

# **The Give and Take of Disaster Aid**

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Social and Moral Transformation in the Wake of the Tsunami in Sri Lanka



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Social and Moral Transformation in the Wake of the Tsunami in Sri Lanka

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### **- Social and Moral Transformation in the Wake of the Tsunami in Sri Lanka**

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#### **Abstract**

The act of giving reflects the most basic principles of morality and has therefore constituted a classical anthropological field of inquiry. The importance of giving, receiving and reciprocating for the shaping and consolidation of social relations has long been recognized. This thesis uses these insights to explore the way in which the gift of disaster aid, which derives from outside the community, impacts upon local social and cosmological relations in a village. The main objective is to investigate how the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami and the immense wave of aid that followed it and subsequently receded, affected the local moral economy in a Sri Lankan village. Fieldwork for this thesis was carried out in a coastal community over a period of twelve months.

The study asks how the 'gift' of aid was understood and valued by donors and recipients and suggests that it set in motion or accelerated processes of change that benefited some people and relationships but marginalised others, thus evoking disorder and moral uncertainty. Local life-worlds were shattered in multiple ways and the recovery process became caught in the tensions between several, sometimes competing, moral discourses concerning tradition/modernity, the individual/collective and the local/global. The thesis provides a thick description of a community before and after exposure to large scale natural disaster and shows that disaster aid not only had fundamental bearing upon social relations but also impinged on vital human and non-human relations - with the earth, sea and supernatural beings - that were important for recovery and meaning making in the local context. The study finds that the catastrophe not only destroyed and altered physical habitats and livelihoods but it also disrupted the dynamic interplay of local social and cosmological relations.

The tsunami exposed some of the power structures that people perceived as problematic in their society and the wave of aid sometimes fed into these or brought about new disparities. Aid thus not only helped with material recovery but also engendered frustration and fragmentation, particularly of the moral and social order; the tsunami gifts were therefore both (re)constructive and destructive. People did not experience the recovery process as simply restoring their community to its pre-disaster condition nor was it, for them, rebuilt in a way that was unquestionably better. The thesis thus shows that the assumption that post-disaster contexts offer a window of opportunity for risk reduction and improved redevelopment - 'the build-back better approach' - depends upon whose perspective is adopted. This thesis contributes to an understanding of how people in the wake of natural disaster use familiar cultural resources to transform experiences of disquiet and powerlessness and it reveals that local morality and cosmology influence how disaster and foreign aid is interpreted and managed.

**Key Words:** Anthropology, Sri Lanka, disaster, aid, cosmology, giving, receiving, morality, economy, Buddhism, ritual, local religious life, philanthropy

# Contents

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Contents .....	vi
Figures.....	ix
Acknowledgements.....	xi
1. Introduction .....	1
Framing the Line of Inquiry: Giving (of aid) and the Local Moral Economy .....	4
Disaster Studies/Anthropology of Disaster .....	7
Tsunami Research in Sri Lanka: What has been done?.....	9
Gift and Exchange Theory - International Aid and The 'Free' Gift? .....	14
Moral Economy .....	21
Introducing the Field Site.....	23
Outline of the Thesis.....	32
2. 'Tsunamitime' - From Compassion to Conflict.....	35
The First Encounter.....	36
The First Wave, The Tsunami.....	46
Coping with Chaos: Relief Aid and Temporary Shelter.....	58
Summary and Reflections.....	65
3. Receiving Houses and Making Homes.....	69
Re-ordering the Land: Protection, Control and Profit.....	70
Tsunami Houses – Building Back Better?.....	76
More than a Roof Over One's Head .....	79
The Making of Sathi's House .....	93
Summary and Reflections.....	100
4. Local Livelihoods - Commodification and Competition .....	103
Philanthropy or Economy - Solidarity or Self-interest? .....	105
A Temporary 'Reconomy'.....	108
New Relations and Opportunities: Victims, Vultures and Heroes .....	112
Livelihood (in)Security in Tharugama .....	114
Local Social Networks and Relations for Economic Security .....	136
Summary and Reflections.....	138
5. A World Up-side-down -Disordered Relations, Obligations and Expectations .	141
The Individual and the Collective.....	143
Opposition and Opportunity.....	149
Aligning Otherworldly Relations: Healing the Social Body and Protecting the Self.....	167
Summary and Reflections.....	177
6. Disaster and Local Religious Life - Reciprocal Flows Disrupted .....	181
'Why Did it Happen and Why Did it Happen to Me?' .....	183
Religious Life in Tharugama.....	187

Decline of Buddhism and Rise of Spirit Religion? .....	200
Suffering and Agency in the Wake of Disaster .....	207
Summary and Reflections.....	210
7. Conclusions and Reflections .....	213
Gift or Poison - Free or Binding? .....	214
Social Disorder: Reciprocity Disrupted and Reconfigured .....	217
Society, Cosmology and Morality - Contested Boundaries .....	218
Unity and Moral order .....	220
Final Reflections.....	221
Sammanfattning .....	225
References .....	231





## Figures

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Figure 1) Sunset <i>oruwe</i> fishing .....	34
Figure 2) <i>Pirith</i> chanting and ritual objects at foundation ceremony .....	96
Figure 3) <i>Paraw</i> (jack fish) on bicycle .....	115
Figure 4) Signboard at the house of a local diviner ( <i>sastere</i> ).....	207

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# 1. Introduction

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We have learned a lot from the tsunami. We have learned about people. Who is a friend and not. Who has helped and who has not. We have learned about the environment and about this country. About what is going on. Now we keep an eye on everything. (080717 no.1.26)

This quotation is from a young man who lives in the fishing village I call Tharugama, in which I conducted fieldwork in Sri Lanka four years after it was hit by the 2004 tsunami. His words hint at the many ways in which the tsunami disaster and its aftermath affected local life. His reflections tell us about uncertainty over relations, obligations and expectations that had previously been taken for granted, about growing suspicion and feelings of vulnerability in a volatile world, but they also speak of resilience and self-preservation.

The main objective of the present thesis is to explore the multifaceted impact upon a community of a large-scale natural disaster and the subsequent wave of aid. The thesis asks how the ‘gift’ of aid was understood and valued by donors and recipients. It suggests that aid set in motion and sometimes accelerated processes of change that benefit some people and relationships and marginalise and shatter others, altogether evoking moral uncertainty and even crises.

On December the 26<sup>th</sup> 2004 an undersea earthquake with its epicentre on the west coast of Sumatra released huge waves across the Indian Ocean that killed over 220,000 and affected more than 2.4 million people. In Sri Lanka the tsunami devastated about 70% of the coastline and

killed an estimated 35,000<sup>1</sup> people. The disaster was extraordinary both in its enormity and in the scale of the relief and recovery operations launched (McGilvray and Gamburd 2010:1). Coastal settlements and villages were turned into rubble within a matter of minutes. Homes, schools, boats, livelihoods, beaches and fields, virtually whole life-worlds, were destroyed. Individuals and communities were forced to cope with immediate needs of shelter, food, water and sanitation while also dealing with non-material dilemmas that incited anxiety and compelled solutions. Survivors were faced with the daunting task of re-creating their world in a material, social and existential sense.

While the recovery and reconstruction phase is perceived as ‘completed’ and the massive attention turned elsewhere, people continue to live with the experience of disaster. Dealing with destruction, displacement and resettlement are long-term processes that go far beyond individual short-term psychological repercussions (Eastmond & Hettne 2001). The natural disaster as consisting of destructive waves did its work in a matter of minutes, but disasters are processual events rather than isolated and temporally demarcated (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002:3). “The disaster”, writes Michele Gamburd with reference to the tsunami in Sri Lanka, not only exposed the basic patterns of material culture and political and economic dynamics but also laid bare “the backbone of class stratification, caste hierarchies and ethnic and religious identity structures” (Gamburd 2010:64).

After a disaster the goal of the recovery process to restore affected communities to their pre-disaster form has, in recent years, evolved into a ‘build-back-better’ approach, “-It’s not a mess, it is an opportunity!” as a cartoon of a man standing in the rumbles of a fallen city optimistically exclaims<sup>2</sup>. This approach builds on vulnerability research and an assumption that the post-disaster context offers a window of opportunity for disaster risk reduction and improved re-development. The ‘Build-back-better’ slogan was widely accepted in the tsunami aftermath, also in Sri

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<sup>1</sup> The death toll in Sri Lanka continues to vary years after the tsunami. McGilvray and Gamburd 2010 refer to a number of reports and studies in which the number varies from 35,322 and 39,000 (McGilvray and Gamburd 2010:16).

<sup>2</sup> It appears on the cover of the 2002 January edition of the *Natural Hazards Informer*. A peer reviewed publication by the Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

Lanka<sup>3</sup>. This prompts critical questions of ‘opportunity for whom?’ For the disaster stricken individuals and communities? For disaster capitalism<sup>4</sup> and political influence? For the well-heeled to ease the burden of their privilege by expressing extraordinary compassion and solidarity? Furthermore, are post-disaster communities (in this case the post-tsunami community) built back into a better version of their pre-disaster state?

Early, during fieldwork, expressions such as: “the golden wave”, “merit water”, “second tsunami”, “the poor have become rich and the rich have become poor” caught my attention. The term ‘second tsunami’ was coined to indicate the massive inflow of aid personnel and aid goods after the disaster pointing at dilemmas concerning the huge amount of gifts that entered the country. This ‘second wave’ of compassion and solidarity was overwhelming to the degree of association with the destructive waves of water. During fieldwork, in the prolonged phase of recovery, years after the natural catastrophe and beyond the massive wave of aid, it was not uncommon to hear people in the community expressing regret of escaping the waves unaffected. Implying a lost opportunity for tapping into the tsunami ‘gift’.

Oliver-Smith noted, in relation to the earthquake in Peru in the 1970s, that “the maldistribution of aid and the inefficiency of aid agencies over several years following the tragedy gave rise to the saying, ‘First the earthquake, then the disaster’ (Oliver-Smith 1999:86 cited in Gamburd 2010:75)”. This indicates that ‘solutions’ might bring about new problems and changes that stretch out far beyond the acute relief period to the extent of ultimately overshadowing the disaster event itself.

Mauss notes an etymological ambivalence in the ‘gift’ in Germanic languages, meaning both ‘present’ and ‘poison’ (Mauss 2002:81 [1954]). This ‘danger’, the ambivalence (Janus-face) of the gift will be explored in

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<sup>3</sup> Bill Clinton as the UN Secretary General’s Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery in 2006 provided propositions defining the term (Khasalamwa 2009:77). It was adopted to depict a more comprehensive approach to recovery (Khasalamwa 2009:73).

<sup>4</sup> Implying that disaster scenes are breeding grounds for transforming old economic structures into neoliberal ones (see Naomi Klein 2008), “I call these orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting business opportunities, ‘disaster capitalism’ (2008:6).

depth by looking closely at how the ‘gift’ of disaster aid was received and incorporated in a rural Sri Lankan community hit by the Boxing Day tsunami. People in the village were, “exposed to something new”, as one informant put it. He was referring to the tsunami but also the inflow of foreign people, influences and goods to the village. Almost as sudden as the disastrous waves brought about an unprecedented experience, the ‘outside(rs)’ came to the village and in many ways manifested a world of bountiful resources and, implicitly and explicitly, expressed certain logics, attitudes and values that produced a milieu of ‘wants’ and competition as well as new houses and livelihoods. I treat the ‘local’ as equally unbounded as ‘the global or ‘national’ and will strive to portray it as such and not as enclosed and static. It is, furthermore, not about a straightforward “re” construction of what was there previously. The task at hand is to explore, analyse and generate knowledge about what happens when local life-worlds were shattered (in all its dimensions) and (re)making was caught in the tension between several, sometimes competing, discourses (between e.g. tradition/modernity, individual/collective, local/global). The ‘local’ and the ‘outside’ are clearly not two separate entities but make up an interlinked dynamic that existed long before the disaster. Still, I will argue that persuasive influences, contradictions and convergences were brought about (and sometimes accelerated) by the tsunami and the interventions following. People were forced to adapt and some were willingly, in an entrepreneurial spirit, making the most of new opportunities, while others felt by-passed and immobilized in the new order. They were drawn into new networks, values and norms and exposed to new uncertainties as well as opportunities, whether they liked it or not.

### **Framing the Line of Inquiry: Giving (of aid) and the Local Moral Economy**

Giving reflects the most basic sense of ethics and *what giving does* is a classic anthropological field of inquiry. What happens then, in the wake of the destructive waves of natural disaster, when an immense wave of compassion and ‘gifts’ suddenly enter a community? How does this affect the local moral economy? What kind of obligations, expectations and relations are generated? The idea of building-back-better is loaded with norms and values and existing literature on ‘the gift’, and giving alerts us to the fundamental importance of giving, receiving and recipro-



cating for the shaping and consolidation of social relations. This thesis wants to use these insights and take them a bit further by exploring the knock-on effects upon local social relations - and not only social but also broadly cosmological – when a wave of ‘gifts’ enters the community from the outside.

The natural disaster, the waves of water, clearly took away and destroyed while the second wave of global compassion gave, but in fact it also created its own disruptions and fragmentations. The comment about ‘the tsunami’ causing the ‘rich to become poor and the poor to become rich’, suggests social transformation and portrays a world that by some was experienced as being ‘upside-down’. Informants referred to the tsunami as being caused by tectonic activity but, in addition, often linked it to moral turmoil and the vicissitudes of modern society and drew upon local cosmology and beliefs in fashioning explanations. Altogether, this pointed me towards and, I believe, motivates a study of the impact of disaster aid on the dynamic interplay of material, social, moral and cosmological configurations and to move beyond the acute phase and the recovery of physical habitats and livelihoods.

It should be emphasised that the study is not (explicitly) about North/South power relations and ethical dilemmas of international aid, and I want to avoid depicting the powerful, benevolent but ignorant donor vs. the poor, innocent and dependent victim. The international aid discourse and popular humanitarianism is fraught with stereotypical images and ‘myths’ of good/bad, right/wrong, altruism/self-interest. In other words, I am undertaking to explore and describe the social and cultural consequences of disaster aid, i.e. the ‘tsunami gifts’, not to make moral judgements about them. The main object of study is not the relation between the ‘outside’ donor and the ‘inside’ receiver’ but what the tsunami gifts do to the local social and moral universe and how this is expressed in everyday life in the village. As noted by Korf et al. (2010) gift relations and their economy of obligations, expectations and reciprocity involve not only the relationship between the donors in the North and the receivers in the South, but consist of “a far more complex chain of relations, rituals, and practices that equally play into domestic patterns of patronage and victimisation” Korf et al. (2010:62). Anna Tsing’s (2005) notion of ‘friction’ is helpful in examining the encounters between donors, recipients and brokers in the various positions in the disaster aid cycle. She describes how friction - “awkward, unequal, unstable,

and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (2005:4) - may empower or disempower the various parties. In other words, friction concerns the dynamic interplay of the global/local and the particular/universal, as is evident in the case of post-tsunami aid in Sri Lanka.

Exchange may be described as being centrally concerned with “the transfer of things between social actors, and things can be human or animal, material or immaterial, words or objects. The actors can be individuals, groups, or beings such as gods or spirits” Barnard & Spencer (2002:218 [1996]). The local economy of reciprocity and relations between rich and poor, humans and spirits, laypeople and monks, high-and low-caste etc. are all influenced by the inflow of the ‘second wave’ of gifts and the ‘third wave’<sup>5</sup> of ebbing support.

What I propose is that the tsunami disaster not only destroyed and changed physical habitats and livelihoods, but it also interrupted local social, moral and cosmological ‘landscapes’ in ways that caused multiple moral crises. The ethnography will illustrate a paradox of the (tsunami) gifts; that they were (re)constructive *and* destructive. Put in another way, they were productive and in some ways mending a fragmented society, but also, instigating transformation and fragmentation. What is more, it will show that, even though most actors involved (givers and receivers) worked to make aid appear to be a ‘pure’ and ‘free’ gift (disinterested, without demands for return and moral and social obligations), it was in fact invested with a body of implicit norms, values and expectations, rather than demands, with an impact upon relationships in particular ways. Spelled out, the specific research questions might be put in the following manner: How does the inflow of external aid for disaster relief and reconstruction affect the local moral economy? What kind of obligations, expectations and relations are enveloped/developed in the ‘second wave’ of giving and in the receding ‘third wave’ of dwindling support that followed upon the ‘first wave’ of water? And, how have local practices and rationales of reciprocity and exchange relations been affected by the entering of external aid?

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<sup>5</sup> See Silva(2009) who writes about the ‘tsunami third wave’ and the politics of disaster management.

## Disaster Studies/Anthropology of Disaster

Before expanding on the more specific theoretical frame, and returning to the key concepts of giving, receiving, morality and economy, a brief summary of previous anthropological research on disasters in general and on the tsunami disaster in Sri Lanka in particular is provided in order to situate the study in a larger field of research.

I find a lack of attention in much research to local cosmology and beliefs when trying to understand people's attitudes towards, interpretations of and responses to natural disaster. This kind of 'neglect' is also noted by Gaillard and Texier (2010) who contend that religion can "never be detached from the larger picture, as it always interacts with social, economic and political constraints in the construction of people's vulnerability in the face of natural hazards" (2010:82). One shortcoming they identify in the mainstream vulnerability perspective on disasters concerns the failure to consider the diversity of religious belief throughout the world<sup>6</sup> Gaillard & Texier (2010:82). I find that emic notions and interpretations of the tsunami disaster, in addition to specific patterns of vulnerability (social, economic, political), has to be brought into the analyses of recovery and people's reactions and responses.

Gaillard and Texier (2010) assert that, for long, the hazard perspective was the dominant theoretical paradigm in disaster studies. It explains disaster in terms of the consequence of the extreme dimension of natural hazards and emphasizes the "rare (in time) and extreme (in magnitude) dimension of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, cyclones, floods, and so on" (Gaillard and Texier 2010:81). Words such as 'extra-ordinary', 'uncertain', and 'un-expected' are underscored in this perspective, and the damage disasters cause is seen to affect predominantly 'under-developed, 'un-prepared' and 'over-populated' regions. People's responses are thus seen to depend on how they perceive the risk from these exceptional and extreme threats (Gaillard & Texier 2010:82).

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<sup>6</sup> It basically follows the Judeo-Christian concept of deities' command over and punishment of sinful people. "In that sense it reflects the imposition on the entire world of a single and simplifying model of allegedly efficient and sustainable disaster risk reduction based on policies developed in Western countries" (Gaillard & Texier 2010:82).

Oliver-Smith writes that the most significant departure from the hazard/event/behaviour focus, dominant in the field since the 1950s, was the development of the vulnerability concept in the 1970s. Researchers such as Vayda and McKay (1975) and Hewitt (1983) started to direct attention to social, ecological and political-economic contexts and constraints and a perspective that traced the root causes of disasters “more in society than in nature” (Oliver-Smith 2002:27). The working definition of the vulnerability concept currently among the most used, according to Oliver-Smith, is the one provided by Blaikie et al. (1994):

By vulnerability we mean the characteristics of a person or group in terms of their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and the recover from the impact of a natural hazard. It involves a combination of factors that determine the degree to which someone’s life and livelihood is put at risk by a discrete and identifiable event in nature or in society (Blaikie et al.1994:4 cited in Oliver-Smith 2002:28).

As Oliver-Smith contends, disasters are multidimensional and the vulnerability concept directs attention to the entirety of relationships in a given social situation and to the foundation of a condition that, together with environmental forces, produces a disaster (Oliver-Smith 2002:28-29). The pattern of vulnerability in a society is a core element of a disaster, “It conditions the behaviour of individuals and organizations throughout the unfolding of a disaster far more profoundly than will the physical force of the destructive agent” (Oliver-Smith 2002:3). I do not disagree with this way of conceptualising disaster but, as mentioned earlier, I call for closer attention to local cosmology and beliefs as a way of expanding our understanding about behaviour and reactions in the wake of a disaster.

Judith Schlehe (2010) is another researcher who proposes that the dominant discourses and international attention favour concrete physical aspects of natural disasters and neglect cultural aspects and indigenous concepts that do form an important part of local people’s attitudes and reactions. She proposes that an anthropological approach might facilitate the understanding of how local people make sense of disaster by linking it to specific world-views, an understanding that includes more dimensions than those regarding economic recovery and physical reconstruction (2010:112-113). “A culture-specific and site-based reading of the discourse on a natural disaster exemplifies that disaster-linked cognitive coping strategies are always unique and contingent formations in re-

sponse to local culture and politics. Notwithstanding that local politics and culture must be seen in their larger global context” (Schlehe 2010:113). In her article about local responses to the tsunami disaster in Java, Indonesia, she makes two important points with bearing upon the present study. First, she takes an anthropological approach to religion that essentially includes local beliefs that differ from the official Indonesian concept that recognizes only the world religions as *agama* (religion). In Sri Lanka too, Sinhalese Buddhists tend to make a distinction between Buddhism, *agama*, (the same Sanskrit word is used) and various local beliefs and practices connected to the ‘spirit world’ of gods, deities, demons (what Gombrich and Obeyesekere [1988:3] label ‘spirit religion’). The second point is that the Javanese (as the Sinhalese) are not any more superstitious or in any categorical sense more inclined to believe in supernatural explanations for disasters than people elsewhere. “People everywhere can and do combine and negotiate manifold co-existing explanations and copying strategies in an enduring entanglement of secular and religious interpretations of natural hazards and disasters” (Schlehe 2010:113).

As will be shown, this largely parallels how reason, causality and copying in relation to the tsunami in Tharugama are expressed. In addition, Schlehe’s contention (2010:115) that the reconstruction of a life-world includes complex cultural dynamics, involving religion, local cosmologies and moral values, and that this is interwoven with local factors as well as outside influences and modernisation is clearly born out in the Sri Lankan case, which I shall be presenting here. This also links to Tsing’s (2005) notion of ‘friction’, mentioned above, and of seeing globalization not as an abstract reality but as a macro-social activity and process based on the circulation of ideas, goods, and people. The present study of the tsunami and disaster aid might be seen as an example of such a process or ‘macro-social activity’ and it looks closely at the ‘awkward encounters’ over differences involved.

### **Tsunami Research in Sri Lanka: What has been done?**

The Indian Ocean tsunami was followed by a variety of publications, studies, evaluations and reports from a range of fields and a selection of those with particular relevance for the present study will be outlined below.

In a report from 2009, in terms of surveying the impact and outcome of relief aid the Swedish Development Agency (Sida) focuses on the links between relief, rehabilitation and development in Sri Lanka, Maldives and Indonesia. The report finds that results only partially met expectations due to a low priority on long-term considerations and a lack of unifying frameworks (of e.g. early recovery, disaster risk reduction, poverty alleviation) amongst leading actors (donors, state, NGO's, UN agencies, civil society). This led implementers to focus on achieving their own objectives with relatively short-term perspectives. It also found that leading actors were often little inclined to analyse the local cultural and governance environment (Sida 2009:10).

De Silva and Yamao (2007) focus on recovery of the heavily affected fishing sector and conducted surveys in three southern districts. They found that experienced fishermen with better educational background had more influence on capacity building of livelihood assets compared with those with lesser skills and education, and that relocation and resettlement plans brought persistent uncertainty to the fishermen and threatened to disrupt community bonds and social networks (2007: 386). They conclude that the involvement of real community leaders rather than political supporters is critical to community based resource management in the tsunami-devastated region (2007:403). These findings are important and underscore that the anthropological, holistic, long-term approach with a strong focus on local social and cultural variables adopted by the present study is highly relevant. The 'build-back-better' adage has to be grounded in an awareness of local conditions and realities.

Shara Khasalamwa (2009) asks whether 'build-back-better' is an adequate response to vulnerability and finds that, despite the engagement of the 'build-back-better' mantra, the tsunami response has not lived up to expectations, nor significantly altered any structured vulnerabilities (2009:73). Kennedy et al. (2008:24) also examine the meaning and outcome of 'building-back-better' in Sri Lanka and Aceh, and they argue that 'building-back-safer' would be a preferable tagline to 'building-back-better', since 'better' has multiple interpretations and 'safer' would provide a clearer goal. The 'build-back-better' tagline and the question whether the disaster could be seen as an opportunity for achieving this goal will be further investigated in the present work. Contrary to Kennedy et al. I do not find that a change of definition from better to safer would resolve the problem since safer - what it means and what is

needed in order to feel safe - is also culturally contingent and involves multiple interpretations.

In terms of gender and disaster, Swarna Jayaweera (2005) presents a brief statistical study of impact at the household level in two southern districts, and asserts that women suffered disproportionately, and the elderly in particular. Generally, she finds that women were more vulnerable in terms of livelihood opportunities and harassment, and that they had greater responsibilities. Additionally, she concludes that more women than men died, and that people found the distribution of aid to be uncoordinated and inefficient (Jayaweera 2005:11). Ruwanpura (2007) focuses the attention on how gendered structures within the local political economy influenced the ways in which women mediate and negotiate everyday responses in the aftermath of disaster. DeMel and Ruwanpura (2006) highlight the fact that prior histories (of places and spaces) influence the way women cope with disaster. They found great differences in responses to relocation due to previous experiences of displacement, and that livelihood support for women focused on skills development aiming to instil an entrepreneurial spirit but pointed to a neo-liberal vision at work that did not always include concerns of gender equity and rights. The encouragement of private philanthropy, they suggest, also lies within a neo-liberal paradigm that creates spheres of influences within local communities and paves the way for gradual privatisation of welfare, known to adversely affect women (De Mel and Ruwanpura 2006:42ff).

Jennifer Hyndman (2008) explores the ways in which the tsunami changed people's relations of home, family and security and she argues that "a 'feminism and disaster' lens should be coupled with a 'feminism and development' approach to understanding change in the wake of the tsunami" (Hyndman 2008:101). In another article Hyndman (2007) examines anxieties that give rise to the securitisation of fear in the tsunami aftermath, and she finds that efforts to enhance public safety stirred feelings of discrimination, tension and fear (2007:361).

In the case of Tharugama, the general observations of uneven distribution and diverse impact in terms of gender identified in the above studies apply, and the point made by Hyndman about the securitisation of fear is pertinently put. The neo-liberal paradigm's influence on disaster aid will be discussed in the present work, and I believe caution should be taken towards sweeping assumptions about an alleged uniform and negative

impact on local communities, and we need to direct attention to the actual attitudes and responses of people. Fernando and Hilhorst (2006) argue for something in line with what I propose in suggesting that, by looking closer at the “everyday practices of humanitarian aid”, blind expectations will be corrected, uncritical admiration exposed and unrealistic critiques put into perspective. They find that discussions on humanitarian aid usually start from the level of principles rather than practise (2006:292) that is a more conductive approach in this case.

Other publications that bring up aspects of ‘neo-liberal influence’ and ‘disaster capitalism’ is Nadini Gunawardena (2008), who argues that rehabilitation is being used to promote big business and tourism, and Roderick Stirrat (2006), who discusses ‘competitive humanitarianism’. Stirrat writes that competition in various forms, particularly between NGOs, is inherent in the structure of humanitarian relief and that agencies based upon disinterested principles are forced into situations in which their principles become compromised; philanthropy may involve a rejection of the world of competition and the market, but in the process of aid delivery it inevitably becomes a part of that world (2006:11ff). The notion of ‘free’ philanthropic gifts turning competitive in the context of disaster aid is relevant for the present study and Stirrat’s piece provides important input. I will argue that, although the tsunami gifts ‘turn competitive’, they are framed as ‘free’ by both givers and receivers in order to ‘do their work’, in terms of fulfilling emotional and material objectives without causing moral dilemma for those involved.

A number of publications focus on displacement and re-housing. Cathrine Brun and Ragnhild Lund (2008, 2009) studied re-housing after the tsunami and illustrate how recovery work in local areas is driven by various external stakeholders who largely define the scope for homemaking processes. Their findings suggest that debates of ‘building-back-better’ following disasters should embody a broader understanding of houses as political, cultural, social and economic constructs. Ruwanpura (2009) interrogates the social and political geographies of resettlement and the reconstruction of temporary and permanent shelters, and she finds that communities’ concerns and anxieties regarding displacement and resettlement have been articulated against prevailing fault lines of war and inequality. Relief efforts thus need to recognise that the process of ‘putting houses in place’ should be embedded within local social relations. The studies mentioned have provided comparative material, and I



agree with the call for a broader perspective of houses as much more than a physical structure. But in addition, the present work identifies not only the importance of particular, social, political and economic patterns but also cosmological notions and spiritual practices in home making, for example concerning human-nature relations and sacrifice to the earth.

Other scholars have contributed with research on the political aspects of the disaster, as for example Moonesinghe (2007) and Jayadeva Uyangoda (2005), who offer political analyses of the catastrophe and assert that the tsunami intensified the country's prolonged conflict (2005:314). Tudor Silva (2009) finds that the well-funded tsunami response driven by the international humanitarian industry failed to facilitate a speedy recovery and galvanize the peace process, and it even added to the vulnerability of some of those affected. This, he proposes, is in part due to the ongoing violent conflict but also to shortcomings of humanitarian aid and the 'tsunami's third wave' (i.e. the withdrawal of the massive support) (Silva 2009:61).

A number of studies have focused on psycho-social health issues, for example Daya Somasundram (2007), who did research in the north on 'collective trauma' following war and the tsunami, and who found fundamental changes in the functioning of the family and community (more prominently due to the war than the tsunami). Relief programmes, the author contends, need to address the problem of collective trauma, not only individual stress disorders, to be effective in rehabilitation (2007:10). Gaithri Fernando (2005) discusses the implications of a statement by a senior government official in the wake of the disaster that "Sri Lankans do not need to be diagnosed with mental health disorders by Western mental health professionals, but what they need is help" indicating that this is experienced as an additional burden to those affected, instead of bringing relief. She calls for a broadened scope of mainstream psychology to include collectivistic and community-centred approaches. In an article in the *New York Times* (2007), Fernando asserts that researchers and counsellors who came to Sri Lanka after the tsunami did find some of the classic symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), but that the deepest psychological wounds for the Sri Lankans were not on the PTSD checklist; they were the loss of or the disturbance of one's role in the group (*New York Times* 2007:15). Issues of 'role loss' and social disorder are clearly brought out in the present case.

The implication of cultural variables, like the ones discussed above, and the role of local cosmology, religion and spiritual belief and practices in disaster recovery after the tsunami have been paid relatively minor attention, but Kate Crosby (2008) investigates interpretations of suffering among Sri Lankan Buddhists in the immediate aftermath, and De Silva (2006) also explores the Buddhist perspective and the relationship of culture and traumatic experiences. Patricia Lawrence (2010), furthermore, did a study in a fishing community on the east coast, which focuses on the reconstitution of social relationships and the simultaneous readjustments in popular religious beliefs. Lawrence's piece is a contribution to a volume edited by Dennis McGilvray and Michele Gamburd (2010) that discusses "to what extent culture matters in responses to natural disasters" and includes a number of insightful pieces<sup>7</sup>. A study by Rajkumar et al. (2008) furthermore deals with ethno-cultural beliefs as coping mechanisms after the tsunami (in this case in India) and finds that many informants highlighted spiritual coping strategies as the most important factors for their survival (2008:850). The present study will recognise, and aim to expand, the insights from these studies regarding the non-physical dimension of disaster recovery.

### **Gift and Exchange Theory - International Aid and The 'Free' Gift?**

While much has been written on the tsunami in Sri Lanka and aided our understanding of issues such as its links to the ongoing conflict, gendered vulnerabilities, livelihood, social structures and institutions, displacement and resettlement, no one has comprehensively and explicitly explored the effects of post-tsunami aid upon the local moral economy and its knock-on effects upon social and cosmological relations. There are several works of relevance for this: Stirrat (2006), Korf et al. (2010), Lawrence (2010) and Sørensen (2008). One of the most significant theoretical works on the cultural features of giving is Marcel Mauss, whose work is of immediate relevance for examining philanthropy and the rela-

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<sup>7</sup> E.g. Gamburd on the "Golden Wave and equitable distribution of aid" (2010:64ff) and Gaasbeek "Actors in a masala movie: fieldnotes on the NGO tsunami response in eastern Sri Lanka" (2010:125ff).

tions created through a global encounter such as took place in Tharugama after the tsunami.

Mauss' seminal work '*Essai sur le don*' first published in 1924, has been central for the anthropological discussion on this subject ever since its publication. In the societies he examines, he find that the gift is given according to well-defined social rules on its reception and reciprocal return, and his analyses concern disclosure of the fundamental rules in the circulation of gifts: the obligation to give, to receive and to repay<sup>8</sup>. In the act of giving something of the giver is also passed along with the gift to its receiver, 'the spirit of the gift' (*hau*) that demands a return to its owner.

For Mauss, reciprocity is the 'glue of society' and what keeps it from the Hobbesian war of all against all. In the words of Mary Douglas, to Mauss, "the cycling gift system is the society and it engages persons in permanent commitments that articulate the dominant institutions" (Douglas in Mauss 2002: xii [1954]). In Douglas inspiring foreword to the 1990 edition of *The Gift*, she asserts that there are no 'free Gifts', and that, although charity is meant to be a free gift of voluntary, unrequited surrender of resources and lauded as a Christian virtue, we know that it hurts. Douglas writes that Mauss' book explains this lack of gratitude from recipients of charity by saying that foundations should not mix up their donations with gifts (Douglas in Mauss 2002: foreword [1954]).

It is not merely that there are no free gifts in a particular place, Melanesia or Chicago for instance; it is that the whole idea of a free gift is based on a misunderstanding. There should not be any free gifts. What is wrong with the so-called free gift is the donor's intention to be exempt from return gifts coming from the recipient. Refusing requital puts the act of giving outside any mutual ties. Once given the free gift entails no further claims from the recipient. The public is not deceived by free gift vouchers. For all the ongoing commitment the free gift gesture has created, it might just as

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<sup>8</sup> *Préstation totale* signifies gifts that involve all aspects of a person and the social and cultural values in a society, and thus express all its vital institutions; moral, juridical, economic and religious. Each gift is a part of a system of reciprocity involving givers and receivers in cycles of exchange in which honor and morality are at play (Mauss 2002:3-5 [1954]). Mauss hypothesised an evolutionary development from group exchange to an impersonal market economy and the gift/commodity debate springs from Mauss ideas.

well never have happened. According to Marcel Mauss that is what is wrong with the free gift. A gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction (Douglas in Mauss 2002: x [1954]).

According to Douglas, Mauss developed his idea of a morally sanctioned gift cycle upholding society from his earlier studies of sacrifice and Vedic literature, ‘sacrifice as a gift that compels a deity to make a return: *Do ut des*; I give so that you may give’ (Mauss 2002: xii [1954]).

Mauss’ and Douglas’ argument about the problem of reciprocity is directly extrapolable to South Asian ethnography more broadly, and it has inspired others to use Mauss’ notion of ‘Gift’ as a lens for examining international development aid (Kowalski 2011, Stirrat & Henkel 1997, Korf et al. 2010). Kowalski highlights that donors downplay the gift system and yet are dependant upon relationships that only the system of the gift can provide; they push commoditisation and the logic of market exchange where the gift is the cultural norm; and they offer aid to promote autonomy whilst buying influence for themselves (Kowalski 2011:189). Korf et al. emphasise that gifts are not just material transfers of aid, but they also embody cultural symbolism, social power and political affiliations (2010:60). Roderick Stirrat and Heiko Henkel argue that the seemingly free gift from Northern donors is transformed into a heavy conditional gift once it reaches the ultimate recipient (1997:66). These studies have been inspiring, and Korf et al. is particularly relevant because it draws on material from post-tsunami Sri Lanka and presents several local case studies. It adopts a similar (in-depth, ethnographic, localized) approach, and yet it is more attentive to the political dimension and implications, while the present thesis rather focuses on social, moral and cosmological (re)configurations and dilemmas.

“A free gift makes no friends” states James Laidlaw in an article from 2000. By using material from India and Shvetambar Jain renouncers and the specific institutionalised ‘free gift’ of *dan*, Laidlaw illustrates the inherently paradoxical nature of the gift and explains why it is a mistake to define the gift as necessarily reciprocal and non-alienated. Laidlaw argues that *dan* comes close to being a truly free gift, and he shows that the fact that the free gift does not create obligations or personal connections is, in fact, where its social importance lies (Laidlaw 2000:618). Further, he identifies an anthropological ‘neglect’ of the notion of a ‘pure’ or ‘free’ gift and a preference, following Mauss, of focusing on gift-giving as cre-

ating and maintaining enduring social ties (Laidlaw 2000:617). He draws on Derrida, who claims and elaborates on the idea of the gift and suggests that “For there to be a gift, it is necessary that the gift not even appear, that it not be perceived or received as gift” (Derrida 1992:16 in Laidlaw 2000). Laidlaw explores this ‘paradox’ of the gift and, in conclusion, argues that while the concept of ‘a pure gift’ has often been dismissed as naïve and unsociological, that of the ‘pure commodity’ has been given more room, and it has been shown (by eg. Carrier 1992) that commodities are fungible and that not everything we buy and sell is a pure commodity. Likewise, not all we give and receive is a pure gift. In fact, he argues, almost nothing ever could be. However, with reference to the Jain case, he suggests that instead of distinguishing the ‘pure commodity’ from the ‘free gift’, impersonality may be a feature of both (Laidlaw 2000:632).

No doubt this is why religious charity and philanthropy in all the great religions have repeatedly rediscovered the supreme value of the anonymous donation, only to find that time and again donors have been more attracted to the benefits of the socially entangling Maussian gift, which does make friends (Laidlaw 2000:632).

The tsunami gift I shall be discussing was often perceived by both givers and receivers to be ‘free’. The actors involved worked to escape its ‘silent’ claim for return in order to upkeep a certain notion of morality and to stay clear from social entanglement, obligations and moral dilemmas. As Hylland Eriksen (2001) also notes, the kind of social integration and mutual obligations created through reciprocity is not always beneficial to everyone, for example feudal lords in medieval Europe frequently sustained their power by extending gifts to their subjects, and it could be argued that development aid from the North to the South is a subtle technique of domination (2001:183). Pierre Bourdieu has drawn on Mauss and the social logics of reciprocity in his studies of symbolic power (1977) and in a sense, as Hylland Eriksen notes, “turns Mauss on his head, by focusing on the ways in which gifts are ‘total social phenomena’ and conceal power relations and exploitative practices” (2001:183).

Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, noteworthy in the gift/exchange debate, attempt, in *Money and the Morality of Exchange* (1989), to unravel stereotypes regarding money and its damaging effects on community and social relations. They contend that it is not money ‘in itself’ that destroys

morality and social order. Exchange might be selfish and exploitative without involving money, and also non-monetary economies contain features of relatively impersonal, competitive and self-interested activities. They propose that people not only make gift/commodity distinctions in determining different types of exchange (fertile, destructive, neutral) but also gender-linked, spiritual and political ones. Another point is that almost all societies make a distinction between short-term acquisitive exchange and long-term transactions that concern social continuity. Parry writes about Hindus in Benares, India, an ethnographic context, he claims, so different as to almost appear as a straightforward inversion of the common attitude towards commodity relations as the domain of moral peril, the dark and dangerous<sup>9</sup>. In other words, that gift exchange is safe and good (moral righteous) and commodity exchange is threatening and bad (i.e. its antithesis). But, “Here it is, *par excellence*, gifts which embody evil and danger, and it is the money derived from such gifts which is barren, good only for a prodigal and futile consumption and productive only of death and damnation. By contrast, commercial profits and market transactions are generally seen in a much more benevolent light” (Parry 1989:65). On closer examination though, Parry finds that the picture must be qualified and that such a crude classification cannot be made, and that both gift and commodity exchange are heterogeneous and differentiated categories (Parry 1989:66). We are, according to Parry, well advised to take cultural variation into account, but still he proposes that there are a limited number of broad principles in terms of judging different kinds of exchange e.g. that some values cannot, and should not, be exchanged at all and that attempts to make them into objects of transaction generate moral peril. Other ‘principles’ concern exchanges that are treated as e.g. ‘generalised reciprocity’ but in fact are ‘negative’ or ‘balanced’, and any exchange is also likely to be judged as to whether it is ‘equitable’ and ‘fair’ within the bounds of the moral community (Parry 1989:88).

I suggest that the ‘tsunami gift’ comes close to being a ‘pure gift’ (is basically impersonal and does not create bonds or demand return), or perhaps more accurately put, that actors in the gift cycle, in different ways, work hard to make it appear as such. What's more, that an investigation of the ‘tsunami gift’, its local impact, contradictions and rationale would

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<sup>9</sup> He uses Cauca peasants as an example here.

be lacking without bringing in the religious and cosmological dimension. Although Laidlaw's and Parry's Jain and Hindu examples differ from the Buddhist Sri Lankan traditions, they pose questions that are equally relevant to the Sri Lankan context. Under what circumstances are gifts perceived to be productive, destructive or neutral? To what extent do givers and receivers make use of the logic of commodity exchange and to what extent do their exchange relations create long-term relationships? These questions are among those that will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

Of the broad literature on giving and exchange, several others are pertinent to this study e.g. Caroline Humphrey who looks at barter relationships in Nepal in terms of their long-term social implications in the light of *karma* (1992), Sherry Ortner (1978) and her work on Sherpa ritual and exchange, and other work by Parry, besides what has been mentioned already, on pure-gift ideology and religion in India<sup>10</sup> (1986). They all draw attention to the role of religion in establishing the necessary moral framework for (and analyses of) exchange. Marshall Sahlins' (1974) range of different forms of reciprocity in *Stone Age Economics* as 'negative', 'balanced' and 'generalised' is another major contributor to gift/exchange theory. Generalised reciprocity is the exchange of goods without calculation of their value with an implicit expectation that exchange will balance out over time. This kind of reciprocity is characteristic of relations with little social distance and considerable levels of trust, such as e.g. between close friends. Negative reciprocity, by contrast, characterises exchange between strangers in which trust is low and each of the parties is trying to profit from the exchange. The third kind of reciprocity, balanced reciprocity, is that in which fair returns are negotiated between two parties. Although Sahlins' categories are helpful for clarifying various kinds of giving, the gift-giving by donors that took place in the wake of the tsunami does not readily fit into them. Tsunami aid was generally given between strangers with a maximum of social distance and with varied levels of trust (not necessarily equal between givers and receivers). In some respects, they suggested a balanced reciprocity (both givers and receivers had certain expectations), but in other respects, the reciprocity was negative in that the parties expected to

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<sup>10</sup> He elaborated on the (Maussian) idea and propose that the concept of 'disinterested giving' emerges under particular historic conditions and perhaps only in the context of specific religious doctrines (Parry 1986).

profit in some way. For these reasons, the straightforward application of the notion of reciprocity, as defined above, may be inadequate for understanding the effects of disaster aid.

In *The Enigma of the Gift* (1999), Maurice Godelier reassesses the notion that gift giving revolves around objects with transferable symbolic or economic value, and he discusses the significance of gifts in social life and in creating social bonds focusing on the realm of sacred valuable objects that are never exchanged<sup>11</sup>. He questions what room there is left for gift-giving in our Western societies, “for it is no longer necessary to exchange gifts in order to produce and reproduce the basic social structures” (Godelier 1999:207). As Chis Hann (2006) writes, Godelier explores the tensions of the contemporary welfare state (using the example of France), and proposes that it excludes many residents from valued entitlements while at the same time appealing to the well-heeled to donate more to charitable foundations (Hann 2006:215-216). “When idealised, the “uncalculating” gift operates in the imaginary as the last refuge of solidarity, of an open-handedness which is supposed to have characterised other eras in the evolution of humankind. Gift-giving becomes the bearer of a utopia (a utopia which can be projected into the past as well as into the future)” (Godelier 1999:208). Godelier’s ideas of “utopian ideals” are, I contend, apparent in the ethnography I shall present on the tsunami and the deluge of gift-giving it inspired.

This thesis will draw attention to the spin-off effects that disaster aid had upon the local moral economy, cosmology and beliefs. These effects have been little explored in studies of the recovery that followed after the 2004 tsunami. The ethnography presented here will show that although aid gifts create social bonds and solidarity, the gift of aid may also have a number of other effects.

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<sup>11</sup> Chis Hann (2006) writes that Godelier is drawing upon Anette Weiner’s (1992) concept of ‘inalienable possessions’, i.e. goods that are not intended for exchange, and that he proposes that modern ‘western’ societies also have their sacra, e.g. in the form of a Constitution, which cannot be sold or gifted but has to be transmitted to future generations. Reciprocity can thus not be applied in this domain and utilitarian exchange is excluded, or pushed into the background, by long-term considerations of morality (Hann 2006:221).



## Moral Economy

As noted, I am concerned with the impact of disaster aid upon the local moral economy. What I basically mean when I use the term *moral economy* is the interplay between moral and cultural beliefs and economic activities. I have chosen this term over alternatives, such as moral community, in order to place focus upon dynamic interrelatedness. The concept of moral economy has its origin in the work of E. P. Thompson; *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) and “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century” (1971), and it derives from Thompson's study of bread riots in eighteenth century Britain. He suggested that public riots and disorder concerning availability and price of food are underscored by a common notion of what is ‘fair’ and ‘just’. The concept it is often associated with peasant studies.

In James Scott's influential book *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (1976), he attempts to understand the material circumstances of peasants in colonial Southeast Asia, and he argues that a “subsistence ethic” lies at the core of these societies and that moments of mobilisation and rebellion follow upon the breakdown of traditional forms of solidarity and inconsistency between the material conditions and aspects of the subsistence ethic.

Another scholar who touches upon the subject is Paul Bohannan (1955), who describes the structure of restricted spheres of exchange among the Tiv in Nigeria, arguing that the colonial imposition of a money economy dissolved these spheres and caused a breakdown of the local moral economy. Following e.g. Bourdieu (1977), the imposition of monetary exchange and disruption of reciprocity might not necessarily or exclusively be ‘negative’ though, but it could also untie webs of moral obligations and oppressive hierarchies. Social fragmentation and disorder is thus not exclusively ‘unwanted’ and ‘negative’, and it might instigate liberation from repressive power relations as well as creating new ones.

The entering of ‘tsunami gifts’ from outsiders into the Sri Lankan community, which was the focus of my study, transformed the social order and ‘untied’ hierarchies and moral obligations, but also created new ones. Echoing the arguments above about the introduction of market exchange and money, the ‘gift’ of disaster aid does not simply break apart local webs of relations and community solidarity. Although it may have

this effect, it also does a great many other things. But to understand this it is necessary to examine this gift empirically and in context. I am further arguing that this is important in order to expand our understanding of why, how and when it has a particular effect. This should aid in making disaster aid more sensitive to cross-cultural variation.

The ethnography will show that the ‘untying’ or, as I called it elsewhere, ‘a moral landscape afloat’, induced by the massive and sudden inflow of disaster aid (and to some extent the natural disaster itself) brought about instances of social mobility and questioning of patterns of social organisation and moral obligations. It disrupted power relations and created new ones, which some people welcomed as an opportunity, while others resisted it and treated it as a threat. In Thompson’s and Scott’s terms, this could not be said to constitute a peasant rebellion. There was no rioting because of perceived inconsistency between shared local ‘ethics’ and ‘new’ material conditions. However, there was an abrupt change in material circumstances and an element of social disorder that caused friction and strain in the local moral economy.

The concept of moral breakdown, as elaborated by Jarett Zigon (2007), could also shed some light here. Zigon suggests (by drawing upon Heidegger) that we normally go about things in an unquestioned, largely unreflected manner and simply do things (being-in-the-world), but this normal, everyday mode of being-in-the-world on occasion breaks down. As dilemmas, difficult times and troubles arise they force individuals to step-away, figure out, work-through and deal with the critical situation (Zigon 2007). Zigon also proposes that in the breakdown<sup>12</sup>, there is a freedom allowing individuals to draw on particular socio-historic-cultural as well as personal repertoires to work-through the ethical dilemma of the moral breakdown, which he calls the “ethical moment”<sup>13</sup> (Zigon 2007). The motivation of the ethical moment (which is confusing and uncomfortable) is to step back into, or keep going back into, the more unreflective moral dispositions of everydayness, “to dwell in familiarity” (Zigon 2007:139). Put in other words, a critical event, a happening that throws us out of the ordinary mode of being, allows or forces us to see

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<sup>12</sup> This is according to Zigon similar to what Foucault called problematisation.

<sup>13</sup> He makes a distinction between morality as the unreflective mode of being-in-the-world and the ethical as a tactic performed at the moment of the breakdown.

things and thus question what we see in a novel way. As long as it is 'business as usual', there is not this kind of profound reflection because we can not really see anything to reflect about, since it is so entrenched in the 'ordinary' and 'taken for granted'.

The tsunami disaster in Tharugama intensified moral challenges. It propelled the community into a 'stepped-away mode' of reflection and gave rise to conflicts and contradictions over local moralities, cosmology, beliefs and practices in relation to the new material, economic and socio-political conditions. My fieldwork took place in the context of accelerated mobility, heightened uncertainty and continual efforts to deal with the anxiety these unfamiliar circumstances generated.

## **Introducing the Field Site**

The thesis is built upon two months of fieldwork in 2005 and 10 months in 2008 in the area of Tharugama, a small village on the south coast of Sri Lanka. Tharugama is a pseudonym and other villages, places and neighbourhoods are replaced with names based on general descriptions of natural elements (gardens, hills, rivers, sand, plants etc). Likewise I have changed the names for all persons and pictures are chosen so as not to reveal easily recognisable features.

### *The Village of Tharugama*

The following overview of Tharugama is largely an attempt to reflect the way locals describe their village, coupled with my own observations. Additionally the village will be briefly contextualised and placed within a larger historic, economic, political and socio-cultural frame.

Tharugama is a small village on the south coast of Sri Lanka with a population of about 3,000. The Boxing Day tsunami killed 40 villagers and displaced about 1,500 persons, that is almost half of the village population (and about 400 families). In the aftermath of the disaster there were three official transitional shelter camps in the village (*Suduweli*, *Kitul golla* and *Pansala*) and additionally a small camp privately run by a foreign couple with a holiday home in the area. The time people stayed

in temporary shelters ranged from about 4 months up to about 2 years with the greater majority closer to the later time frame.

A busy highway divides the village and traffic's large numbers of long-distance and local buses, trucks, three wheelers, motorbikes, cyclists and the occasional ox cart. At places it runs right next to the beach and sometimes a few hundred metres inland. The seaside of the road is home for many of the fishing families and scattered with numerous small bays and beaches. At the northern side of the main road small dusty roads crisscross a lush, green landscape. Close to the sea the land is, for the most part, quite flat but for a hill with a Buddhist temple on top. Further inland, at the end of the village, jungle scrubs, hills and a lake with an adjoining marshland create a natural border. Tharugama is separated into three GN (*Grama Nilbidari*) divisions<sup>14</sup>. There is one primary school, one secondary school and three pre-schools. To get to a post office, a doctor or a dispensary you have to go to one of the neighbouring villages a few kilometres away, but several ayurvedic specialists (*vederala*) and other kinds of healers are resident. There are two Buddhist temples and a communal place for worship in the forest, with a *Bodhi* tree (Bo tree, sacred tree in Buddhism) and shrines for the village god, *Gambara dejiyo*, and other locally important gods and goddesses. Sinhalese Buddhists dominate the village (and the area) and Sinhala is the spoken language<sup>15</sup>.

Like most fishing villages along the coast, it consists of an assembly of many types of mostly small houses, commonly single floor structures, with quite shallow foundations, cement or brick walls and roofs covered by tiles or metal sheets. Poorer houses are simple wood structures sometimes with mud walls and palm thatched roofs. Many houses along the coast were, partly because of land scarcity and population growth, located very close to the sea and sometimes right on the sandy beaches. These factors were of significance for the devastating impact of the tsunami waves. Often members of an extended family live in one household and after marriage it is common for a young couple to live in the house of the husband's mother. Arranged marriages are the ideal, but love marriages (*yaluwela*) are not unusual. Paternal uncles and maternal aunts are

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<sup>14</sup> The smallest administrative unit in Sri Lanka.

<sup>15</sup> The authors own phonetic transliteration is used throughout.

considered as little/big father/mother<sup>16</sup> to ego and his/her children as brothers and sisters<sup>17</sup>.

In terms of livelihood, the majority in the area are still occupied in fishing or fishing related activities, but there is also a substantial engagement in coir work and limestone work, even though it is declining. Few people are engaged in cultivation other than for supplementing the household with basic staples like chillies, papaw and coconuts<sup>18</sup>. Most women are at home, but it is not uncommon that they add-on to the household income by for example making coir ropes or selling items like tee, biscuits, fruits and vegetables, or home made food in small simple shops attached to their houses (*kade*). It is common for women to have been abroad at least once, usually to the Middle East to work as housemaids. Men migrate for work as well but to a somewhat lesser degree<sup>19</sup>.

In the village, the terms *poosath* or *salli kariyo* ('rich or money people') refers to those who are considered wealthy, *madiyama* to those in the middle, *samaniyo* to ordinary people and *dukpath* to the poor ('those who have fallen in sorrow'). The majority of villagers would, according to informants, fall under the category of *dukpath*, poor people, then, in terms of numbers, come *samaniyo*, ordinary families, the middle, *madiyama* category and a few *poosath*, rich.

In many regards, caste in Sri Lanka is less visible and significant than in India, but still a majority of the population recognizes caste for some purpose. There are three parallel systems of caste (Sinhala, Sri Lankan Tamil and Indian Tamil) and each system involves some form of caste based discrimination. The Sinhalese have evolved their own caste system at least from the medieval period onwards, despite that Buddhism, which

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<sup>16</sup> *Punchi/ loku amma/ tata*; Little/big mother/father

<sup>17</sup> *aiya, malli, akka, nangi*; elder brother, younger brother, elder sister, younger sister

<sup>18</sup> People are furthermore involved in a broad range of other occupations e.g. day labourers, carpenters, electricians, teachers, drivers and shop owners, a few government officials, and employees or soldiers of the armed forces.

<sup>19</sup> According to the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), the Sri Lankan migrant population for 2008 was around 1.8 million with a total outflow of 252,021 departures. Female migrants have dominated for several decades (on average about 65 per cent) due to the heavy outflow of housemaids to the Middle East. This is slowly changing towards more skilled categories migrating, with more male participation. The Middle Eastern region dominates the foreign employment market accounting to over 90 per cent of the total migrant workforce (IPS 2009:21ff).

speaks against caste has a strong influence on culture and worldview (Silva et al. 2009:9-10). Caste in modern day Sinhalese society is a kind of taboo subject. It is rarely spoken of openly and is regarded as a private topic discussed amongst caste fellows or in connection with matrimonial matters (Hussein 2008:206).

When dealing with social organisation and caste in a Sinhala Buddhist context it is in place to take note of Louis Dumont's (1966, 1983) hierarchy of values and of his caution against neglecting fundamental differences between cultures and assuming a universal egalitarian and individualistic worldview. Hylland Eriksen (2001:147) notes that according to Dumont societies are organised according to specific values that are expressed at different levels. The superordinate then encompasses the subordinate. The caste hierarchy of the Indian subcontinent, Dumont posits, can therefore not be understood in its parts but the parts must be seen in relation to the encompassing socio-cultural whole.

In Tharugama, people belong to a number of different castes. The biggest group is the *karawa* (fishermen), but the *durawa* (toddy tappers) are numerous as well. Then there are the *goyigama* (farmers), the *rada* (washermen), and the *hunu* (limestone workers). Before the tsunami, the southern side of the main road was home for many of the poorer *karawa* families. In the north part of the village caste and socio-economic status of households are more diverse and changed after the tsunami, since many *karawa* were relocated here from the south side. Still, a general demographic pattern of same castes living together in certain areas tends to dominate.

Caste does influence every day life in Tharugama, not only marriage affairs but also e.g. in the way people behave and relate to each other, even if its importance has declined. Stereotyped images of caste are also frequently expressed, for example it is generally acknowledged that *karawa* men are 'hot blooded' and violent and *karawa* women loud, conniving and using foul language. The image of the *karawa* as tough and violent is widespread, and harbours and fishing villages are considered places with high rates of crime such as theft, fights and murder, and locals tend to agree with this negative image. Another example of a common stereotype concerned the *goyigama* as people with 'good manors' e.g. *goyigama* women are pleasant; they 'speak softly and never lose their temper'. Self-discipline and composure are valued traits in a Buddhist

cultural perspective, while loss of control, to give in to passions and cravings, is considered low.

### *A History of Insecurity*

A brief description of the milieu and circumstances in which Tharugama and the study are placed will be provided here. It is not a comprehensive account of Sri Lankan political culture and socio-economic history. Nevertheless, the village and its people do not exist in a sealed off unit and some amount of contextualisation is vital. What I find most pertinent, in relation to this small-scale localized study, is to provide an outline of recent major changes and developments in Sri Lankan society at large.

Sri Lankan modern history bears imprints of extensive economic reforms, social unrest, political turbulence and large-scale violence, and Tharugama villagers often express life as being about struggling on in the face of reoccurring calamities, and even if what they often refer to is individual very tangible problems of livelihood, local disputes, health problems etc., they tie into larger national and global discourses.

Sri Lanka is integrated into the global economy and has, as many developing countries, been affected by its dynamics and borrowed heavily from foreign donors, and IMF (the International Monetary Fund) has at times imposed Structural Adjustment Programs (Gunawardena 2008 and Ruwanpura 2000 in Gamburd & McGilvray 2010:4). The integration into the global economy and culture of mass consumption, economic liberalisation, population growth, urbanisation, labour migration and the break-up of the traditional village society is a development that has had far reaching effects, and in many ways added new insecurities (and opportunities) to local communities and to people's lives. As James Brow (1996) writes, after independence, and especially since the late 1970s when an "open economy" policy began to take effect, communities became increasingly integrated into a larger economy governed by market principles. In the village he studied this brought about more pronounced economic differentiation and increasingly impersonal and atomistic economic relations that reached beyond the confines of the local community (Brow 1996:68-69).

In addition, the tsunami hit a deeply divided political setting, and efforts to respond were soon confronted with challenges that affected the quality and speed of assistance, while some forms of aid delivery fed into political conflicts that have ensnared Sri Lanka in civil war for more than 25 years<sup>20</sup> (Keenan 2010:17).

In studying the national discourse on disaster recovery in Sri Lankan English print media, Orjuela (2009) found an overwhelming emphasis on 'unity'. Two threats to unity were brought out, the natural disaster and the LTTE. A 'unity in diversity' political discourse predating the tsunami was often used to frame the disaster and recovery. Orjuela (2010) notes that the Sri Lankan state's development discourse emphasises unity, and repeatedly frames the country's strivings for national unity and development in opposition to the 'interference of Western powers' in the conflict (e.g. calls for peace negotiations and criticism of gross human rights violations) and in development (Westernization as a threat to local tradition and religion)<sup>21</sup>(Orjuela 2010:106-107).

The southern area in which I did fieldwork has not been subject to outright fighting, but it has provided the armed forces with large amounts of soldiers to fight at the fronts in the north and east of the island. At the time of the tsunami, the separatist war between the LTTE and the Sinhalese dominated state had caused an estimated 70,000 deaths and displaced almost one million people (Keenan 2010:20). Besides the well-

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<sup>20</sup> Beginning in the mid-1970s a violent struggle to create a separate state was driven by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The war ended brutally in May 2009 when government forces defeated the LTTE leadership and took control of the whole island by force. Keenan (2010) writes that the conflict originated in the failure of Sri Lanka's post-independence leadership to agree on a system granting equal access to resources and protection by the state. After independence in 1948 some Sinhalese politicians used the state to rectify what they saw as disadvantages suffered by the Sinhala Buddhist majority (74 percent of the population) under British colonial rule. A number of laws were passed that effectively defined the state as Sinhalese and Buddhist e.g. The Sinhala Only Act in 1956 and the 1972 Constitution that granted Buddhism a special status. Sinhalese "grievances centred on the loss of prestige accorded to Buddhism, the dominance of English as the language of the elite and of economic opportunity, and the disproportionate number of Tamils holding civil-service jobs and gaining entrance to universities" (Keenan 2010:18).

<sup>21</sup> Manifested e.g. in strong criticism of and attacks against foreign-funded NGO organizations, as well as against Christian churches (DeVotta, 2007 cited in Orjuela 2010).



known civil war, the 1971 and 1988-90 insurgencies involving the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna or People's Liberation front), a left-wing Sinhalese activist/political organisation, state security forces and other paramilitary bodies induced violence and fear, especially in the southern parts of the country, making abductions and extrajudicial killings commonplace (Argenti-Pillen 2003:4).

### *Local Landscapes of Risk, Danger and Suffering*

Besides the history of developments in the country, which for the most part implicitly influence village life, there are more overt and every day dangers and threats to be considered, e.g. the concern to avert the poisonous voice (*kata vaha*), the evil eye (*as vaha*) and evil thoughts (*ho vaha*). Moreover, there is the more dangerous gaze, *disti*, that of 'the wild', un-socialised, immoral, lowly beings which bring about (is) a state of possession and literally means 'glance of the demon' (Vogt 1999:343). Argenti-Pillen (2003) uses 'the gaze' as a central notion to analyse the local context and how women contain violence in south Sri Lanka. She proposes that these various gazes in village discourses are taken into account when making the minute decisions of everyday life; the protective (albeit judgemental) gazes of family members, the seductive gazes of potential lovers, the jealous and murderous gazes of enemies, the gazes of dead relatives, or more generally the gaze of the "public" enforcing a Sinhalese Buddhist ethos and the gaze of un-socialised (nonhuman or human) beings who operate outside the norms of Sinhalese Buddhist culture. She portrays an environment in which individuals constantly seek to find their place and navigate amongst the multiplicity of gazes that in many ways resemble Tharugama attitudes and perceptions of vulnerability and the constant exposure to public (as well as other-worldly) scrutiny, of immanent risk and a preoccupation of taking 'proper' precautions. Other dangers besides evil eye, mouth, thought and the gaze of the wild include various forms of sorcery and black magic that might be inflicted upon you by enemies and several cases of black magic (*kodivine*)<sup>22</sup> surfaced during fieldwork.

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<sup>22</sup> Black magic in its worst form is believed to harm men as well as animals, trees and inanimate objects. The influence of the senses, such as sound, sight, smell, touch, taste and mind, are brought into bearing in its practice (Fernando 2000:372).

Kapferer (1991 [1983]) notes that demons and ghosts are apart from the cultural and social order of humans, but still they intrude into their communities and dwellings. It is the social and cultural order that provides support and protection from the demonic, and when individuals are removed from others, physically or mentally, they become vulnerable to attacks (Kapferer 1991:70-71). A major natural disaster and the subsequent influx of outside influences put tremendous strain upon the local socio-cultural order. This may be expected to weaken the community's ability to protect itself from intrusion by demonic (anti-social) forces. Demonic forces outside the Buddhist realm proper threaten the Sinhalese Buddhist cosmological order. From within Buddhism, however, the notion of *dukkha*, suffering, is given broad explanatory value by villagers. I was constantly reminded about the idea of *dukkha* as a natural part of life. Calamities were reoccurring and something to deal with at best ability. The tsunami was yet another difficulty to overcome in a row of hardship and suffering and a looming risk and danger, rather than perpetual safety, regarded as the 'regular' condition and an inescapable feature of existence. However, although the tsunami could be incorporated and understood within a familiar discourse of 'life as suffering', it was exceptional in scale and thus, in presenting people with new kinds of challenges and a heightened sense of vulnerability, i.e. the *event* of the tsunami was extraordinary but the *process* of suffering familiar. The disaster is both an event and a process that cannot easily be distinguished from other aspects of life or be given a clear beginning or end.

Suffering (*dukkha*) is at the core of Buddhist philosophy and the first of the 'Four Noble Truths'. It is often simply translated as 'The Noble Truth of Suffering' but the Pali word *dukkha*, besides its ordinary translation and usage as suffering, pain, sorrow and misery, also contains deeper ideas such as imperfection, emptiness and insubstantiality (Rahula 1959:17). *Dukkha* should be understood as being produced by attachment to worldly things and release from suffering, pain, unhappiness, and from the cycle of rebirth could only be achieved by ending desire, individuality and attachment to worldly things through adhering to Buddha's Middle Path (Kapferer 1991:23).

In conversations with informants about everyday problems, as well as moral and existential dilemmas, *dukkha* often appeared. Common sayings in response to misfortune and difficulties were; "*what to do*", "*this is life*",

*“this life is suffering”, “what can I do”*. In her study of suffering from war and the tsunami in north Sri Lanka, Toftgård (2008) found similar expressions to be commonplace, and they existed within a general frame of acknowledgment and acceptance of suffering, “[...] as much as such statements were resigning expressions of personal experience caught up in the overall crisis as context, they can also, and more pertinently, perhaps, be recast within Sri Lankan cosmology which even more so lends authority to the interpretation of life as suffering” (Toftgård 2008:85-86). Toftgård further notes (by reference to Obeyesekere 1985, Lawrence 1998, 1999) that a cosmological preoccupation with suffering, in which hopelessness is accepted, and even positively valued, does exist and that to Sinhalese Buddhists hopelessness lies in the nature of the world and understanding, and overcoming it leads to salvation. In western societies a common attitude towards suffering is as something that one should not have to endure whereas in Sri Lanka it is understood as an inevitable part of human experience and could be openly shared (Toftgård 2008:80-81).

Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) note that Sinhala Buddhism has always been associated with a multifaceted and rich cosmology and that all beings populating the universe reflect the moral order (which is also the natural order). Wicked beings are beneath us in hell and virtuous beings above us in heaven. Humans and other beings in which good and bad are more equally present are situated in the middle; the human social order is furthermore but a reflection of good and bad deeds in past lives (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988:16).

According to Vindsana panditya, a Tharugama villager well acquainted and renown for his knowledge of local history and traditions, the village landscape and surroundings are imbued with ‘symbols’, ‘secrets’, ‘moral lessons’ and connections to the past that to different degrees are part of a collective memory and identity. Most people, also the younger generation, have some amount of knowledge and awareness of e.g. places known to harbour spirits and demons, and they direct behaviour to avoid certain kinds of dangers regardless of age, class, caste, gender etc. However, Vindsana panditya believes that this kind of knowledge is rapidly being devalued. He laments recent changes and, in concurrence with the majority of informants, perceives the time before ‘tsunamitime’ as ‘better’. A warmer, safer society was often portrayed; a society where money lasted longer, fishing was more lucrative, the land more fertile,

nature and weather more predictable and people more sharing. To what degree this tendency is a general nostalgic yearning for an idealised notion of the past, common everywhere, or for actual 'on the ground' changed material and social conditions, norms and values is something that will be made more clear as the thesis proceeds.

## Outline of the Thesis

*Chapter Two - 'Tsunamitime': From Compassion to Conflict* - will provide an entry into a 'field of shattered worlds'. It will show how the event of the tsunami suddenly threw communities into new situations and that this 'disorder' spurred people to try recreating order while they were simultaneously being subjected to the 'second wave' - the humanitarian aid industry. The main part of the thesis revolves around the prolonged recovery phase, not 'tsunamitime', even though it is constantly present. This chapter's emphasis on the disaster itself is thus meant to provide an essential backdrop and contextualise rather than analyse. In this chapter I also reflect on my own role in the village context. *Chapter Three - Receiving Houses and Making Homes* - will continue to illustrate the process of disruption and reordering and how this affects relations of giving and receiving by focusing on housing, which was subject to intense conflicts over entitlements, expectations and obligations. It will bring out that in a context of entrenched insecurity, disorder and immanent danger. The house becomes an important site for generating a feeling of control and protection, an ideally well-ordered space with clear boundaries that keep insecurity and misfortune at bay, physically as well as symbolically. It will show that creating a safe home entails much more than the erection of a physical structure, and illustrates that investing the household with certain values, and aligning its webs of relations according to local norms and traditions, will create a sense of security and confidence. *Chapter Four - Local Livelihoods: Commodification and Competition* - investigates ambiguities and uncertainties in the area of livelihood and fishing in particular, which was a major target for aid, and pays attention to local professional relations as well as relations with the sea. It will reveal that, besides involving important social webs with family, neighbours and friends, the local economy of reciprocity also depended on balanced 'cosmological' relations and exchange with gods and spirits. Here will be discussed various rationales and incentives of giving and receiving the gift of aid and what I call a temporary 'reconomy' (re-

construction economy) and how people have reacted to altered circumstances and the inflow of NGOs and aid goods. *Chapter Five - 'A World Up-side-down': Disordered Relations, Obligations and Expectations* - demonstrates that the situation in Tharugama in the period after the tsunami was marked by a process of re-establishing ambiguous borders and re-writing scripts according to circumstances changed. It was a situation in which many experienced a new kind of insecurity related to identity and belonging, which included reformulation and resistance but also opportunities and acceptance. It will be brought out how the disaster laid bare some former power relations but also created new ones. Local hierarchies, exploitative relationships and moral obligations were 'untied' and under a process of (re)tying, and the tsunami reinforced a pre-existing culture of mistrust. Besides increased mistrust, a significant feature was the (re)structuring of relations as a way of 'curing' disorder and restoring an intelligible life world (social as well as cosmological). *Chapter Six - Disaster and Local Religious Life: Reciprocal Flows Disrupted* - focuses on moral dilemmas and transformations in the sphere of religious life, and looks closer at the local economy of merit-making and on shifting roles of givers, receivers and brokers in the context of disaster aid. It will demonstrate that the religious and spiritual dimension of local life worlds has essential bearing upon people's struggle for being on an existential level but also for more general well being and management of everyday life. It will illustrate that the recovery process and the way aid was controlled and distributed played into ongoing developments in larger society influencing local religious life and trust towards established religion. In *Chapter Seven - Conclusions and Reflections* - I will recap the basic aim and objectives, draw together the main findings and discuss limitations and possibilities of the approach taken.

Figure 1) Sunset *orime* fishing



## 2. 'Tsunamitime' - From Compassion to Conflict

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Many have died. How to give an account of these shocking events without giving in to a desire to shock? And more important, what does it mean to give such an account?

E. Valentine Daniel (1996:3)

This chapter will provide an entry into a 'field of shattered worlds'. It will show how the event of the tsunami suddenly threw communities into new situations and that this 'disorder' spurred people to try to recreate order while they were simultaneously being subjected to the 'second wave' - the humanitarian aid industry - with various philanthropists bringing in their own rationales of recovery and order. As noted by Mary Douglas (2002 [1966]) disorder spoils pattern, but also provides the material of patterns. Disorder is by implication unlimited, since no pattern has been realised within it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. It destroys existing patterns but also contains the potential for new ones. It is therefore symbolic of both danger and power (Douglas (2002:117 [1966])).

The dramatic rupture caused by the tsunami created destruction and disorder but it also opened the way for creativity and change and this had implications for the local moral economy and relations of reciprocity. For example, new relations were forged between various givers and receivers of aid as well as between researcher and informant, as will be described in this chapter. In this chapter I shall reflect on my own engagement with people in the area and discuss methodological issues in an attempt to disentangle some concerns regarding production of ethnography in a disaster setting. The chapter focuses on accounts of what it was like to be affected by the tsunami, and memories of 'tsunamitime'

(*tsunami welawa*) i.e. when temporary camps sheltered the displaced, relief aid was distributed and humanitarian organisations and NGO's were abundant in the area. It will reveal how people dealt with the harrowing experience of the disaster and how the giving and receiving of relief aid was a critical process bringing out both 'the best' and 'the worst' in people. The main part of the thesis revolves around the prolonged recovery phase, not 'tsunami time', even though it is constantly present. This chapter's emphasis on the disaster itself is thus meant to provide an essential backdrop and contextualise rather than analyse. Before going into the lived experiences of the catastrophe, I want to reflect on my own role in the village context

### The First Encounter

I first came to the area that was to become my field site in 2002. At that time I was a tourist on leave from a one-month field-method course held in south Sri Lanka. I had my future husband, Holger, with me and we enjoyed the tranquil, tropical beaches around Polkanda for a week. We met a local fisherman, Vindsana, and his family with whom we have had continuous contact since then. Holger is a keen fisher and soon arranged to go out with Vindsana and some other fishermen in an *oruwe*, the traditional small non-motorised boat. He had brought equipment from Sweden and the locals inspected a brand new rod with eager interest. I recall the scene:

Holger surrounded by curious fishermen on the small beach while preparing to go out with the *oruwe*; the locals with their *pitte* (rods) made of branches of the *kittul* tree and simple homemade hooks adorned with yellow thread; Holger prepares his new modern rod followed by many eyes; a small pull to fasten the hook to the handle and suddenly the rod snaps at the middle and breaks in two! Then, the alarm of the locals, aware of the value of the rod and my future husband's embarrassed face as he tries to reassure them that he has another one, that it was not that bad. Finally, they get into a boat out on the waves. After a couple of hours they return, Holger annoyed and disappointed, he did not manage to catch a single fish while his companion in the small *oruwe* landed about 40 of the sardines visible in abundance in the bay.

Later he told me that he was amazed and puzzled about the fact that even though he tried to mimic the local style of fishing, using a similar



sized hook and the same colours of bate, it was impossible. He watched, with growing frustration, how the man he was out with caught fish after fish. He could even see the clouds of fish swimming teasingly around the boat.

His modern equipment could apparently not make up for his lack of knowledge of the local milieu, techniques, behaviour and preferences of the fish. There was a lot more for him to learn in order to succeed in fishing here. I do not intend to idealise indigenous knowledge but still this might serve as a simple illustration about not taking for granted that something that works in one setting is necessarily working in the same way in another. The way these people we met during our first visit fished, we learned by time, was deeply embedded in local culture. The ways of the sea and the fish, the length and sturdiness of the rod, the size and shape of the hooks, the moves of the arm and so on were developed in relation to specific cultural, economic, social, and environmental concerns and circumstances. For the group of fishermen on this beach, fishing entailed much more than income, it enveloped a sense of community, identity and ontological security. Besides revealing social and cultural distance the incident also illustrates economic asymmetry, since my husband could take lightly on the loss of a rod, he had others and did not depend on getting a catch to sell that day. I do not want to make too much out of this encounter but it was during this time (my first in Sri Lanka, years before the tsunami) that I made my initial connections with people in the area, we laughed and tried to communicate despite lack of a shared language and awareness about each other's way of life. The value of sharing in doing and non-verbal communication was another implicit early insight. The incident was remembered by us and amongst villagers. On our later returns we were well known, at least to some extent.

### *An Emergent Field*

I returned to Sri Lanka a few years later, in early 2004, as a volunteer for a local NGO, travelling the country to set up peace and reconciliation workshops, but there was no time to revisit the southern fishing village. That autumn I prepared for my master thesis (planned to revolve around Buddhism and politics) and then, in December, the same year, the tsunami struck and consequently changed my plans to focus on the role of

religion in the aftermath of the tsunami. I received a small grant to do minor fieldwork in 2005, a few months after the disastrous waves devastated the coast. The decision was partly based on personal motives; to see Vindsana and his family again and find out about their situation. We have had postal contact since our first encounter, and after the tsunami I tried to contact them but my efforts were unsuccessful. So when travelling from Colombo to the south coast after the tsunami, seeing the devastation, I feared what I would be faced with in Polkanda, knowing that their house was located very close to the sea. A provisional plan was primarily to find Vindsana and his family and thereafter start to think about work. Depending on the situation in Polkanda I would consider to do fieldwork there.

On arrival I found that the whole family was safe and that their old, scruffy house was equally old and scruffy but basically untouched by the tsunami. The house is situated on the verge of the sea but on quite high ground and the wave breakers and coral reef just outside lessened the impact. Polkanda actually suffered minor losses compared to neighbouring villages. On the border of Polkanda and Tharugama, the neighboring village, a temporary relief camp was established at a Buddhist temple. After discussing my plans to do a study with Vindsana I decided to stay in the area and, with his help, do in-depth interviews at the temple camp. So I stayed for two months, and worked with Vindsana as my field assistant. After fieldwork at the camp, support, with contributions from friends and family in Sweden<sup>23</sup>, was extended to needing families in the form of food parcels and fans.

After my first visit to the island, I joined a Sri Lanka study group to learn Sinhalese and in 2007, when back for an internship at a Colombo based NGO, I had the secondary aim of practicing Sinhalese. When going out for a longer period of fieldwork in 2008 for this thesis, my language skills were at the point of understanding the most basic level of everyday conversations.

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<sup>23</sup> I, as well as people back home, was drawn into a 'wave of compassion' incited by the horrific images of loss and suffering pumped out by media. The fact that 543 Swedish citizens, most in Thailand, were lost in the tsunami (SOU 2005:104) I believe further contributed to unprecedented engagement and giving in Sweden.

*Fieldwork - (re)Presenting Reality*

Vindsana knew of my arrival in 2008 and about plans to possibly stay for a longer period of time to do a comprehensive study in the area. This time I had Holger with me again. During the minor fieldwork in 2005 I was on my own, which limited mobility and incited many questions. Holger's presence throughout the period of fieldwork made me, in a sense, more 'normal' and increased my freedom.

As in 2005 my major worries this time as well was how to conduct fieldwork in an environment of such a 'spectacular' event without slipping into stereotype images of misery and victims and how to generate 'good results' without intruding on integrity and stirring up difficult memories of loss for the sake of getting 'scientific data'. At the same time I was confident that getting the points of view of people affected would provide insights that could not be achieved in another way, and I hoped to build trust enough for people to feel okay to share, bearing in mind that sometimes "suffering brings us to limits of language" (Jackson 2005:152). But for the most part it was not silence but a flow of words that were prompted by my interest and questions, as if telling an outsider like me gave welled-up words and experiences a sense of acknowledgment. Generally, outlet for opinions and grievances concerning relief and reconstruction has been limited, as influence in the process on the whole. In an environment in which so many lost so much, who can muster the strength and will to listen to yet another story of loss and sorrow? And would it make a difference?

Hope of gaining something in return, a gift or support, played into many situations. Establishing a relationship with someone from the 'rich West' offered a measure of security and this was a prevalent aspiration. I was aware that I would disappoint many people in this. I also had to balance my professional and personal roles and come to terms with my guilty conscience about being a visiting researcher in the context of overwhelming needs and suffering; I could leave whenever I chose and local discomforts and scarcity were, for me, temporary and optional. I had my share of 'gift dilemmas' and experienced directly the way in which the

obligations related to giving inevitably had an impact on relations<sup>24</sup>. However, my personal experiences will remain largely in the background, although they do inform the content of the present thesis.

During fieldwork I carried around doubts and questions. Is bearing witness enough? Is compassion relevant? When will fear of interfering turn into indifference? Michael Jackson (2005) writes about anthropology and the ethnographic method, and that we should not “take it upon ourselves to redress the injustices of the world but to do justice to the way others experience the world, and whatever is at stake for them” (Jackson 2005:153).

As I see it, this necessitates placing oneself in the situation of the other – a sustained intimate and often silent, involvement in his or her everyday lifeworld that inevitably transforms one’s own worldview, and may involve the other seeing his or her situation from a new perspective. In this sense the ethnographic method seeks not some form of abstract knowledge, but through a mix of osmosis and dialogue understands the other from the unsettling and unsettled space of the subjective in-between (Jackson 2005:153).

After listening to a person talking about difficult and painful experiences, I often felt like I had been given both a precious gift and a profound burden. I struggle with the words I write in an effort to (re)present these personal experiences, while being aware of my own subjectivity and ultimate power to define. I can’t avoid thinking about the ‘spirit of the gift’, about something of the giver being passed along with the gift to the receiver, carrying a silent (but compelling) obligation of return. The relation between the anthropologist and the informant also contains a reciprocity dilemma in which expectations are often diffuse rather than explicit, despite adherence to established ethical norms. The anthropologist’s failure to meet or even acknowledge informants’ expectations may generate negative feelings. To borrow Sahlins’ (1972) terms, the anthro-

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<sup>24</sup>When a huge container of gifts from Sweden, one late night, arrived at the village, it presented us with plenty of opportunities to learn about and experience the difficulties, dilemmas and complexities involved in gift giving (in the post-disaster context). It was sent by initiative of family and friends at home who independently, and with the best of intentions, organised and collected gifts (clothes, toys, tools, electric appliances etc) knowing that we were to stay for quite some time in a disaster stricken village in rural Sri Lanka.

pologist may push the relationship towards generalised reciprocity, i.e. strive for a minimum of social distance and a maximum of trust with an implicit understanding that there will not necessarily be any tangible benefit for the informant. However, the informant may push it towards negative reciprocity, viewing the relationship as containing a minimum of trust and a maximum of social distance, and may have an expectation of profit.

People I met tried to get their particular point of view across and spoke from their particular position. In remembering and retelling, individuals in their different roles as survivors, helpers, or bystanders positioned themselves in a local social, political and moral discourse. An awareness of these positioned voices, my own and the informants', had to be coupled with a stance of sincerity in every situation. The issue, for the anthropologist, I believe, is attempting to understand how different views and positions are configured, produced and related (and not to find some 'absolute reality').

In their introduction to their discussion of conducting fieldwork, Sluka and Robben (2007) describe the current interest in ethnographic method and morality and note what they refer to as "a period of soul-searching" in the discipline (Sluka & Robben 2007:24). They exemplify this "critical-stance" by citing Scheper-Hughes.

I am weary of these postmodernist critiques, and, given the perilous times in which we and our subjects live I am inclined towards compromise, the practice of a "good enough" ethnography. While the anthropologist is always a necessarily flawed and biased instrument of cultural translation, like every other craftsperson, we can do the best we can, with the limited resources we have at our hand: our ability to listen and to observe carefully and with empathy and compassion" (Scheper-Hughes [1995] cited in Sluka and Robben 2007: 24).

Another dilemma I had to deal with during fieldwork was to establish my identity as different from that of an 'NGO-person'<sup>25</sup>. My position as

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<sup>25</sup> The common stereotype of foreign 'NGO-people', as conveyed by villagers, was a person with no Sinhala language skills, and scant knowledge of local culture, there to distribute monetary and material aid but also to enjoying themselves at local restaurants and beaches.

an ‘outsider’ who did not really belong to the ‘second wave of gift givers’ was ambiguous. In the years following the disaster, the villagers had grown accustomed to westerners handing out money and goods and I was afraid that this could affect interviews and the way people engaged with me. Ironically, I wanted something from the people but I had nothing concrete with which to reciprocate. I assumed that if I began giving gifts and became caught up in the ‘donor culture’ and the moral and social entanglement, this would not only limit my freedom as a researcher but would also give rise to more and more difficult ethical dilemmas. I found that my caution about giving gifts ultimately made my role less problematic. Laidlaw claims that free gifts make no friends and I found that avoiding this trap also helped me make no enemies by setting me on neutral ground. I learned that the sometimes reckless gift giving of the second wave confused many of my informants and was sometimes felt even to be offensive since it broke the familiar norms and values of gift giving in the community.

Fortunately I was not completely unknown and new to the area, and quite a number of people knew that I was a university student. I was very clear and constantly advertised that I was there to do research and did not represent an NGO or belong to any humanitarian organisation. With time, and persistence in clarifying and talking about my work and intentions, I was not fitted into the mould of a foreign ‘NGO-person’ and started to feel more confident about my presence at various village events, in people’s homes and lives. Soon I was invited to a wide range of activities; puberty rituals, inaugurations of shops, women association meetings, school fairs, funerals, weddings, healing rituals, alms giving’s and other comings and goings in the village, and I came to adopt a less anxious attitude about my work as an anthropologist. I continuously had relapses of serious doubt and questioning but decided to focus on simply (?) ‘being there’, with the people I meet, in that moment, ‘doing my best with the limited resources at hand’. In his introduction to *Life Within Limits: Well-being in a World of Want* (2011), Michael Jackson captures this nicely.

Herein lies another assumption – I make as an anthropologist – the assumption of *intersubjectivity*. Just as human existence is never simply an unfolding from within but rather an outcome of a situation, of a relationship with others, so human understanding is never born of contemplating the world from afar; it is an emergent and perpetually renegotiated outcome of social interaction, dialogue and engagement. ...Life transpires in the

subjective in-between, in a space that remains indeterminate despite our attempts to fix our position within it –a borderlands, as it were, a third world (Jackson 2011:xiii).

The phenomenological method stresses ‘participation’ in the life-worlds under study, and as Knibbe and Versteeg (2008:53) write, with reference to the study of religion, it could be more conducive to help in praying for someone than to record what words were being said during prayer. Still, “To a cultural outsider, it is never ‘simple’ to understand the practices of people, and she tends to understand them by explaining them to herself. Even if she simply takes the practices she is trying to understand at face value and tries to imitate them, they will always be integrated into a habitus that has already been formed”(Knibbe & Versteeg 2008:53).

### *Methodological Concerns, Choices and Selections*

I was not sure if I would do the study in Polkanda, were I worked before, but I finally decided on the neighboring village of Tharugama. One reason was that it was more severely affected by the tsunami. Tharugama was also larger and more mixed in terms of caste and livelihoods and contained different ‘categories’ I was interested in. I decided on a broad categorisation: 1) people *displaced and relocated*, 2) people with *rebuilt houses at original locations* and 3) people *not directly affected by the tsunami*, assuming that this would have an effect on people’s experiences in the recovery process. Tharugama had a tsunami housing project, the ‘Montana Village’, with newly built houses for about 70 displaced families in a jungle area previously uninhabited. In other parts of the village some damaged and destroyed houses were rebuilt in existing neighbourhoods while other areas were completely untouched by the waves.

I was hesitant to present my work and ask questions focused on tsunami recovery since I feared this might direct answers towards the way people would talk to humanitarian workers and state officials. Furthermore, I did not want to extract the event of the tsunami out of lived realities and treat it as an isolated event. I wanted to explore its consequences in the context of people’s lives as complex ‘whole persons’ with a history, not as ‘tsunami victims’. At the same time I could not possibly cover everything. Based on previous fieldwork and the way relief aid fell out locally I identified a number of areas that I assumed would contain plenty of

information regarding the giving and receiving of aid. Hence, focused enquiry into these would expose a lot about the local moral economy and how expectations, relations and obligations were enveloped and developed in the process of recovery. These broad areas correspond with the chapters. They are: 2) the giving/receiving of acute relief aid, 3) the housing process, receiving houses, and making homes, 4) livelihood support, e.g. the donation of boats, 5) social organisation in the wake of disaster aid and 6) disaster aid and local religious life.

I started with mapping out and getting to know the area by walking around, with my field assistant and alone, speaking casually and introducing myself to people I encountered. The next step was to conduct random household interviews in the three broad categories mentioned earlier, in order to collect basic information and to probe the themes, if they were sensible and relevant. Later I revisited households and persons for in-depth interviews and to collect narratives. Besides extensive observation and involvement in every day life, altogether 50 semi-structured household interviews, 40 in-depth interviews and 10 more detailed life history narratives were collected. Additionally, I draw from the smaller study I did in 2005 with specific focus on the tsunami, and the role of religion for recovery and coping and also from more informal visits to the area before the catastrophe.

Besides villagers from the three 'categories' (of displaced, rebuilt and unaffected) I interviewed a large number of specialists with particular information about for example various healing practices, local building traditions, astrology and local political institutions and regulations. I kept track that age, gender, class, caste and the categories of 'displaced', 'rebuilt at original location', and 'unaffected' were roughly evenly represented in the material garnered.

I felt it was particularly important when beginning my fieldwork to allow the material I gathered to shape the course of my study rather than to try sticking rigidly to a prior plan. I tried to allow my informants' stories to show me what was important to them and then to focus more closely upon these issues. Anthropological fieldwork requires flexibility and a willingness to continually reassess one's assumptions, and it demands sensitivity to note recurring themes and novel information while remaining focused on their relevance for the research problem. It also requires integrity to balance ethical standards with scientific endeavour. In my



case, the overarching question concerned the impact of the flood of external aid on the local moral economy, and it involved exploring how relationships, obligations and expectations were developed and altered by the giving and receiving of 'the gift of aid'.

### *Local Partners, Language and Translation*

Sometimes fieldwork is a matter of luck. I was fortunate enough to find a woman in Tharugama, Imanie, with whom I developed a close working and personal relationship. Preferably I wanted to find a person in the village with sufficient English and local knowledge to act as translator and field assistant; I thought it would be most practical. We could easily go through interviews, change plans and have regular contact, which, I assumed, would facilitate a closer relation and better work. My Sinhalese was good enough for casual polite conversation but not for in depth interviews and, even if it improved, I was dependent on a translator throughout my stay. In previous fieldwork I had worked with interpreters that were outsiders and had difficulties with the authoritarian role the interpreters often took towards villagers and the social and cultural distance between them. Imanie had a large social network and was engaged in many village associations and activities. In her youth she worked in the Middle East as a nanny and her sister is an English teacher, factors that contribute to good English abilities. Imanie furthermore had extensive experience of the local relief and reconstruction process, not only by living in an effected area, but also because she was employed by various NGO's as an interpreter after the disaster, and she and her husband quickly got involved in providing acute relief at a local temple. Her family has its origins in the village and she married a village officer, at the time of my fieldwork he was retired since a few years.

Imanie's position in the village was colored by her being the wife of a former village officer and I had to take this into account. Furthermore, I assumed that local gender patterns and the fact that she was a middle-aged woman might make it a bit difficult to talk to men e.g. about fishing but allow me easier access to the women's worlds. Pros and cons were considered but the advantages in working with Imanie soon proved to outweigh any disadvantages, and I decided to find ways to make up for possible biases.

Imanie and I soon developed a team through which I could actually learn a good deal by letting her inform the progress of an interview or conversation. The fact that she, with time, understood my intentions and interest and eventually found it exciting made good results. Although at times she could not understand my keen interest in certain things (often regarding what she saw as ‘common knowledge’) and became weary of my constant questions and demands for detailed explanations. But, as she told me, she also learned new things and saw her community in a somewhat new light by examining issues she had been unaware of or not interested in before. Once she compared herself to a detective, uncovering new details and piecing together small parts of a bigger puzzle. On several occasions she pondered a question at night after our work and came up with suggestions of a way forward the next day, what to ask and who to see. Her social network was vast, and I gained instant information about happenings in the village and could take part in various public events and private celebrations and rituals. Imanie’s house became something of a base for our work. It was often filled with people and the environment provided plenty of opportunities for group discussions and informal conversations. Her husband, as a retired village officer, could also help with a lot of information about the village. How it has changed over time in terms of environment, livelihoods, cast, class, life styles, standard of living, traditions and so on. He had suffered several strokes and spent most of his time in the house; sadly he passed away about six months after my departure.

### **The First Wave, The Tsunami**

On the morning of December 26<sup>th</sup> in 2004 roaring masses of water swept in over the coastline and transformed the landscape in a matter of minutes. Homes, neighborhoods, coconut groves, fishing grounds, roads and footpaths that evolved over time at some places in the area were suddenly altered beyond recognition. A rumble of building materials, furniture, clothes, boats, garbage, uprooted trees, branches, bicycles and three-wheelers, covered in mud, was what met the eye when the water finally receded. In terms of the immense material and environmental damage caused by the tsunami, a difficult time of reordering and reconstructing lay ahead. In addition survivors had to come to terms with the loss of lives, and not only a fragmented physical landscape but also questions of reason and causality, about issues on an existential level. Those

who had relatives with capacity to take them in generally chose that option over the camps. There were, furthermore, a great number of people whose houses were only partly damaged and still liveable.

The impact of the tsunami along the coast was not evenly dispersed but differed greatly depending on various factors such as the position of coral reefs, the level of the land, and the type and amount of vegetation. At some places houses situated very close to the sea were basically unaffected while others, 100 metres from the water, were destroyed. The type of houses that got completely broken were, quite naturally, predominately poorer houses made from less stable material such as wood and mud, even though a lot of solid concrete buildings and houses also got severely damaged.

### *Tsunamitime Memories*

Michel Jackson (2005) writes that an event is remembered as it is re-worked in a process of making sense of it and not as it was originally lived, that “it discloses both a will towards the future and the sedimented will of the past. Any event may therefore be seen as an epiphany – a window onto previous events that are all but forgotten, and possible events that are being anticipated or prepared” (Jackson 2005:11-12). Marita Eastmond (2007) examines “Stories as Lived Experience” amongst forced migrants, and points out that stories are part of everyday life and a way for actors to negotiate experience. Like Jackson, she notes how past experience is remembered and interpreted in the light of the present as well as by the way the future is imagined (2007:248). Furthermore, she suggests that memories and stories are situational and that what is told is shaped through the encounter between narrator and listener and the power relationship between them (Eastmond 2007:249).

Narratives are not transparent renditions of ‘truth’ but reflect a dynamic interplay between life, experience and story. Placed in their wider socio-political and cultural contexts, stories can provide insights into how forced migrants seek to make sense of displacement and violence, re-establish identity in ruptured life courses and communities, or bear witness to violence and repression. The researcher must pay particular attention to his/her own role in the production of narrative data and the representation of lived experience as text (Eastmond 2007:248).

In an attempt to portray the critical event of the tsunami, Suranga's and Pushpa's recollections and reflections of the tsunami and its aftermath will be recounted. The choice of these two narratives is not that they are exceptional, typical or representative. Their situations differ in terms of age, gender, economic strength, amount and type of aid, and they share the grim experience of the tsunami that bring to the fore imperative questions of survival, suffering and coping. They are presented to illustrate both diversity and commonalities, but foremost to give the reader a sense of how the catastrophe was played out at this particular place through the narrated experiences of two villagers. I have chosen to recount the narratives in their entirety, except for a few comments here and there, as an attempt to convey the emotional aspect of the total experience of fragmented life-worlds.

Interlocutors encountered during fieldwork, as any other persons, vary in the way they verbalise and communicate experience and, as Eastmond noted above, narratives are also situational. This also plays into the choice of these two stories since encounters with Suranga and Pushpa were occasions that prompted many memories and articulated vivid expressions of 'tsunamitime' (*tsunami welawa*) experiences.

Suranga is an old man. He was born in the village in the 1922 and has lived there his whole life. He lost three of his six grown-up children in the tsunami. Before the tsunami he lived in an extended family with three of his grown-up children and their families in a house on the sea-side of the main road. For his living he has been involved in numerous trades like selling kerosene, cakes and fish, but for some years he depends on his son's financial support.

I had been out to buy some fish in the morning. When I came back home I asked my daughter to prepare some food for me so she brought me some *indiapa* (rice flour noodles). She handed me the food and when I turned around I saw the waves. I told my daughter to run and save her life and that I would stay and hold on to a lamppost. I held on tight but when the second wave came I got very scared, it was too strong and I got swept away. The waves came to a height of 22 feet (almost 7 metres) at this place. At that moment I thought I would die so I surrendered to the force, I held my arms out and just went with the water. The first, smaller wave took my children. I think that one of my daughters held on to the other one's neck, I got a very bad feeling that these two would die. The water was not really like waves, it was going around in circles everywhere. I

know some people say that the water had gone far out after coming back again but I saw it all come at once without stopping. The water went about three kilometres inland, all the way to the *Monaraduwe* lake. The land here is low, that is why. The force of the water took me over two kilometres inland. I have no memory from being inside the water and when I first woke up my whole body was stiff and I could not speak. I opened my eyes and I saw trucks, furniture, fridges and many other things scattered all around me. I saw that my clothes had been torn off my body and started to shout but nobody was there. I did not recognize the place but I started to walk and came to a yard where I found a pair of trousers. There were five cigarettes in the pocket. I continued walking, I was injured, I had lost one of my fingers. I tried to find the way and walk towards the main road. On the way I saw 16 dead bodies. I was looking out for my daughters but I did not find them.

Most of the dead bodies here were found about 2 kilometres inland. There are many deep holes where people have dug up the ground for coral and the bodies got caught in them. There was a big bus full of people on the road at the time the tsunami struck and those people ran out and got swept down a hole like that. Nobody knows who these people were and where they all came from. I don't know how things are at that place now, these people did not get buried or anything. But I have not heard about problems with spirits (*bolmans*) or ghosts (*peretiya*). Many bodies were just put on tires and burned, there were many bodies in the road. I saw a dead couple that must have only just got married, there were gold for 50,000 rupees on their bodies. I just covered their faces and went away. I did not feel that I wanted anything. There was a voice in my head saying 'don't take it'. I had lost everything so why should I feel I want gold? I could not think about money. I was like a *bolman* at that time. I just wanted to get out of there. But there are people who made money from the tsunami. Some people took the things that got flushed out from houses, and even the jewelry on the dead people. I feel very sad about that. In that way many have become rich. The people from inland that were unaffected came here and took it all.

At the time of my fieldwork, years after the catastrophic waves, it was more common to hear talk about 'people coming to take,' rather than 'people coming to give' when bringing up 'tsunamitime'. In other words recollections seemed more concerned with 'taking', conflict and competition than giving, cooperation and sharing. Greed (*tanhave*), as a feature of the recovery process developing alongside the distribution of aid was often highlighted.

Before the tsunami I made a wooden box. Inside I kept 16 new *sarongs* and 65,000 rupees that I had saved up from my fish selling days. Whenever I got a new, shiny coin I always put it in this box. I also kept my identity papers, medicine prescriptions and all other important things. But the box went with the tsunami. Later I looked for it and found it, the locks were broken and its content gone. Our eldest son is handicapped and we saved special money for him in this box. There were pictures of him inside and also my identity card so the people who found it should have returned it. At least the people who took it should have had pity for our son. It is because of this child that we have earned money, we are very loving towards him. In Sri Lanka we say that when a mother gives birth to a child like this it will bring good luck and wealth for the family. That is why the mother loves a child like that very much. It is a very innocent (*abinseke*) child. And still the people have taken the money.

After the tsunami my family and I stayed at a temporary camp that a foreigner made for the people here. There were 12 families at that place. This man owns a holiday property close by, he helped us a lot and made new houses very fast. He also took me to the doctor and gave me medicine and food. Altogether 25 families were affected in our neighborhood and some of them went to stay at the temple camp. But he made houses for all the 25 families anyway. Other NGO's that came here only gave some clothes and food. Most often they came and stopped at the main road and handed out things. I stayed for 60 days in hospital after the disaster and when I came back I was very worried for our future but the foreigner told me not to go to another place. He told us to stay here and that he will care for us and make new houses at the same place as the old ones. He gave us food every week, rice, milk powder and vegetables. When I speak about him I feel like crying, I am very thankful towards him. I am very happy for our house, it even has an upstairs platform for security if another tsunami comes. But these days the foreigner is not helping any more. He and his wife have big business in foreign countries so they are not coming here. Sometimes his wife comes and gives the staff at their house salary and leaves. They are very big people (*loku minissu*). They helped many people after the tsunami but after the houses were finished they left and now they want to sell their big house. We are always giving a lot of merit (*pin*) to them.

After the tsunami the people here were not strong enough to make new houses. We got the biggest house because we were living 4 families in one house before. He came with a very big plan for our house. They did not do the *pade* (traditional design) or check the *neakathe* (auspicious time) for any of the houses. I do believe this is important when you make a new house. Normally when you make a Sri Lankan house you need good *pade*

and also to obtain the *nekathe* for the foundation and entering and all that. This is to ward against misfortunes and to ensure a happy life in the house for the family. But we don't feel there is something wrong with our house, we are happy here. But I think we have some problems with the *Bahirawa* (guardian beings/spirits of land/earth), we did not do the *Bahirawa puja* (offerings to the *Bahirawas*) for the house and land so we can't keep and save any money and we are sick all the time. The house was done according to a foreign plan but we have to be happy for our house. We are very grateful. A *sastere* (soothsayer) has also told us that we have a problem with the *Bahirawa* in the house but now we don't have the money to do the *puja*.

The foreigners gave us everything, the house, beds and cupboards. That is why nobody is saying anything about the *pade* and *nekathe*, we don't want to disrespect the foreigners. Nobody is telling anything bad about that couple. They even gave medicine. They are like God to us. I know that they will get a big reward in their next life. They also came to our house and prayed with us to Lord Buddha and told us that we will have happiness in this house. After the tsunami we did not have a single cent to spend on a house and even with the government compensation money we could never build a house like this. Until I die I will stay in this house. My son and daughter in law are very frightened that another tsunami will come. They want to sell the house and move to a place further inland. I do believe that there will be another tsunami. I have seen it very clearly in my dreams that in another six years a tsunami will come. We have small children here but so do our neighbours. I don't want to sell this house and move but if my son forces me I think I have to.

It is obvious that Suranga feels indebted to the philanthropic foreigner who gave them 'everything'; "he is like a God to us". He emphasises the giving of 'merit' (*pin*) to his benefactor, as a kind of return of grace. He does not want to show 'disrespect' by drawing attention to local building practices and homemaking rituals. Suranga is well aware that he is 'lucky' and should be content. The couple's engagement was over by this time, "they only come and pay the salaries and go". I encountered many cases of disappointed and frustrated foreigners who started out in compassion and ended up in disappointment, even resentment, over the outcome of their work efforts and financial support. These cases do not involve established humanitarian organisations and NGO's but a category of 'helpers' that was common in the tsunami aftermath, e.g. private persons, tourists, companies, local sports clubs etc that started small scale projects. Many of the small foreign NGO's working in the area had little or

no experience of disaster relief and reconstruction aid and this undoubtedly contributed to the uneven results and frustrations felt by both the givers and the receivers. Stirrat (2006:14) refers to these as the ‘small furry animals’ moving in a world of ‘slow-moving dinosaurs’ (i.e. the large INGO’s and the Sri Lankan state) in the disaster aftermath. Suranga ends his account in reflection over change and over the contingency of life.

After the tsunami all the things growing died. Before we could grow very nice papaya trees but now they don’t come up in a proper way, they can’t stand properly. I think it is because of iron that came with the seawater from the bottom of the sea. It was like a mountain of black water, you cant believe it if you haven’t seen it. Many people died in this area. This side of Tharugama and Galgamuwa were the worst affected places around here. In Galgamuwa 48 *upasaka ammas* (female Buddhist lay adherent) died in the temple not far from here. They were at the temple taking *sil* (Buddhist precepts) because it was *poya* (full moon day/Buddhist holiday). The saddest day in my life was the day that my children died. After that we don’t have any happy days but when we sit on our porch and watch the vehicles go back and forth on the main road we don’t feel the sadness. Many times people look at me and wonder how I survived the tsunami, they say I am a very old man (080627 no.1.23).

When Suranga talked about his life and the tsunami we were sitting together with his wife and some close relatives in his new house. The way he remembered and talked was very emotional and it was impossible to not get drawn into his story. Occasionally he burst out in tears but soon regained composure and continued. His memories were full of detail even in the most urgent and dramatic moments. The people present in the room were silently listening, his wife adding short comments a few times and showing me pictures of the children.

The new house struck me as beautiful and very well built compared to most other ‘tsunami houses’. It was the first one I came across with a kind of second floor for protection against similar disasters. I was told that this foreign couple, who owned a holiday home in Suranga’s neighbourhood, made the same security platform for all the houses they donated and that they were very involved in house design and construction work. Few donated houses had a second floor, even though many informants expressed a wish for it. Details like doors, windows, frames and tiles were of very good quality and I was taken for a tour of the house



with Suranga and his wife, who proudly showed me the rooms and the garden. The experience of Suranga is one example of what it was like getting caught in the tsunami and subsequently trying to recover a house and some kind of ‘normal life’. It deals with suffering, the regeneration of life and many issues that will recur; homemaking, place attachment, interventions and a floating social and moral landscape. The importance of local concepts such as *neakathe*, *pade*, *pin* and *Bahirawa* mentioned in Suranga’s story will increasingly become clear to the reader, in a way mirroring my own experience of gradual understanding.

The other story I intend to recount here is that of Pushpa. In many ways her experience and living conditions stand in contrast to Suranga’s. Pushpa is in her thirties. She lives with three small children and her husband in Lokuwatte, the newly built settlement for people who lost their homes in the tsunami at the northern border of the village. A large sign-board at the entrance of the area reads ‘*Montana Village*’ and names the American donor organisation<sup>26</sup> that contributed with money for the construction. The implementation was carried out by a Colombo based Sri Lankan NGO and local contractors. Amongst the villagers the area is mostly referred to as Lokuwatte, the old name, and sometimes as *Montano*. Before the tsunami the area was covered with thick jungle with only a small footpath leading to three isolated mud huts. To make way for new houses for the tsunami affected people a large chunk of jungle was cut down and the area cleared.

Many of the houses here already look worn down, as if they have been here for a long time. But the surrounding bare earth with sparse vegetation reveals the novelty of the place. Pushpa’s house borders the marshland and the jungle and there is quite a distance to cover to get to the main road in the village where the schools, shops and bus stops are located and even further to get to their old neighborhood in Podiwatte close to the sea. The house and the plot of land are small. Pots of plants on the well-swept red-earthed ground and a makeshift fence nevertheless create a welcoming and ordered impression and place a clear boundary towards the disorderly jungle. Inside there are two tiny bedrooms and a small living room decorated in bright colors. We are sitting in the living room while Pushpa is talking, her son is on her lap, his siblings, neigh-

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<sup>26</sup> An organisation started on initiative of a group of expatriate Sinhalese in the United States.

boring children and women move in and out of the room while we talk. I notice that the room is sparsely furnished; family pictures and plastic flowers are put on display on a cupboard in one corner. In another corner a small shelf for making offerings to the Buddha, an indispensable item of a Sinhalese home, has its place. The atmosphere inside is warm and homely even though the house is small and simple. Her husband is out working at the harbour in a neighbouring village. He is a *kulle kari-jak*, a day labourer within the fishing sector. These days he is loading fish from incoming boats onto trucks for the fish markets in Colombo and other towns. Besides his income Pushpa earns money from making dry fish in the garden. During the monsoon there is no fish so they are used to an income only six of the months of the year.

Tsunami!, Pushpa exclaims, it is very dangerous! I saw the tsunami and I will never forget it! I don't think I will experience anything like that again in my life! I was very afraid. Last night we did not sleep because they said on the news that there will be strong winds and floods. We were afraid. We live quite far inland but the waterways in the marshland connect to the sea, the water is there, at the back of our house. At the time of the tsunami I got injured and had to be in bed for a long time. My son also had 18 stitches in his head (she parts her sons hair and exposes a thick white scar on his skull). I also had stitches and fractures on my arm and legs. When the tsunami came my daughter took my other children and ran away but I got stuck in something and got hurt. When the tsunami stopped and the water receded I was in my nightdress and my children did not have any clothes. First we went to the temple in *kitul golla* but we did not get any help there so we went to the house of some relatives. Then, after some time, we went to the school to register there for getting help. We got some help with foods and clothes and we stayed there for three months. After three months we moved to a temporary shelter at the *kitul golla* camp. We stayed there for two years and we were amongst the last families to move out. For the last 6 months there was no electricity in the camp, and one day they told us that within one month we had to leave. It was very hard. Many people came to the camp and I told them my grievances and problems. Some promised to come back and help but I never saw them again. Once, a coconut tree fell down on our temporary shelter and destroyed many things inside. A foreigner came and he promised to help but in the end he did not do anything. In the beginning we got food from Seewalanka (a local NGO), but later they stopped all help and told us that we had to leave. At that time there were only five families left and we were living like dogs, nobody was looking at us or paying any attention

to us. We were thinking that if we don't get a place to stay we would go to the road and sit with our children until somebody would help us. Many times we went to the AG office (Divisional Secretariat) and were determined to sit there until the District Secretary talked to us and helped us. In the camp people were throwing stones at us at night because they wanted us out of there. The monk at the temple was not treating us in a good way, he wanted to take the land back. We went to him and begged him not to throw us out; -please I have a small child! I said. The monk replied that it was not his child. Now we are not going to the temple anymore. I think that the monk was scared that we would make wood houses and stay, and that would be bad because he wanted to build a Buddha statue there, it would not look nice then.

Pushpa capture a feeling of vulnerability and uncertainty during tsunami time and in the relief camp, which many informants confirm in various ways. She also expresses a lack of trust in government authorities and of faith in the local temple and monk, which is important to note. She continues to describe the difficulties to get a house and to rebuild a proper and safe home.

We had a very hard time to get a house because we were living at my mother's house before the tsunami. We had put up a small wood hut with a coconut leaf roof in the yard. They (the government) only give one house for one house even if there were 10 families staying at that place before the tsunami (the general policy was one house for each house owner, regardless of extended family circumstances). The help we got with food, clothes and things after the tsunami was good enough. We got what we needed, but the house was the problem. We had to wait much longer than others to get a house, but at last we got this one. All the other families staying in the camp got houses in the Montana but my family and four others got houses very late. Now all these five families live here (at the far back of the Lokuwatte settlement).

There has been a lot of talk about the area, that it is full of *yakkhas* (demons/devils) and *peretiyas* (ghosts). There was thick jungle all over here before. We are afraid and sometimes we do not go out of the house after dark. I use *pirith* (Buddhist protective chant) all the time because I know that if I put *pirith* the *yakkhas* and *peretiyas* will not come. We also have many problems with snakes; they come here because we live so close to the swamp. But I am happy for this house; we did not have a place of our own to live in before, but when it rains we are getting wet since the roof is no good. In our old hut with coconut leaves we did not get wet but in a tiled house we get soaked! The house is not good for the family, it has

four doorframes and five windows. Five windows are ok but four doors are not good. To make it good we have to close one window, then it is ok. If we had money we would rebuild it and make it in a proper way but we don't have any money. All the money we bring to the house run out again, we cannot save anything in this house because the *pade* (measurements in traditional building practice) is not good. We did not have a chance to see or do anything for the house because we moved in when it was finished. I think we have to do the *Bahirava puja* because we are sick all the time and we cant save any money, but it will cost about 10,000 rupees. Vandana (local astrologer) told me yesterday that this house is not good for us but we are not strong enough to make it good. Some foreigners once came and took photos of the house. They even took photos of the cobras, but nothing happened after that. I would really like a proper wall to protect us but the AG will not do it. I do not like the AG, they put up walls for all the houses except these last five! I hate the AG! For the tsunami people who rebuild their houses on their own they gave 2,5 laks (250 000 Sri Lankan Rupees). If we got this amount we could do the wall. We have tried to fight with the AG but its no use. We also went to a human rights office but nothing helped. At least we got the house but we had to fight very hard to get it. For the last few days its been raining a lot so we have tried to get the AG officer to come. He finally came but he would not get down from his vehicle to see properly what it is like here. We did get a lot of help from other countries and from NGO's but we are still suffering. They are always trying to step on us. The AG is only telling lies. Seven months ago we made a strike, a demonstration, and went in front of the AG office. We shouted and showed signboards and asked them to give us proper kitchens and roofs and walls. It was even in the newspaper, but nothing happened. In Bathgama (a village 15 kilometres away with another housing scheme) they are still helping people and they have got very nice houses there!

If somebody has fallen into a hole once as soon as they try and move they only go deeper. My son is also sick all the time. We use to have a plot of land further in but we had to sell it in order to afford a *tovil* (elaborate healing ritual) for my son. He was getting fits all the time and we spent 120,000 rupees for the *tovil*, which was all the money we got from selling the land. This was six years ago and he became better after that. They could not cure him at the hospital. Once he got a fit when Kumani, the *māniyo* (female priest), was with us, his body became tight, his mouth crooked and he lost his consciousness. Kumani did something for him and he went home, then again he got a fit so Kumani told us that it was necessary to do a *tovil* to cure him. Bandula (an *edure*, exorcist/demon charmer) did it and he is coming here now and then to check on him, but now he is

ok. These days as soon as he has a temperature or something we take him to Bandula.

We have more problems in our life now than before the tsunami. It is very hard to make the *karawella* (dry fish). Poisonous snakes come and stay inside the fish when we are drying them in the sun and I don't want to sell these fish. It might be bad for the people who eat them. I would like to move from here if there were a good place for us. This place would be ok if we only had a strong wall towards the marshland and the jungle and if the doors and the roof were protecting us properly. We have tried to tell some people to contact the Americans that donated the houses but it was no use. They (the donors) have stopped the help now we were told. Tsunami houses at other places are much better, these houses are the worst. We can't go to the toilet because it is on higher ground than the house itself. That is not good for the house. A lot of cobras come and I am afraid for the children. Vindsana (a man who knows the village very well) told us to be careful in this area because there are a lot of snakes. There are many animals here, rabbits and peacocks. The AG put us in a zoo after the tsunami (laughs)! We would never have come to this place if we did not have to but we were told that there were now other houses for us.

I think that five, six generations will have to pass before I will have a good life. I suffer a lot but I am doing many good things (referring to Buddhist rituals and prescribed moral behaviour) now so sometime in the future things will change. The children keep asking me why their father is always working and why we can't stay in a happy way. Some days we only eat *pol sambol* (spiced grinded coconut) and rice. I can write 5 books about my life! But there is no use telling these stories (080523 no.2.8).

Narratives like these give some sense of the variety of ways in which people's lives were affected by the tsunami and how this relates to local cosmology and moral discourse. While the natural event momentarily deprived people of control and agency and temporarily removed them from their social context, the process of rebuilding life afterwards was shaped by social and cultural forces. The immediate period of loss – of livelihood, lives, homes and order – is described as rapidly shifting into a time of re-ordering and a situation of new dependencies. These stories broadly show the three phases into which narratives tended to fall; structure, breakdown, restructuring. This brings to mind classic anthropological themes of separation, transition and incorporation (Van Gennep 1960, Victor Turner 1969). I shall return to these points in greater detail in chapters following while the last section of this chapter will place the

specifics of these narratives into the broader context of the emergency and relief phase in the Tharugama area.

### **Coping with Chaos: Relief Aid and Temporary Shelter**

Crosby (2008), who conducted fieldwork within the first fortnight after the tsunami in Sri Lanka, noticed that major temples along the coastal road were already becoming key stopping points for NGOs' in their efforts to identify needs and channel resources. The temples both provided direct relief and also adapted their traditional religious services to the needs of the survivors and recently deceased. For example, Crosby mentions that the traditional rites for the dead<sup>27</sup>, which were normally held for individuals, were now being performed collectively. This was done in response to size of the death toll and the fact that in some cases whole families had been lost, leaving no one to organise the funeral and commemorative rituals. Many temples organised *pin vedima* (merit enhancing rituals) and dedicated them to "all those lost in the tsunami" (Crosby 2008:57ff). In Tharugama I also noted this ritual flexibility and that individuals, monks and temples, in various ways responded and adapted to the disaster. Local temples were sometimes pulled into a pivotal position as an interface between outsiders and insiders, between donors and recipients. The ways in which this affected the role of some monks within the local scheme of giving and receiving will be dealt with in Chapter Six.

Directly after the tsunami many people fled to higher grounds in the jungle or took refuge in the village Buddhist temples. Older temples, also in coastal regions, tend to be located on higher ground such as rocky outcrops above the plains and are thus obvious sites for refuge from flooding. For these reasons the use of temples for emergency housing for the displaced is an established practice (Crosby 2008:55). The situa-

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<sup>27</sup> For Buddhists in Sri Lanka it is common to commemorate the dead first at the funeral and then at memorial services at specific intervals afterwards, the first major one at seven days following death. These merit-enhancing deeds (*pin vedima*) are normally arranged and paid for by relatives. They dedicate the merit (*pin*) they gain through the recitation of protective texts, listening to preaching and giving alms to the monks, in the name of the deceased (Crosby 2008:58). It is considered an essential act in order to enable the dead a passage into his/her next life form and not be trapped in limbo as a ghost (*preta*).

tion in Tharugama immediately after the tsunami was one of complete chaos as people were trying to save lives and property and at the same time trying to grasp the severity and scope of the situation. At first, most thought that this was something that happened only locally and for the majority the concept of a tsunami was completely unknown. Some stayed in the jungle for days, afraid to come back down to the seaside in fear of new waves. According to villagers there were about 700 people at one of the local temples in the early days after the tsunami. The chief incumbent had to try to shelter them, feed them and make sanitary arrangements. Four months after the tsunami I interviewed a Sinhalese psychologist who worked in the area with psychosocial relief in the camps. She told me that many people ran to religious places like Buddhist temples, churches and mosques and that the monks and priests were often the initial helpers for many survivors. They distributed food, arranged sleeping areas and provided for the most pressing basic needs. At the same time they offered spiritual help and the Buddhist monks for example did *pirith* (protective/healing ritual involving chanting of Buddhist discourses) all day and night<sup>28</sup>. The psychologist believed that these measures taken by Buddhist monks at the temples had a soothing effect. Doctors and psychologists like her also went out to attend to the needs of the people and continued the initial efforts by the monks and priests. As it developed many of the more permanent refugee camps were organized in connection to temples (050506 no.1.1). As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six, the fact that the monks became ‘brokers’ of gifts radically altered their role in the moral economy of the village.

After some time when people dared to get back to check on their properties, some found that they had lost their homes and had to seek longer term shelter in the refugee camps that were being organized in the community. At the same time lands, roads, wells and so on had to be cleaned and repaired. Also for those whose houses had not been totally wrecked there was a lot of clearing and cleaning to be done and a lot of people found that many of their belongings had been lost or destroyed. With the help of e.g. the Sri Lankan Armed Forces, the Belgian Army and various volunteers, roads and lands were cleared of debris, and wells and

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<sup>28</sup> According to the local monks it was common to have the *Ratana sutta* played on recorders at the temples. This *sutta* (Buddhist canonical texts) is believed to be protective and was preached by the Buddha at times of draught, floods and epidemics.

waterways were relatively rapidly restored to function. Initially, the breakdown of structure when the wave hit seemed to elicit a kind of *communitas*<sup>29</sup> (Turner 1969), or at least some sort of unity in the experience of liminality, a sense of sharing in need and destiny.

### *From Compassion to Conflict*

After having studied recovery in a wide range of disasters, Susanna Hoffman (1999) suggests that a broad general order emerges in such situations, and that the experiences of disaster victims from various places and events show many similarities. She stresses that her model is ideal in nature, and the periods she outlines may in reality blend into one another, take place earlier or later and occur to greater or lesser degrees (Hoffman 1999:134ff).

According to Hoffman, the acute life-threatening phase, *the crisis*, involves primarily individualistic behaviour to save one's life and property. She also uses the notion of liminality to describe this phase. This then rapidly shifts from individual survivors struggling in the midst of chaos to more collective actions, such as sharing and helping one another, and creating a common identity as disaster victims (Hoffman 1999:137ff).

In the *aftermath nexus* there is a gradual slip into competitive behaviour, conflict and estrangement of the affected community in relation to the surrounding society. This is the period during which outside agencies arrive, which further contributes to the complexity of recovery. At this point, Hoffman argues, segmentary opposition is set in motion; dividing, devaluing and dehumanising the Other (Hoffman 1999:144ff). Finally, the third stage of recovery, the *passage to closure*, is reached. This has no sharp delineation but is by and large when the donors have departed and a more or less fixed pattern of life has been resumed (Hoffman 1999:149).

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<sup>29</sup> *Communitas* was developed by Victor Turner as a term for the experience of heightened sociality which occurs in certain ritual contexts, such as the liminal stage of rites of passage or during pilgrimage (Barnard & Spencer 2002:598)



Events in Tharugama broadly echoed the tripartite process that Hoffman describes. Although there were occasional exceptions – for instance, stories of people severing the fingers off corpses in order to steal rings – the common narrative was one in which empathy, unity and philanthropy featured strongly in the early phase. After the water receded, people who did not experience loss quickly came to the aid of victims with food parcels, water and clothing. One might assume that the sharing in need and destiny, and the horrific experience of the disaster would create a deep and lasting sense of unity and that the experience of lingering in transitional camps with uncertain prospects of new homes and livelihoods might produce a sense of *communitas*. However, the initial solidarity faded relatively quickly and when the state and aid industry became active, a field of competition and conflict emerged, much as Hoffman’s model describes. If a sense of *communitas* was awakened in the first wave it seemed to be stifled in the second. As Hoffman also notes, the third stage, *passage to closure*, is harder to identify and, I would say, the least amenable to a model. Disasters have repercussions that may extend far into the future and this makes it difficult to speak of ‘closure’ in any clear sense. My fieldwork in Tharugama was conducted in part during the *aftermath nexus* but largely in what Hoffman might describe as the stage of ‘closure’, in which the community, in many ways, still struggled to come to terms with disaster induced changes and circumstances.

Although models like Hoffman’s have their limitations, they may also be helpful for simplifying the analysis of complex phenomena. Hoffman and Oliver-Smith (1999:133) note that a community that is hit by disaster may experience fragmentation, transition and reintegration more than once. In Tharugama people who were relocated from transitional camps after several years often experience fragmentation anew after having attained at least some sort of everyday routines in the camps. Hoffman’s way of framing disaster recovery in three stages does therefore seem to capture some of the broad features of recovery after the tsunami in Tharugama, but this needs to be qualified with careful ethnographic investigation.

No doubt the tsunami created a situation in which the moral mettle of the individual and the community was put to the test. Initially, there were hopes that the shared experience of disaster and loss could repair relationships and unite people across ethnic and political divides. It came sudden and unexpected and it took quite some time before the magni-

tude and scope of the disaster were fully realized. In Sri Lanka there were initially high hopes that the disaster could revive the stalemated peace process and unite people over ethnic and political boundaries, but as it turned out the recovery process became intensely politicized and fed into the unresolved conflict (Hyndman 2007, 2009, Silva 2009, Uyangoda 2007).

As order begins to re-emerge after a breakdown, the fault lines that existed prior to the disaster may not only reappear but be either weakened or reinforced by new influences. As Korf et al. (2010:74) note, it would be naïve to assume that the tsunami gifts could be isolated from the political context into which they were fed or that they could operate freely from the structures existing in the receiving society.

In the post-tsunami context, with the huge inflow of aid, a new arena of both grievances and opportunities was shaped. Silva (2009:66) observed that as organized humanitarian responses from the state, NGOs' and the international community developed and aid flows became established, local community initiatives fizzled out. The question therefore arises as to what extent the inflow of aid may stifle the re-growth of community by shifting local relationships of interdependence and reciprocity and creating new relationships between local individuals and outsider donors. In some instances, the empathy of the non-affected turned into resentment towards the beneficiaries who received all the attention of the external agencies. The gifts from outside seemed to erode solidarity between those affected and those not affected; new divisions arose and a new kind of social ordering emerged. Tension and ambiguity were prevalent about who was entitled to receive assistance and who was expected to provide it.

The way aid and benefits were distributed and eligible 'victims' and beneficiaries identified did not only have an impact on local social and political configurations but also had to be seen in the light of a larger regional and national perspective. Nanthikesan (2005) is concerned about a too narrow focus on the tsunami-affected to the neglect of those who have been affected by other disasters for example those displaced by war:

Speaking of disasters and those who lost their livelihoods in the span of a few minutes, we are reminded of the Muslims of the North who were driven out by the LTTE on a few hours' notice. These refugees continue

to languish in refugee camps for over fifteen years without any serious RR (relief and recovery) and reconstruction effort. It will be difficult for these refugees to understand why everyone around the globe who are trying to assist their eastern brethren, have paid no attention to their fate for the past fifteen years. Or for that matter the homeless beggar in the streets of Batticaloa may wish she was affected by the tsunami rather than by structural poverty that had deprived her livelihood (Nanthikesan 2005, *Lines* e-journal).

Relief and reconstruction after the tsunami disaster took place within a particular political context and responses were unavoidably shaped by these conditions. “Struggles over interethnic justice, neoliberalism, economic distribution, the disempowerment of women, caste bigotry and such have shaped the Sri Lankan political landscape in significant ways over the last decades ... even the tsunami cannot wipe out the imprint of these fault lines” (Nesiah et al. [2005] cited in Hyndman 2007:361).

Clearly the catastrophe brought people together but also pitted people against each other. Communities experienced fragmentation, friction and reintegration and they experienced great compassion as well as egoism. In a close-by town, the tension between different camps in competition over resources and donations became violent, and on several occasions the army and police had to be called in to calm things down. In this area a team of doctors told me that they would not dare to go into some of the camps unaccompanied because of the tense atmosphere. This was about 5 months after the tsunami and they worked with a psychosocial project in the district. They were apparently afraid to get assaulted if unable to meet the demands of the refugees in the camps, and conflicts and arguments over aid constantly arose. There were a lot of problems with uneven distribution, with some people receiving the same item twice or thrice, while others received nothing. Other problems that could be mentioned were that some foodstuffs were not fit for consumption when they arrived because of containers being held up in harbours for too long. Sometimes people did not know what to do with tinned food and foreign products they did not recognize, and donated clothes were too often unfit for the climate and culture (e.g. warm sweaters and mini-skirts and tops). The lack of privacy, especially for girls and women, also created difficulties in the camps. The general image conveyed to me of the situation in camps and areas around them was one of ‘grab what you can’, often resulting in the stronger ones with an ability to fight and fend for themselves getting more.

My own memories and images from the area and the village 4 months after the tsunami are still vivid. I found myself confused and having difficulty putting together some kind of coherent picture. It is all a blur of the numerous organisations and aid workers roaming around with locals queuing for everything from plastic chairs to medical care, a rumble of different kinds of temporary shelters and tents with tsunami debris piling up, and the constant approaches of people with requests for help with houses, boats and food. Stories of loss, grief and endless needs were a constant echo in my mind. I could only imagine how overwhelming the situation must have been for many of the people living here, realizing that future survival and well-being depended on their ability to grasp this new setting and the opportunities any assistance might offer, or else risk being bypassed.

A local hotel owner in the area, who was involved in the reconstruction process in a neighbour town of Tharugama, writes about his experiences and he notes that, when comparing families who were heavily affected by the tsunami and lost family members with those who suffered only minor material losses, the former received less aid than the latter. In his opinion this was due to the location of most NGO's far away from the devastated region, and that the displaced victims were in a weaker state and not able to get to where the aid was being distributed. Thus victims who suffered minor damage or were unaffected were able to locate and get to the aid-points, while severely affected victims failed to do so or found out about relief services too late (Piyadigamage 2007:64ff). His findings do not entirely correlate with my own but it was apparent that, in receiving aid goods, some were 'luckier' than others and that you had to be strong and assertive to be successful. A common opinion amongst my informants was that the people affected within the no-build zone<sup>30</sup> got more help and resources compared to those affected from outside the zone. The occurrence of uneven distribution produced widespread sarcastic terms about the tsunami as 'golden water', 'the tsunami of gold', and '*pin vatture*' (merit-water), and people sometimes referred to the inflow of aid and organisations as 'the second tsunami', as mentioned in the introduction.

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<sup>30</sup>The 'no-build'/buffer zones' were introduced by the government after the tsunami as a safety measure and prohibited rebuilding within certain areas close to the sea. The particulars of buffer zones and housing policy will be discussed in Chapter Three.

In comparing the opinions regarding, co-operation, sharing and assistance 4 months after the disaster with those 4 years after the disaster, a generally bleaker outlook prevails. Disappointment over failed or misdirected assistance, lack of help from neighbours and villagers and lack of solidarity from unaffected people was common. Suspicion and competition over resources and aid permeating the community, putting neighbour against neighbour, but also a sense of mistrust and disappointment towards the larger society, the state and aid organisations prevailed. When I arrived for fieldwork in early 2008, the camps were all gone and the displaced settled in new houses, the debris and material havoc created by the tsunami almost vanished and over-grown with green vegetation. New sub-communities within the village had materialised and NGO-workers were a rare sight but remembered by the many signs with logos marking project sites or former activities.

### **Summary and Reflections**

In this chapter I have disclosed methodological choices and some ethical concerns. Attention has been directed mainly at the ‘first wave’ of disaster and at developments and experiences in its immediate wake such as temporary shelter and relief aid (the early phase of the ‘second wave’). As illustrated the event of the disaster played out differently at different locations and lives but it constituted a significant rupture, in the community as a whole and in individual lives. The narratives and the descriptions of the acute relief phase in the area suggest that renewal of life takes place under conditions of strong forces acting upon people, but they also hint at intrinsic capacities for living in chaos and with uncertainty, which further developed as the unfolding of events continued. It reveals a tension between ‘being acted upon and acting’, and it sets up the scene for closer investigation of impact on the local moral economy in the context of giving and receiving of aid and the process of piecing together fragmented life-worlds.

Communities and individuals hit by the tsunami underwent experiences that may be compared to the stages of rites of passage. There was fragmentation of order, a period of solidarity and then reintegration into a new order, much in line with Hoffman’s three-stage model of recovery. This chapter introduced material that underscores the complexities of

## CHAPTER 2

giving in the context of disaster and that challenges the Maussian notion of gifts acting as the 'glue of society'. This will be further examined in the chapters following. Natural disaster may, temporarily at least, strip a community of its previous moral scaffolding and as it struggles to re-order itself, old fault lines re-emerge and new differentials are born. Clearly, problems concern the restoration of not only physical but also of moral order.







### 3. Receiving Houses and Making Homes

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For a man's house is his castle, *et domus sua cuique tutissimum refugium*  
(i.e. and one's home is the safest refuge) Sir Edward Coke (1549-1634)

The previous chapter illustrated the process of disruption and reordering and how this affected relations of giving and receiving. It depicted a development from solidarity and compassion to competition and conflict in the wake of the disaster. This will be further illustrated in this chapter by focusing on housing, which was subject of intense conflicts over entitlements, expectations and obligations (of the state, donors and beneficiaries). It will further exemplify the way in which uneven distribution of the new gifts affected old relations.

The tsunami broke down all kinds of structures and boundaries; physical, social, cosmological. Douglas (2002:117 [1966]) notes the human propensity to create order and recognises that disorder may represent both the destruction of patterns but also the potential to create new ones. Ambiguity and change often give rise to anxiety while stability and clarity of boundaries and concepts give security (Douglas 2002: 200 [1966]). In this chapter I will show that in a context of entrenched insecurity, disorder and immanent danger, the house becomes an important site for generating a feeling of control and protection. It is ideally a well-ordered space with clear boundaries that keep insecurity and misfortune at bay physically as well as symbolically.

Creating a safe home entails much more than the erection of a physical structure. However, the donors of new houses in the post-tsunami reconstruction period in Tharugama largely ignored the social and symbolic dimensions of homemaking. This led to ambiguous feelings among

locals towards new houses. Some of the subtle aspects of homemaking were referred to in the previous chapter but here I will explore this in greater detail. Investing the household with certain values and aligning its webs of relations according to local norms and traditions creates a sense of security and confidence. The great attention paid to the home, such as by scrubbing and cleaning, is generally not so much about hygiene as it is about separating, creating boundaries and making visible statements about the home that is being made out of the house (see Douglas 2002:85 [1966]).

The importance of house and home became very clear to me when I spoke to people displaced in the Tharugama area in 2005. My field data from that time is replete with expressions like “if only we get a house everything will be alright”. Upon my return for fieldwork in 2008, people’s wishes for new houses had by and large been realized but their hopes that this would make everything ‘alright’ were not always so straightforwardly fulfilled. Had these new houses then become homes?

In local traditions, homemaking involves reciprocal relations with the earth and the spirit world. These relations are essential for creating an ordered, bounded space around the household and a safe and ‘proper’ home for its dwellers. This chapter seeks to capture how the giving and receiving of houses played out locally and the fact that giving houses does not automatically create homes. Local discourses of ‘building-back-better’ did not always converge with the perceptions and standards of implementers and decision makers. Expectations and obligations regarding houses and homes of various actors were diverse and laden with misunderstandings and assumptions. The issue of ‘building back better’ and of ‘opportunities’ in the post-disaster context is problematic and begs questions such as better for whom?, according to whom?, and according to what values?

### **Re-ordering the Land: Protection, Control and Profit**

In an article about neo-liberalism Sherry Ortner (2011) reflects on Naomi Klein’s ‘disaster capitalism’ (2008) and that this not only implies

that extreme free-market capitalism brings economic disaster to many people but also that real disasters<sup>31</sup> may provide excellent breeding grounds and opportunities for transforming old economic regimes into neo-liberal ones. This transformation involves the selling off of state-operated properties, goods and institutions to private, profit making, buyers and operators (Ortner 2011). “I call these orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities, i.e. ‘disaster capitalism’” (Klein 2008:6). Some authors claim that this is an accurate description of what took place in the wake of the tsunami in Sri Lanka. In a critical article of the buffer zones and reconstruction programmes, Nesiha (2005) argues that the humanitarian reconstruction plans were roadmaps for multi-national hotel chains, telecom companies and the like to cater to the tourism industry and that small scale fishing will become more difficult as access to the beaches will become privatized. Entire fishing communities will be moved inland and the coast ‘sanitized’ and made consumer friendly. Ironically, he notes, the tourists enjoying the oceans loll onto the shore might be sitting in *cadjan* cabanas that evoke a nostalgic image of the fishing communities of the past – “a romance with a neatly consumable experience of ‘otherness’ without the interference of a more messy everyday life” (Nesiha 2005:4).

Housing was one area that offered opportunities to show fast tangible results to donors at home and where investment opportunities arose for those with the capacity and intention to exploit attractive beach land. The extent to which the coast has been intentionally ‘sanitized’ and ‘humanitarian reconstruction plans roadmaps for the establishment of multi-national co-operations’ is beyond the scope of this study, but at the time of my fieldwork no large-scale exploitation for tourism business had taken place in Tharugama. There were some holiday properties owned by foreigners and a few small hotels. Some of those displaced were trying to sell the land they still owned by the sea, but although there were many ‘for sale’ signs in English along the coastal roads, tourism and investments were slow due to the deteriorating conflict and global economic instability. At the time when this was written though, several informants verified that a considerable and growing segment of beachside land had

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<sup>31</sup> Using e.g. Hurricane Katrina 2005, the collapse of the Soviet Union 1989, the debt crisis in New York City in the 1970s as examples.

been sold to make way for holiday homes and/or been exploited for tourism. To a fisherman's family the profit from a beach property sale to a foreigner is substantial and enables e.g. the setting up of a nice new home inland, funding of a family member to go and work abroad or for a child to get first-class schooling.

An oft-discussed topic in the aftermath of the tsunami was the controversial buffer zones introduced by the Sri Lankan government in January 2005. As Hyndman 2007 writes, they were created supposedly as a public safety measure in order to protect coastal dwellings from the potential destruction by a future tsunami but they soon became politicized. A 100-metre buffer zone was established in the South, which is densely populated with a Sinhalese majority and popular for tourism. In the Tamil and Muslim dominated East, which was most heavily affected by the tsunami, a 200-metre buffer zone was declared and a 400-metre limit was announced by LTTE for Northeast areas under their control. In both the South and the East the high density of population and the shortage of land coupled with the restrictions made reconstruction highly contentious (Hyndman 2007:364-365).

Given a history of tensions and a general suspicion and distrust of politicians and their motivations some locals saw the buffer zones not as a measure taken primarily to protect the coastal inhabitants from future tsunamis, but rather as a means for the government to get control of attractive beach land for further exploitation, in other words as a form of 'disaster capitalism'. Bearing multiple dimensions of attachment to homes, places of habitation and links to livelihood and identity in mind, it is not surprising that the government's initially imposed coastal buffer zone, which prohibited people from moving back to their former places of habitation, was a major worry. At many places there were demonstrations and strikes in protest against the policy. To many people, the reasons behind the 100-metre buffer zone were vague and difficult to comprehend since at some places houses close to the sea were unharmed while others, beyond the 100-metre limit, were completely destroyed. People also questioned if the 100-metre limit would bestow adequate protection in case of another tsunami.

The government's announced policy was to identify lands close to the villages affected and to build a house for "every affected house owner who lived within the said 100 metres" (Sambandan cited in Hyndman

2007:365). The owners within this zone would “retain the ownership of his original land” and the government “will not in any way claim ownership to such property”, the owner would be “entitled to appropriate the land (within the 100-metre zone) as he wishes, except building on it” and further the government would “extend patronage to planting coconut or any other suitable crop in those lands” (Sambandan cited in Hyndman 2007:365). The strategy for reconstruction and permanent housing resulted in two clearly defined schemes for permanent housing reconstruction, the ‘*donor-driven housing scheme*’- resettlement sites for relocation of affected families from within the buffer zone and the ‘*home owner- driven housing scheme*’- including damaged homes outside the buffer zone to be rebuilt by the owner with financial aid from government/donors (Dis-sanaike & Pallewatte 2007:2).

Hyndman (2007) argues that fear of another tsunami was being used to legitimize the instalment of buffer zones, and refers as an example to a statement made by the then-president Chandrika Kumaratunga in March 2005 following an earthquake near the epicentre of the tsunami<sup>32</sup>. Kumaratunga used the incident as a logical rationale for the buffer zone and to oppose criticisms; “the people should now realize that the government, bearing in mind all the allegations levelled against it, has acted prudently with a vision and in a responsible manner” (cited in Hyndman 2007:366). On several occasions during fieldwork I observed how easily fear caused by the tsunami was activated by rumours and speculations of an approaching tsunami, and many of those displaced told me that a main reason for not opposing resettlement and the buffer-zone was security.

Douglas (2002: xx [1966]) notes that the notion of risk may be “engaged in protecting a vision of the good community, whether it is a vision of stable continuity or of sustained radical challenge” and this is evident in the way the Sri Lankan government promoted security as the motivation for creating buffer zones. Risk was used to legitimize a controversial decision. In other words, if the risk of future tsunamis was perceived by people to be real and urgent and the government’s measures to be appropriate, then they would be seen as undertaken out of concern for the well-being of the citizens. One might note that an emphasis on risk (e.g.

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<sup>32</sup>It was 8.7 on the Richter scale but it did not create another tsunami.

terror attacks and epidemics) and implementation of extensive security measures are regular features of Sri Lankan political culture. This is much in line with the notion of securitisation adopted by the Copenhagen School; by talking in terms of security an actor moves a subject from the realms of politics into that of security concerns and thereby legitimizes the adoption of extraordinary measures against the socially constructed threat. Successful securitisation of a topic depends on an audience accepting the securitisation speech act (Buzan and Weaver 1998).

The initial buffer zone policy in Sri Lanka was maintained for almost a year but by late 2005 exemptions from the policy were being made. In Tharugama a 35-metre limit was the final assessment. The people who were considered eligible for a new house were generally given a number of options of new housing projects in the area. Most of those displaced in Tharugama chose the Montana Village in Lokuwatte but some families decided to relocate further away. Reasons given were to get away from old conflicts and get a fresh start, or that another location was closer to a particular workplace or school. One woman was so disappointed at her old neighbour's lack of will to help and share after the tsunami that she decided to leave and live at a housing project in another village. The issue of resettlement was not simply a question of trying to restore everything to the way it was before. Responses varied and the influence of donor aid and government policy was not monolithically damaging to some kind of pre-existing perfect order and to some the situation provided an opportunity to start anew in a new network of relationships.

The government's securitising rhetoric played upon people's fear of another tsunami in order to execute their plans. My findings support De Mel and Ruwanpura's (2006:27) contention that attitudes towards relocation largely hinged upon individual fears, anxieties and needs. Some but far from all of those displaced in Tharugama experienced relocation as coercion; many saw it as a justified measure taken by the government in order to ensure their future safety and in this sense accepted the speech act of securitisation and welcomed the improvement of a poor housing situation.

Still, to the population affected rules and regulations regarding resettlement often appeared haphazard, as one of the *grama niladhari*<sup>33</sup> (village officers) in Tharugama tried to explain to me (080721 no.45). He pointed out that changes in the no-build zone regulations created confusion and, that the information reaching people was not properly explained nor systematically disseminated<sup>34</sup>. The village officer claimed that there have been many cases of land within the no-build zone sold to foreigners, since those displaced retain the deeds of their old places it is possible for them to sell the land. He had been given instructions not to sign the forms required for installing electricity and water in the no-build areas and maintained that villagers were well aware that in the case of another tsunami the government will not extend any assistance, “not send any NGO’s even”, to people who built inside the restricted zone. “They know that there might be problems in the future but the foreigners are not aware of any rules and risks. They [those displaced] have been told by the AG office not to sell their land, but not in a strict way. If the people have the deeds they can still sell” (080807 no.45). He added that, unlike the locals, if a foreigner buys land it is possible for them to get electricity and water and he was doubtful about the accuracy of the term, ‘no-build’ zones. My interpreter at this time, Imanie, added that she believed that one reason for the change in the buffer-zone limit from 100 to 35 being that the government could not possibly find land and give new houses to so many people. The government’s decisions rest on multiple grounds of which this might be one, security another, as well as political, economic and humanitarian motives.

With the relaxing of the buffer zones people with homes classified as outside the no-build area were offered a choice to relocate or rebuild in their original lands (Dissanaike & Pallewatte 2007:3). The official policy was that the ownership, in the form of a government grant including ten years within which the land cannot be sold was issued to tsunami-affected families. Furthermore, if the beneficiary wants to rebuild his old house with the cash grant he has to forfeit the entitlement for the donor built house. However, in practice in Lokuwatte and other donor-driven

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<sup>33</sup> The *grama niladhari*, formerly *grama sevaka*, formal head of the *grama seva* division (smallest administrative unit).

<sup>34</sup> In Tharugama, before the tsunami, there was a reservation area of 35 metres (for environmental conservation) at some places where construction was prohibited. After the tsunami the government changed it first to 100 metres and then again to 35 and included more land than before.

housing settlements I visited, houses had been sold, some were empty and up for sale and I found two cases of people having ended up with more than one house.

Clearly, the question of ‘opportunities for whom’ in the housing process has many answers and there were indeed not only ‘victims’ that benefited. For some it became the ‘opportunity of a lifetime’ and for others it was felt as a great loss and forced displacement. However, what happened on the ground in Tharugama does not straightforwardly support an idea of ‘disaster capitalism’ as a deliberate conspiracy. Space and economy underwent fragmentation and reordering and this chaos furnished opportunities for individuals as well as for more powerful external actors to benefit.

### **Tsunami Houses – Building Back Better?**

Issues of protection, control and profit were involved to various degrees in the process of relocation and resettlement. When it finally came down to distribution and construction it was often uneven and not always driven by the interests and concerns of those affected. This further unsettled the local moral economy. The housing projects at new sites for those displaced from within the buffer-zone were, as mentioned above, attractive to the NGO’s and international donors since they gave a good opportunity to show concrete results to headquarters and donors at home (Silva 2009:68). The extensive need for resettling those displaced, the huge inflow of aid, and organisations willing to rebuild sometimes created a competition-like situation over land, workers, building material etc. The sudden boom in construction made demand for skilled labour exceed what was available and prices on construction material escalated and budgets for housing had to be continually revised. I met with several NGO representatives in 2005 with problems to complete the number of houses initially pledged since the cost per house had risen far above their budgets. Land scarcity delayed construction even though funds existed and organisations were ready to build. It should also be noted, as Gaasbeek (2010:140) does, that even though the process of permanent housing had many flaws, it was also unprecedented as for the speed at which reconstruction work was done. “For all the talk about avoidable delays on the part of aid agencies and the Sri Lankan government, there have been few disasters in which nearly the entire population affected found



themselves in transitional shelters and with assistance to re-start their destroyed livelihoods within a year, and in which the vast majority found themselves back in permanent housing within three years” (Gaasbeek 2010:140).

In a study of four donor-driven housing schemes on the west coast, findings indicate that donors generally did stick to the minimum requirements set out by the government but that there were vast differences in the quality of basic building construction (material used) and the finishing (plastering/painting) (Dissanaike & Pallewatte 2007:4)<sup>35</sup>. They argue, that the opportunity to ‘build-back-better’<sup>36</sup> was lost due the government’s pressure to complete schemes at an unrealistic pace, the tacit understanding that donor-driven schemes need not comply with normal rules and poor dissemination of guidelines and monitoring by relevant agencies (Dissanaike & Pallewatte 2007:10). Under the ‘donor-driven housing scheme’ all families affected were entitled to a house built by a donor agency according to the GoSL (Government of Sri Lanka) standards<sup>37</sup>, the government providing the land and services (water and electricity) up to the site and the donor internal common infrastructure (Dissanaike & Pallewatte 2007:3).

In the donor-driven housing scheme at Lokuwatte houses did not get any kitchen facilities at all (lack of funds according to informants) and many toilets did not function properly. Furthermore, there were concerns about safety because of weak material in doors and windows (lack of locks, window bars etc). At times of heavy rains leaking and flooding were common problems and during storms some people left their houses to go and stay with family at other places in fear of injuries.

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<sup>35</sup> The study mentions that many locations were unsuitable for housing and that donor-driven housing schemes often had minimum levels of environmentally and socially sustainable planning (Dissanaike & Pallewatte 2007:10).

<sup>36</sup> The ‘Build back better’ slogan was widely accepted in the tsunami aftermath, also in Sri Lanka. Bill Clinton, in 2006 as the UN Secretary General’s Special Envoy for Tunami Recovery, provided propositions defining the term (Khasalamwa 2009:77).

<sup>37</sup> The GoSL standards, minimum design specification, for a housing unit were: 500 sq.ft floor area, at least one lockable internal door, internal or external kitchen, internal or external toilet with sanitation facilities, internal partitioning conforming to local building regulations as per requirement by the beneficiary, internal electrical distribution system with fittings, and rain water harvesting system where relevant (Dissanaike & Pallewatte 2007:3).

Additional problems, according to Tharugama beneficiaries, were the 'one house for one house' policy. For large extended families, who shared one property before the tsunami, the resettlement houses were not big enough. Adult children with children of their own could for example have made a simple wood house in connection to the *maha gedere* (ancestral house of a kindred group) and sometimes the *maha gedere* was big enough to house several generations (this is the kind of situation that Pushpa describes in Chapter Two). In some cases additional houses were handed out and this often became a source of conflict and jealousy. In cases with people receiving two or more houses there was often an extended family background.

The village also included many families with poor houses that were untouched by the tsunami and therefore not considered eligible for any 'tsunami aid'. A telling example was a family living in a rented mud house without electricity, water or a proper toilet in the Lokuwatte jungle while their relocated 'post-disaster' neighbours in the 76 new houses beside them enjoy electricity. Besides the apparent injustice they also have the dirty wastewater from the new settlement polluting their well and rendering the water unpotable.

The beneficiaries of 'donor-driven' and 'home-owner' driven schemes have received uneven and varied benefits in terms of size and quality of houses, furniture and equipment, and the 'non-affected' population is not taken into account. This has led to new, and sometimes more pronounced differences, in how people live. The material standard of houses in the village as a whole has improved, as many poorer houses were destroyed and were built back better, but those who were excluded from tsunami aid and who lived in poor houses before now found themselves in a shrinking minority and feeling that they were worse off now than before. Things were changing fast and many villagers felt unable to keep up with the changes materially and psychologically.

Grievances regarding housing abounded, regardless of how the tsunami had affected households and many people felt that their possibilities to influence the situation were limited. A common description of the resettlement and housing process in Tharugama was to liken it with a lottery, some were winners and some were losers. Suranga, in the last chapter, happened to live next to a generous foreign couple and quickly received a well-built spacious house; Pushpa was resettled at Lokuwatte in an

incomplete and much smaller house, while still others, who were categorically excluded from tsunami aid because they were ‘unaffected’, continue to live in small mud houses without electricity or water. All of this inevitably influences local social relations.

Resettlement of those displaced to permanent housing and reconstruction of damaged houses were identified as being among the most important factors for recovery. All actors involved from the state and donors to the people affected emphasised the house as an essential part of re-establishing lives, and the rapid rebuilding of houses received the highest priority by the state and the international community. Here, the needs of those affected and the priorities of the state and the donors appear to converge, but relocation and the provision of a house do not automatically lead to a ‘back to normal’, secure living situation. As noted, inconsistencies in quality, size and distribution of houses created many problems, which were further complicated by neglect of local perceptions and traditions of house and home making.

### **More than a Roof Over One’s Head**

In rural Sri Lanka, local values and traditions are deeply embedded in houses and the making of homes. This ties into important local social and cosmological relations and webs of reciprocity that have bearing upon ‘a good/safe home’. If successful relocation (from a beneficiary perspective) is to be achieved this should be taken into account by policy makers and implementers.

When studying the reconstruction process in eastern Sri Lanka, Brun & Lund (2008) contend that the rebuilding of houses is often politically sensitive, and that the house is a contested territory, a meeting point between geopolitics and identity politics. Outside assistance should therefore take into account the local political and social context and see houses built after disaster “as social building blocks in context and not in isolation as an individual family unit aid package” (Brun & Lund 2008:278). They further rightly argue that building houses alone cannot drive the reconstruction and recovery process. They noted that there was extreme confusion over people’s rights, entitlements and access, over who guides and helps and over who should be listened to and trusted in any elements of the process (Brun & Lund 2008:285).

Possession of a house is highly valued in Sri Lanka and the house's standard is a reflection of social status. As Fernando (2000:358) writes; "It is the uppermost pride of a Sinhala man to own a house of his own, and be the king of his 'domain'. To live in a rented house or to share one is always looked down upon". Although there were many complaints and clearly visible problems, most of the people in Lokuwatte considered themselves lucky to have received a new house. Although much is still lacking, they own their houses and they can stay there for as long as they wish. Many of those resettled lived in simple wooden houses before the tsunami, sometimes on encroached or rented land. Even if some of these families were to save for their whole lives it would be difficult for them to afford to build a house of such a standard on their own. This illustrates the problematic nature of evaluating 'results', since they are experienced relative to the person's own social and economic situation history and grievances.

House construction in Tharugama is normally a long and costly process. It is usually done in stages, sometimes with several years in between, and unfinished houses are common sights in the village landscape. For example, a local carpenter in his forties had been going on contracts to work as a driver in the Middle East for the previous eight years. On his short leaves he continued to build his house and was slowly completing it bit by bit with the money he earned abroad.

In the hasty reconstruction after the tsunami, which was done en masse by a great number of outside actors who often had little knowledge about the local social, cultural and political context, houses were viewed more or less as 'neutral' physical constructions. Locations were seen as blank spaces, not as imbued by a particular history of conflict and insecurity, or as parts of a cosmological system that involves the earth and spirits in the maintenance of order, safety and harmony.

### *A 'Proper' Home - Establishing Webs of Security*

Anthropologists have long observed the variety of meanings that home-making may embrace; "a home is invested with meaning, emotions, experiences and relationships that lie at the heart of human life" (Blunt & Varley 2004: introduction). Skotte (2004) argues that the house symbolises security and insecurity, power and identity, public and private, hu-

man and non-human. It is where most of our lives are lived, and it constitutes long-term investments, normally the largest financial venture of any family (Skotte cited in Brun & Lund 2007:6).

In Tharugama the house, besides providing physical protection and marking identity and status, is invested with symbolic protection that ties into a ‘cosmic’ web of relations. In order to provide proper protection, good luck and long healthy lives without conflicts for its dwellers, the relations between the household and the surrounding community as well as with spirits, ghosts and earth deities have to be properly upheld according to norms of reciprocity and sacrifice. In *A celebration of demons*, Bruce Kapferer notes that the house and women are the focus of intense ritual activity, both to ensure their own protection and that of other household members against the disturbing and disruptive forces of the natural and of the cultural and social world extending around them (Kapferer 1991:149 [1983]). The human body, house body and household body are intimately linked and likewise subject to intrusion of harmful forces causing sickness and misfortune. The integrity of ‘boundaries’ is imperative for harmony and security, and breaches are dangerous. As Mary Douglas writes, “...all margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered” (Douglas 2002:150 [1966]), which, in the case of re-housing in Tharugama, is evidently a common concern.

At first when I talked to people about their new houses I interpreted the many complaints as merely referring to the bad material quality of the structure. When I heard phrases like “this house is not good for us”, “this house is not good”, or “this house is not safe for the family” I initially, with the faulty houses before my eyes, failed to see other dimensions hidden (to me) in the ordinariness of the statements. With time I came to view the house in a different way and to understand more of the subtler qualities that are invested in a house, not only as a structure protecting from weather and thieves but also against more elusive and potentially more fearful dangers. The domestic space is constantly at risk of dangerous antisocial intrusion from a volatile outside and has to be well guarded. Everyday life in the village is permeated with a concern for manoeuvring dangers and misfortune, and for promoting auspiciousness and luck. The beliefs and practices surrounding the making and maintenance of a good and safe home are linked to perceptions about the body, and healing practices and healing rituals are often house rituals taking

place at a patient's house with family and sometimes friends and/or neighbours present.

In Sri Lanka *Vaasthu Vidiya*, a traditional architectural teaching and practice originating from India, influence how people build houses and create homes. The architectural principles in *vaasthu* “connect the individual body to the home, and the home to the cosmos” (Bryden 2004:26). *Vaasthu vidiya* will soon be discussed further and for now it will suffice to note that *vaasthu* in essence concerns directional alignments and balanced measures, i.e. the placing of structures in certain ways (the building itself, walls, doors, windows), and that the house has multiple meanings and functions, as protective in both a physical and a psychological sense against different forms of threats. The house exists and evolves in relation to social, economic, political and cosmological configurations. A house has ‘a life’ that is intimately interwoven with its dwellers. One female villager who often fell sick and felt unhappy and anxious had an elaborate cleansing ritual in her house. She described that since the house was old, the history of many people falling ill, quarrelling, dying and so on has weakened the house, and thus it had to be cleansed and its protective capacities invigorated.

So far, this chapter has shown that recovery in terms of housing requires a broad, culturally sensitive approach. The ethnography presented here reveals a range of problems such as land scarcity, incoherent policies, lack of equality, transparency and participation. People's experiences and responses in Tharugama will be more explicitly spelled out in the remaining space of this chapter and the way in which the gift of new houses affected local relations, expectations and obligations will be discussed.

### *The House in a World of Threats*

Academic texts concerning the ritual traditions and practices specifically relating to house building and homemaking in Sri Lanka are scant, but Argenti-Pillen (2003), even though focusing on how women contain violence in southern Sri Lanka, touches upon the symbolic security and significance of the house in a historic context of violence and insecurity. She did fieldwork in a cluster of rural neighbourhoods in the southern province.

According to Argenti-Pillen the people of Udahenagama (pseudonym) commonly made a broad distinction between the *gedera* (house, household, family) and the *samadjaya* (society). *Samadjaya*, she suggests, should be understood as “spaces in between contexts” or “non-domestic spaces” and referring to the wider society surrounding the *gedera* (Argenti-Pillen 2003:126). A similar distinction was made by people in Tharugama, who often conferred images of the household as an ideally well-protected unit with restricted and controlled human and non-human relations in contrast to an unreliable, disordered and dangerous society outside. Argenti-Pillen argues that there has been an inward movement during the lifespan of this generation, where the household consolidates itself. Before men used to sleep outside on the porch but now more often they sleep inside the main house with women and children. The *kili pāla* (pollution hut) used for secluding girls during the puberty ritual is no longer built in the forest but usually in a well protected section of the house. Further the people of Udahenagama “inadvertently evoke an almost non-Sinhala and non-Buddhist wild society encroaching on the ethos of the household. The walls of the house form a barrier and boundary, a protection against evil eyes, poisonous gazes, the gaze of the wild, or the effortless intrusion of strangers. If the barriers are breached, cleansing rituals are used to re-establish the boundaries of house or garden” (Argenti-Pillen 2003:87).

In Tharugama too “spaces in between contexts”, the larger society outside the close-knit kin groups and households, were often regarded as unsafe, and the boundary between safe and dangerous spaces set up at the doorstep. After living in the village for some time and taking part in everyday life, I was taken by the milieu and mindset of constantly looming danger and subsequent caution. It made me realise the importance of a ‘proper’ house. I do not want to imply that the house always constitutes an unproblematic, safe environment, and I am aware of vulnerability and risk within the walls of the house, such as of violence or abuse. Nevertheless, I would argue that the ideal house, as site of order with predictable and well-ordered relations, provides a sense of continuity and identity, and ‘faults’ in houses and measures to ‘make it good’ were taken seriously as exemplified in the quote below by Dilini. She was displaced by the tsunami and lives in a new tsunami house within the Montano resettlement area.

15 years ago my life was much better compared to how I live today. Now I don't even have a biscuit to give my children. Life is more difficult now because I have four children to care for. We lived at a tsunami camp for one year after the tsunami. It was good there, we got food. When we lived in the camp my husband used to catch a lot of fish. He came home with profits like one lak (100,000 rupees). Since we came to this house we have had problems and lack of money. It is because of this house, when we came here all the problems started for us. There is something in the house that is not good for us. I want to bring a *pade bedene kenek* (traditional house expert) to look at the house to see what is wrong and what can be done, but we can't afford it. When I came to this house everything in my life was finished. Last time my husband came home from fishing he only brought 12,000 rupees. This is not enough. I have become a beggar since I came to this house (080516 no.2.7).

Dilini implies that there is something 'bad' about their house, causing her husband to lose income and their life to deteriorate. The problem could be dealt with by bringing in an expert (*pade bedene*) to 'analyse' the house structure and the household relations. He will present an explanation to their difficulties and a practical solution. For a person in a place with constrained space to manoeuvre, this might provide mental relief. Finding a cause and being presented with a realistic opportunity to do something about their dire situation would at least inspire hope. This illustrates the discrepancy between donors' and recipients' notions of order and security.

### *Invisible Protection*

Gifts from outside, in this case houses, are absorbed into or interpreted in terms of the local system of ideas. In Tharugama, in order to ensure well-being and proper protection, and that there will be money and food, good health and no conflicts, a new house should be built with certain precautions right from the start when the ground is to be prepared for the foundation. Before and during the construction process, and when entering the house, there are a number of important measures to take that has to do with establishing, acknowledging and maintaining important relations, not only with family and neighbours, but also with spirits and gods. On the journey from abstract construction plan to physical object and finally to a 'proper home', a large number of auspicious and protective rituals are prescribed. When I thought people complained



about the poor quality of their new houses the ‘no good’, ‘not safe’ were sometimes also referring to lack of ‘confidence’ in the house, of the ‘invisible protection’, i.e. to houses that have been constructed, but with the traditional ways of homemaking neglected.

Suranga, in the previous chapter, is ambivalent about his new house. On the one hand he is happy and grateful towards the foreign donor, but on the other hand he is lamenting that they have been subjected to sickness and misfortune in the house. He is trying to find arguments in favour of the house and the donor, despite his awareness that the house was not made in the traditional way and the proper precautions not taken. He is describing that the house was built according to “foreign plans” but says that “if you build a Sri Lankan house you need good *pade* (balanced measurements) and you must obtain the *nekathe* (auspicious time) for the foundation and the entering. Further, the *babirawa puja* (offerings to earth deity) was required to make it good, and house problems were verified by a local *sastere* (soothsayer). Suranga and his family lived outside the buffer zone and received help under the ‘owner-driven’ programme, and the house is, as described before, of good quality and size and rapidly completed<sup>38</sup>. Still, it was not entirely regarded ‘Sri Lankan’, nor fully ‘foreign’. In other words, it was regarded as something in between and its qualities for bestowing proper protection implicitly questioned.

In discussions with people involved in both ‘owner-driven’ and ‘donor-driven’ housing programmes, the concepts of *pade*, *neakath* and *babirawa* were often mentioned, and this draws attention to the local norms, values and traditions fundamental to homemaking.

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<sup>38</sup> In the Tharugama area the ‘owner-driven’ houses seem to have been somewhat more successful in terms of rate of completion and overall quality. This finding correlates with a study of 600 household views in 6 southern and eastern districts on the progress and process of housing, by Institute of Policy Studies in Colombo (IPS 2006).

*Placing Boundaries and Achieving Balance - Vaasthu*

When people locally talked about *pade*<sup>39</sup> they referred to the broader system of *vaasthu vidya* - indigenous architecture. Academic texts available in English on *vaasthu* in Sri Lanka<sup>40</sup> are scant, but BRIT (Bio Diversity Research Information and Training Centre), a local NGO working to explore, preserve and spread traditional architectural knowledge<sup>41</sup>, have published a few texts on the concept of *vaasthu* (BRIT 2006). In one authored by Sirisena Attanayake it is pointed out that the house, for Sri Lankans, reflects the identity of a family and that family names often include the house name. To live in a traditional house, they contend, is to be provided shelter, comfort, prosperity, happiness, health, dignity, identity and protection. Moreover, regardless of social standing Sri Lankans are conscious and concerned about traditional *vaasthu* practices when building their houses. The most common practice is avoiding *bumidosa* (land/soil qualities that will make the construction faulty), matching horoscope with designs, placing doors and windows according to the correct natural directions, and placing the house, rooms and kitchen in the correct directions (BRIT 2006 passim). In Tharugama I came across all of the practices mentioned above.

*Bahirawa puja* is linked to the avoidance of *bumidosa*. The concept of *bhoomi* (earth/soil) is beliefs in invisible powers in nature that might influence house construction. The house itself is an additional burden (weight) to the Earth god (*bhoomi devatha*) and there are several rituals to please the Earth gods, the main one being the *bahirawa puja*, an offering ritual aiming to avoid faults when using land to build a house. If the house is wrongly placed and precautions to appease the gods lacking, it is believed that it will be weak and harmful for the dwellers and cause frequent sickness, hamper economic prosperity, and also that the general

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<sup>39</sup> The word *pade* itself, as told by informants, means something like 'base' and it is used when referring to the traditional way of building. It also implicates measurements/units used for building a house and for identifying where and how to situate it on its designated plot of land to make it as favourable as possible for its future dwellers

<sup>40</sup> A translation of the *Sinhala Mayimataya*, an influential ancient architectural handbook of Indian origin, is done by MacDougall (2008), and Bryden (2004) has written about courtyard houses and *vaasthu* in India.

<sup>41</sup> This organisation collaborates with University of Moratuwa (Department of Architecture) and has done a few studies e.g. a detailed household study about characteristics of house design, spiritual aspects and traditional furniture.

appearance of the house is unpleasant (BRIT 2006:353). In his work from 1954 *Exorcism and the art of healing in Ceylon* Paul Wirz recounts the legend of *Bahirawa* or *Bumi-Devi* (the goddess of the earth) and the origins of the offering rituals.

When prince Sidharta had become a Buddha and sat under the Bo-tree on the diamond throne which the goddess of the earth had given him, *Marea* came to dispute the ownership of the diamond. He had brought his whole retinue with him and used all his powers of persuasion to gain possession of the jewel. All those who accompanied *Marea*, professed in his favour, while Buddha could neither offer proof nor bring a single witness forward to testify that the diamond was rightfully his. So, he stretched his hand out and called the earth as his witness. The earth opened and the earth goddess made her appearance. She held a vessel with a coconut-blossom in her hand, turned to *Marea* and said: 'This diamond is his, the Enlightened One's, property' Thereupon, *Marea* flung a curse at the earth-goddess. Soon after, the deity gave birth to eight children who became eight *yakkiniyo*; it was their duty to take care of the earth and of everything in it, i.e. its treasures, ores, metals and jewels [---] They distributed themselves over the eight points of the compass and took care that men did not commit offences against the earth-goddess, and saw to it that those who wanted to dig in the earth for treasures and other things, presented her with an offering. From that time on, they demanded offerings from mankind on every occasion, whether a man wanted to dig a well or to work a new rice field, or to search mineral wealth.

And so it came about that from then on eight offerings, so called *Bahirava-pidenna*, distributed over the eight cardinal points, have had to be presented to the eight *yakkiniyo* and to the earth goddess, on the spot where a person intended to dig (Wirz 1954:181).

Donor gifts arrived in a setting in which humans were involved in exchange relationships not only with fellow humans but also with the earth and spirits. If these were not maintained and honoured, there could be negative repercussions. Foreign donors were largely unaware of these cosmological relationships and of the fact that their 'gifts' might disrupt them and thus weaken the household and, consequently, reduce its ability to 'give' to others in their community. Exchange relations between humans and non-humans, by means of offerings and alms rituals, are important for the generation of protection, well-being and luck, and this becomes evident in the case of house building and homemaking.

In Tharugama, before starting the construction and deciding where to place the house on the land, the *pade bedene keneke*, (lit. the person who puts down the ropes) an expert in *vaasthu* principles of design, is ideally consulted. The local authority on this, Basuna ayia, told me that his daughter, an architect in Colombo, use *vaasthu* in her work and that it is not a practice related to where you live or who you are<sup>42</sup>.

Basuna ayia, started working as a mason in 1954 and ‘doing the *pade*’ about 15 years ago after his father passed away. He learned everything from his father and he is passing on his knowledge to his daughter. One day we met up in his house to talk about his work, the tsunami and the many new houses in the area.

My job starts when I go and see the land where the people are planning to build the house. First I have to see the land then I can start calculations and do the plan. After that I put out the ropes for the foundation to show the placing and design of the house. I use a compass and specific units for measurements and mathematical calculations according to fixed diagrams (he shows me the compass and several books with intricate diagrams and tables).

From *uttire* (north) and *dakuna* (south) I make the *lanuve* (ropes), it is not good to put walls at certain sides. If you do it in a wrong way you can't stay in the house. If you put a door in a corner, according to the *sas-tere pade* (teachings/studies of *pade*), there will be like a fire in the house; bad incident like fights, suicide and sickness will come, so nobody does this. It takes me about one hour to do the *pade* for a house. When I do all the calculations and divide I see what kind of *pade* is needed for each room to make them good. But before I start to do the *pade* I have to see the horoscope. In the horoscope I can see the good and bad lengths and size for the house. It is also important how the house is situated on the land; if it is in *preta pade* (ghost pade) it is not good. The *manuchiya pade* (human pade), *deivo pade* (god pade) and *bracma pade* (purest and highest pade) are all good. But *bracma pade* is only used for *pansal* (temples) and *deval* (shrines/God houses). A *pansala* is always situated at the centre of the land.

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<sup>42</sup> A search on the Internet on *vaasthu* indicates a growing contemporary interest in Sri Lanka and India. For example fashionable apartments and houses in Bombay and Colombo are sold with the promise of ‘complete *vaasthu* design’.

People say that if the *pade* is not good money will not stay in the cupboard, and they believe it is the *Babirawa*, but that is not the *Babirawa*. What the *Babirawa* does is to confuse the people. For example if you keep a book at a special place you will not remember it and you will blame your family for taking it, there will be fights and problems. Some people think it is taking the money but that is not correct, the people have forgotten the correct things. To get rid of the *Babirawa* you have to do the *Babirawa pujawe*.

If the *pade* is not good there will be a lot of fights in the house and if there is a wall in the middle of the house somebody will die. You see, the *pade* is the same as a roundabout. If there are cars coming from four roads they are putting a roundabout to make the cars run through smoothly. If there is no roundabout they will crash into each and make a mess, there will be accidents. It is the same for a house. There should not be something blocking in the middle, then people will die. Also you should not have four rooms of equal size in your house. Then you feel reluctant to staying in your house. One day you will go to stay with your *lokuamma* (mother's elder sister) the next at some other place and so on. You will dislike your own house and no matter how much money you bring into the house, it will never stay. All this can happen because of the *pade*.

I also go to houses when people have problems to see if something can be done. I make a special horoscope and I can for example see how long life a house will have and for how long it will be good for the inhabitants. By rebuilding and changing the design you can make a bad house better, for example change the position of a door or a window. If the house is in the wrong position on the land, you can make a 'false' wall, like a decoration, to make it longer and by that change the configurations. To move the whole house or make it bigger by adding more rooms is too expensive for most people.

When you make a new house and you want it to be as good as possible for the family, you have to think about the horoscope, the *pade* and the *neakathe*. You also have to think about something good and *dharmie* (karma), to light a lamp and offer flowers and think about our *agama* (religion). You should check your stars and find a *neaketh* day to start the foundation. It is important. Even if the *sirit virt* (traditions and customs) change a lot in our society, this will not change, people will keep doing it. It is old knowledge that comes from India.

If you make a commercial building you also have to do it in the correct way otherwise your business might lose money and have to close down quickly. For example it is not good to have business at junctions with three roads. In Tharugama there is a place like that, and people have tried to make business there but never succeeded. It is also bad to have a house or a business in front of temples and channels. If the water is going to the

west it is not good, it is going down. Even the president is asking his technical officers to do the buildings according to the *nak sastera* (auspicious knowledge). Some government factories have many strikes all the time. This can happen if you don't do the buildings in the correct way.

A lot of families come to see me. They don't have a good life and they want help. So I can advice them to make some changes. In Lokuwatte all the houses in the area are built in the same way. For those houses you have to make another room or make the house bigger. Then they will be all right. I have done the *pade* for about 50 tsunami houses in Tharugama. At Lokuwatte the houses have bad *pade*, the contractors did not care. Look at my hand and fingers. It looks good and natural, if a finger came out here (points inside the hand), at the wrong place, it is not good. When all are there at the correct place it works good and it looks nice! (080530 no.40).

The way Basuna aiya talks about the relationships between the positions of doors, walls and windows in relation to the land draws attention to the way in which order is created. This recalls Douglas' notion of matter out of place being dangerous. When Basuna aiya suggests that people who are about to build a house should "think about the horoscope, the *pade* and the *neakathe*, about religion (*agama*) and to make offerings", this shows the importance of tending to a wide web of relations in the creation of a robust structure that will protect its inhabitants. Physical order is interwoven with cosmological order and harmonious relationships in one realm are mirrored in the other – thus, harmony between human and non-human realms will enable a family also to prosper within the human realm. The wellbeing of the individual, the family, the household, the community and the cosmos exists in a kind of layered set up, with disorder in one realm spinning off into the others.

Obeyesekere (1981) has elegantly described this Sinhalese taxonomy of misfortune, as going from the general to the specific, with the specific causal theory resting in the larger one while the most general, *karma dosa*, subsumes all other religious causal theories (Obeyesekere 1981:107).

I meet with an accident and I can say, "this is due to the fault of sorcery practiced by my neighbour", *huniyan dosa*, or I can say, *deva dosa*, caused by divine wrath; or I can say *graha dosa*, planetary misfortune caused by my bad horoscope; or I can say, this is due to the sins of my past birth, *karma dosa*. These explanations of my misfortune are not mutually exclusive, for I could say that my accident was caused by sorcery, but a sorcerer would in

fact do this to me because of my bad astrological time, *graha dosa*, which in turn is a product of my past sins, *karma dosa* (Obeyesekere 1981:107).

### *Cultivating Prosperity - Auspicious Timing and Pirith*

Astrology is another feature of this all-encompassing cosmological system. Even the planets are tied into the whole set up and the use of astrology and auspicious timing (*nekath*) is an important measure to promote well-being in a house. A horoscope is prepared for a person at birth according to the constellations of planets at that particular time and continues to play an important role during his/her whole life. Before undertaking any kind of construction the horoscope is examined by an astrologer to identify the auspicious times (*nekathe*) for different stages in the building process. Important stages include the laying of the foundation, installing the main door, starting the construction of the roof, and entering the building and these are done at the exact auspicious moments.

Vandana, an astrologer in the village, stressed the importance of reading the horoscope (*kendere*) to obtain the *neakathe* for every distinct phase in house building. Vandana, like Basuna ayia, took over after her father passed away and has been making and reading horoscopes since 1990. Her veranda was frequently filled with waiting clients. She said she has so many clients because “you need a *neakth* for almost everything in your life, from the day you are born until the day you die the *neakathe* is important”.

After the tsunami the people come to see the *kendere* (horoscope) more often. I think that after the tsunami they believe more in the *kendere*. During the time the people were in camps they did not come so much but they came to get new horoscopes because some were lost in the tsunami. They also came to get the *neakathe* for their new houses. For some tsunami houses I did all the *neakathe* times, but for the Lokuwatte houses the AG-office had given the key and told them to enter quickly. The houses there do not have the *neakathe* for the foundation; the door and the roof beam so I told the people that then there is no point in doing it only for the entering. I cannot do it quickly; it takes time to make the correct calculations. At other places people came in good time to obtain everything, and then I could do it properly. In the Lokuwatte houses there is a lot of *dosa* (faults, imbalance). I can see it in the horoscopes (080607 no.38).

The abundance of *dosa* and various kinds of problems with houses at Lokuwatte were confirmed many times by people living there, and the deficiencies of these houses were well-known concerns. The term *dosa*, as explained above, denotes misfortune or unfortunate events for the Sinhalese, but its earliest etymological meaning is “faults” and in Sanskrit medicine *dosa* signifies “faults of the organism” (Obeyesekere 1981:107).

In addition to *pade* and *nekathe*, traditional Buddhist practice to obtain blessings and to nullify possible evil effects on the house and the land is preformed. It is common to have a *pirith* ceremony done at one or several stages of the process. The Buddhist *pirith* is a regular feature in village life and a popular ceremony in Sri Lanka, not only in relation to house building<sup>43</sup>. The Pali word *paritta* comes from the Sanskrit *pari+tra* ‘to protect’ (De Silva 1991:139). It is the chanting of Buddhist texts (discourses) to invoke blessings, and ward of illness and danger for individuals and for the welfare of the world (Perera 2000:1).

In Lokuwatte anxiety over the condition of houses was common, as indicated earlier in this chapter, and as the village astrologer and mason stated many houses were built according to the same plan with no specific considerations for the people intended to live there and for traditional practices like the *pade* or *nekathe*. At the donor-driven housing projects I studied, no considerations of local building traditions or few or no requirements from the beneficiaries had been taken into account. In Lokuwatte people were not given the possibility to influence the size, design and location of their new houses, nor the time of entering. The masons and workers were all from outside the village, and a Colombo contractor had been brought in from the funding organisation. The donors did organize *pirith* for one house as a joint opening ceremony for the whole area. I was repeatedly told that the builders did not care about the houses being done in a good way, that they did not care since they did not know the people moving in and were only there to earn money. Furthermore, people complained that the people employed were unskilled and not properly trained masons and carpenters. They were often new to the local environment and worked temporarily within the reeconomy, but they were not outsiders in the same sense as the foreign-

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<sup>43</sup> For Sinhala Buddhists a *pirith* ceremony is commonly performed at important individual and collective events.



ers. Consequently, their identity was ambiguous and they constituted yet another ‘floating category’ together with the various groups of foreigners - aid workers, local NGO staff, philanthropists and tourists – and other locals with unclear roles and status, such as ‘tsunami-people’, ‘victims/beneficiaries’, ‘winners/losers’, which will be brought up in detail in Chapter Five.

To sum up, the problems people experienced with their new houses were clearly of two kinds. The first concerned inadequate material standards of houses that failed to protect residents from weather and thieves, that were too small and lacked proper and functioning kitchen and/or toilet facilities. The second kinds of worries were about people’s sense of safety and that the houses lacked ritually infused protection that could provide luck, hope and confidence (e.g. *pirith* and *Bahirawa puja*). The constitution of an ideal house includes many layers of protection, material and symbolic, to make it robust and auspicious, as the case of Sathi’s house will illustrate below.

### **The Making of Sathi’s House**

Within the first month of arrival in Tharugama, I came across a house ceremony for laying the foundation. Since I was interested in housing and local perceptions of what constitutes a good and safe house, I started to ask around and as it happened, Imanie knew a family in the village that had been selected by a European NGO to receive a new house. This organisation had been active in the area after the tsunami in various relief and reconstruction work (e.g. donating a substantial amount of boats and houses) and had decided to stay on in the area to continue to support the poorer section of the community, regardless of tsunami impact.

The family chosen to receive a house lived at the northern border of the village in a small wooden house without electricity. Sathi, the mother, and Saman, the father, were struggling to make ends meet and trying hard to provide good education for their four sons. They were in debt to several local micro-credit organisations. Saman normally sold fish, going off to the interior hills on his motorbike, but with the motorbike pawned due to economic problems he had to take menial jobs as a day labourer here and there. I met Sathi before the start of the house building and she

was overjoyed to get a house and concerned about doing it in the right way. She believed that they would never manage to build a similar house on their own.

Before starting to build they had gone to the closest city to get a well-reputed *yiotishie* (astrologer) to establish the auspicious times to start digging and to put down the central foundation stone. At the auspicious time Saman was supposed to put the central stone of the foundation into the ground. A *bara*<sup>44</sup> (vow) had also been made to one of the Gods at the *Gambara Bodhie*.

### *Laying the Foundation for a New Home*

When I arrive at the location for the new house of Sathi and Saman, there are a lot of people present already. It is a beautiful morning, the air is crisp and cool, there is no wind and the birds are holding concert in the dense jungle. On the way there I came across an old man dressed in a bright white sarong and a shirt. I later learned that this was the *pade bedena keneke* and that he had just finished putting out the ropes and laying out the size and directions for the structure of the house, where to put walls doors, rooms, etc.

The building site was located at the northern border of the village and a small footpath leads into the area. The house is to be constructed at the same place as the old wood house the family used to live in. During the time of construction the family resides in a small temporary shed next to where the new house will take shape. At this point during field work, I was not aware about the intricate traditions involved in house building.

After some time at the site, I was told that there had been some quarrelling and disagreement involving the old *pade bedena keneke* and the representatives of the European donor organisation there to oversee the process. The *pade bedena* man had made a lot of changes from the original plan presented by the NGO. He claimed that the house had to be built according

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<sup>44</sup> It is common practice make to ask for help in this way, also in matters other than house building. After the completion, if all goes well, the family will revisit the *devale* to fulfill the vow (with particular offerings) and transfer merit to the God/Gods.

to his calculations and directions otherwise it would not be good for the family to live there. The donors did not understand the reason for the changes, which also involved higher cost compared to the original plan prepared by the NGO. After lengthy discussions a compromise was agreed upon and the donors were persuaded to make a few alterations in the way the *pade bedena kenek* recommended.

Later when I met the donors they were making sarcastic jokes about paying the ‘old man with the ropes’ some extra money next time they build a house to make him say that their plans are good for the family. Imanie sternly warned them to do so; “If something happens in the house or to the family in the future, they will go to the astrologer and find out that the house is not built according to the *pade* and all the problems for the family will be referred to as depending on that. They will be unhappy and worried and forced to make changes to the house on their own (which they cannot afford)”. The NGO representatives did adapt their plans but still regarded the demands and the *pade* as local superstitions, and irrelevant for wellbeing and safety in the house. Here giving does not follow the Maussian notion of creating lasting social bonds and moral obligations. Nor is it a completely pure and free gift, nor a straightforward ‘commercial’ transaction, nor is it a question of one actor intentionally exerting power over the other. Instead, giving involves a negotiation in which two conflicting views confront one another and are then modified to arrive at a compromise.

When the dispute settled, the time had come for Saman to start digging; he walks around the site and light oil lamps and incense in *gokkola* (tender coconut leaf) baskets that the mason erected in the four corners, one in each cardinal direction, and for the four guardian deities<sup>45</sup>. When this is done male family members, friends and neighbours starting digging according to the ropes placed on the ground by the *pade bedena*.

Then two men dressed in white arrive and quietly start to arrange a table for *pirith* and the *pirith nule* (protection thread). On the table there are five concrete boxes in the size of a brick, four rectangular and one square. They contain luck bringing and protective items. The square stone box is

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<sup>45</sup> In the Sinhala pantheon there are a number of superior deities under the Buddha, the Four Guardian Deities (*hataravaram devjyo*), namely Natha, Vishnu, Kataragama and Saman (Kapferer 1983:158). Over time the list has seen some variations but the three to join Vishnu come from a list of five, Natha, Pattini, Saman, Vibhisana, Kataragama (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988:30).

for placing at the centre of the house and the others for the four corners. On the white-covered table there are also an oil lamp, incense sticks, a jar with water, flowers, *bullat* leaves and the *pirith nule*.

Figure 2) *Pirith* chanting and ritual objects at foundation ceremony



Saman walks around with purifying smoke, stopping for a moment at each corner and at the bundle of white thread (*pirith nule*). He picks up the *pirith nule* and brings it over and around the jug of water, up in the air above the table, over a beam and then all around the site attaching it to the four corner baskets, then all the way back to the table where the *pirith* takes place. During the whole process the two men are chanting and the atmosphere is peaceful and solemn. Instead of calling in monks to do the *pirith* the family has invited two esteemed men from the village to do it<sup>46</sup>.

When the *pirith* is over everybody is waiting for the auspicious moment to put down the corner and centre stones and five persons get ready at their designated positions. Saman stands with the square stone contain-

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<sup>46</sup> According to villagers it is called *gibi pirith*, “common men *pirith*”, and it is gaining popularity locally. In choosing this option over inviting monks to do the *pirith* ceremony, the monks’ dubious moral standard and higher costs were stated as reasons.

ing the lucky and protective items at the centre of the house, a wealthy man is standing at the north corner and trusted friends of the family in the remaining ones. Sathi and female relatives and friends are waiting outside the site with a small pot of coconut milk, an oil lamp and items to light a hearth. At exactly the same time, the stones are put into the holes in the ground (all those present with watches or cell phones are keeping track of the time, and some confusion arise over which one to follow).

When the stones are in the ground, concrete is poured down and Sathi walks into the centre carrying an oil lamp, fire wood and dry leaves. She builds and lights a hearth. She is aided by her female companions and they keep the fire alive and work to get the milk boiling. Everybody is waiting for it to boil over (*kiri uturenawa/ithireema*). Depending on the direction that the milk overflows, it signifies luck or misfortune. Finally the milk boils over to a good and lucky side and everybody is happy and pleased, especially Sathi and Saman.

The burial of the corner stones and the central stone in the earth and the avoidance of *bumidosa* and *Bahirawa puja* mentioned earlier recall traditions of sacrifice to the earth and its guardians in order to avoid offence and neglect that might cause problems for humans who depend upon it (cf. Michael Wright 1990).

After boiling the milk some people carry a table into the middle and prepare it with food, e.g. *kiri bat* (milk rice), bananas, *dol dol* (sweet coconut cake), *katta sambol* (a chilli condiment). The house owners and a few other people get parts of the *pirith nule* tied to their wrists. It is now charged with benevolent and protective power through the chants from the *pirith* ceremony and everybody there gets invited by Saman to eat a festive meal. Plenty of food has been prepared for days by Sathi and her female relatives, and people happily dig in.

The house owners are presented with gifts of sugar and money, and the sugar is later traded for money at the local *keade* (small shop). It is believed to be good luck to have a wealthy person presenting the couple with the first gift, then more will come to the house. Gifts were, as customary, presented with both hands indicating that it is given willingly. This suggests the idea of ‘gifts generating gifts’ in a perpetual cycle of reciprocity. They will continue to get sugar, money and household items from family and friends for some days to come, a welcome addition to the household since the ceremony has cost them a considerable amount of money. In fact, a few days before the foundation ceremony I got to

know that Sathi was worried because she did not have money to make a nice traditional meal to serve all the people. It is customary to give food to family, relatives, friends and the people who help and work. To not have enough food or to not do so would be embarrassing and a bad start for the new house, but as she and her husband were in debt it was not possible to pay for all the necessary things. Sathi asked the donors and they were not willing to give additional money. In end though she managed to get another loan and she could look forward to the foundation day and postpone her worries. From the donors perspective Sathi's request was seen as irrelevant, and even somewhat offensive, in the light of the great gift of a 'complete' house. However, to the receiving family this social dimension of laying the foundation for a good home was crucial.

After the foundation has been built, the critical occasions are when the main doorframe (*olou hao paninewa*) and the first roof beam (*ulu wahu tábima*) are put in place. These events will also be done according to *neakathe* and are considered important steps towards the major event of entering the new complete house. For the first roof beam, a coin is tied into a piece of white cloth (*panadura*), and attached to the beam at the *nekath* moment. The main door frame is traditionally first entered by the chief carpenter who has a key role in the construction and in the ritual (Fernando 2000:361). The main carpenter of Sathi's and Saman's house was the first one to enter the main door-frame. At the *nekath* time he first throws his tools over the threshold and then jumps over it himself. I was told that this was a kind of insurance that he had done a good job, and not put 'bad things' in the house. In that case anything bad would attach to him, rather than to the family of the house. Ideally the carpenter should also release a cock over the threshold before he enters. If there are *yakkas* (demons) or other evil spirits in the house, they will take the cock and not the carpenter. This type of aversion is also used in the *tovil* healing ritual, where the demon charmer tricks the cock to enter the animal body instead of the patient.

When a new house has been completed, the owners should not enter it until the auspicious (*nekath*) moment. At that day the family ceremonially enter the house and the main door. All family members enter one by one, carrying with them ritual items like, a statue of the Buddha, a pot full of water, a coconut sapling, coconuts and rice. A temporary hearth is made at the centre of the house and coconut milk again boiled until it overflows (*kiri ithireema*), symbolising abundance. The pot in which the

milk was boiled will be hung on the main beam of the house as a permanent fixture.

Saman and Sathi had problems to enter since the house was ‘completed’ at a period with a low rate of auspicious dates. At the same time the donors were pressing for them to hold the ceremony before they left, as they wanted to document the event for the organisation and its supporters in Europe. Furthermore, the provisional shed the family stayed in while construction was ongoing held up badly against the ruff, rainy weather. That the family endured rain, mosquitoes and hardships in the shed while living next to a ‘finished’ house and did not go inside to sleep is an indication of the importance of entering at the correct moment. They patiently waited for a good date to appear to start their life in the new house despite difficulties and pressure from donors. The house was, in their eyes, not entirely complete until the final ceremony was executed. Douglas maintains that risk depends on shared culture, not on individual psychology (2002: xix, 1960), and in the case of Sathi’s new house it becomes clear that both risk and security/well-being are culturally dependent concepts.

The fact that the family built their house according to the local ideals earned the respect from fellow villagers. They were considered to act according to esteemed customs and were sincere in efforts striving to provide a good home for themselves and their children. The symbolic protection and evocation of luck and auspiciousness gave rise to new hopes for the future. Some time after the family started to live in the house, village gossip made known that the house was considered good and that the family ‘gets everything’, implying that they did everything in a correct way and now have luck on their side. When I asked Sathi about her situation some time after they moved in, she said that they were happy. Even though they still struggle, at least they have a proper home.

These days even if we don’t have any money we somehow get food on the table. That is most important. For 14 years we lived in a house without electricity. The house we have now is good, we have everything and it is safer and protects us from snakes, scorpions and centipedes. But we can’t save any money; we did not do the *babirawa pideni* (offering ritual to the *Babirawa*). Everything else with the house we did in the correct way. We would like to do the *babirawa* but we can’t afford it. Bandula (a local *edure*) knows we are always *naja* (in debt) so he offered us to do it for 15,000 ru-

pees. We have some problems still, but I am happy for the house. It was built quickly and was done in a good way (080916 no.63).

Although Sathi and her family continued to have financial problems, she felt more secure in their new house and appeared to gain confidence in tackling hardships. This shows how multifaceted protective boundaries are, both physically and non-physically. Having food on the table despite the lack of money was, for Sathi, a sign of the wellbeing their new home could provide, beyond physical protection, because it had been ritually charged before and during its construction. Awareness of this ‘invisible protection’ inspired hopefulness about the future. However, boundaries were not impermeable and some ‘leakage’ took place as evidenced by the fact that the household was unable to keep money in the house. For Sathi, as for many villagers, this constant ‘trickling out’ of money was one of many problems of living on the threshold of new disasters that had to be managed.

In the process of house building, Saman and Sathi made statements about themselves and they had the opportunity to renegotiate their human and non-human relations, their moral status and social standing. This offered them a chance to make a start that most of the tsunami house dwellers were not able to make. The intricate symbolic and physical ordering of the household, in accordance with well-known customs, was perhaps also attempts to make order in a broader chaos and to control a capricious reality. It is maybe best understood as part of a holistic approach to the re-creation of order on multiple levels – physical, social, economic, moral – in a disrupted universe.

### Summary and Reflections

As shown in this chapter, the heavy focus set on a narrow physical dimension of housing and the failure to see material structure as only one part of creating homes are realized at the cost of less tangible but essential social, symbolic and cosmological dimensions. Material and symbolic robustness of houses are interlinked, and vital to both house and home making, and local experts like Vandana (the astrologer) and Basuna aiya (the *pade bedene kenek*) help people deal with uncertain futures and invisible threats. Ritual remedies are used to tackle hardships, to provide security and to promote prosperity and wellbeing. When a villager experi-



ences drastic change, increased insecurity and misfortune, this is sometimes interpreted as resulting from lack of attention to the necessary ritual precautions in constructing a house to ensure harmony in the wider web of human and non-human relations. The notion of sacrifice to the earth is implicated in this. The house can therefore be seen as an arena for the generation of explanations, control and meaning in a context of bewildering events and random misfortune<sup>47</sup>. It ties together a delicate web of essential relations and embraces a complex local network of exchange relations, not only between humans but also between this and the 'other worldly' realm of ghosts, spirits and gods. The villagers' attentiveness to (re)ordering patterns and reconstituting boundaries in homemaking also expresses agency after the loss of control experienced during the disaster.

In an article about ritual dynamics in humanitarian assistance, Richards (2010) argues that humanitarian interventions need to include ritual space in order to support recovery, and he makes an important observation; the rituals of 'others' are often seen as superstitious local oddities and as largely irrelevant to recovery interventions, but they should be seen as having great potential. What has been illustrated above about tsunami housing and the making of new homes and neighbourhoods exemplifies this.

The aim of 'building-back-better', in the case of housing, was clearly unevenly realised. Some have been more 'lucky' than others and opportunities in the wake of the disaster were seized not only by needy 'victims' but also by 'exploiters' hoping to benefit from the post-disaster scene. The building-back-better agenda was based on a particular value system that was not immediately translatable into the local context. It forged new differentials and, to some extent, set up a field for opportunism, greed and conflicts, which influenced local ideals of morality. A similar process was evident in efforts to aid the local recovery of livelihood activities, as will be shown in the next chapter.

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<sup>47</sup> One might reflect on 'obsession' with homes, home styling, cleaning, 'cocooning' etc in Europe'. In times of trouble and overwhelming experiences of 'floating fears' we tend to retreat into the secure, predictable and familiar. This can also be seen in fashion trend as we tend to dress more conservatively during turbulent times.



## 4. Local Livelihoods - Commodification and Competition

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So whilst philanthropy may involve a rejection of the world of competition and the market, it inevitably becomes part of that world. What starts out as a gift becomes a commodity, and no matter how frequent the call for 'co-ordination' and 'collaboration', competition will continue to characterise the 'human international'.

Roderick Stirrat (2006:16)

The tsunami dissolved not only the physical life-world but also economic order and it caused vast material losses at all levels of society. Approximately 150,000 people lost their livelihood in Sri Lanka as a result of the tsunami (GoSL 2005). Many suffered from the loss of a breadwinner, the collapse of markets and the destruction of resources. The restoration of livelihoods has been a major feature of post-disaster recovery (Khasalamwa 2009:82).

This chapter deals with something as tangible as income and material security, but it seeks to reveal important social, moral and symbolic dimensions of livelihood and how these interact with disaster aid. Interveners are 'acting upon recipients' but recipients are also 'acting and inventing', and their actions show how the 'gift of aid' is interwoven with hierarchies and moral dilemmas. The tsunami disrupted pre-existing patterns and flows of reciprocity, demanding action and opening up an arena of multiple voices and competing interests in which the local, national and global interplayed. Benthall (2008) proposes that representations of disasters are a consumer commodity and that the political economy of disasters and relief aid contain a continuous export flow of disaster imagery, processed by media organizations for consumption in the North, which reciprocates through the Southwards provision of aid

(2008:4-5). Benedikt Korf et al. describe this as the ‘commodification of good intentions’ and conceptualise the ‘biography of the gift’ as “a process of increasing commodification, whereby the ideal of the gift as an ethical, disinterested act of generosity becomes polluted by the worldly practices of the mundane and interested world” (Korf et al. 2010:62).

As will be shown, the gift of disaster aid geared at recovery of livelihoods in Tharugama was not only ‘commodified’ but it also affected perceptions and practice regarding work and money. It will illustrate how the disaster made way for intensified outside influences, causing friction and putting pressure on local relations, norms and values, and economy. Here too, as in the previous chapter, obligations and the expectations of givers, receivers and brokers in the gift cycle are diverse and not always compatible.

In Tharugama the maintenance of a daily living was frequently mentioned as a worry, but as long as disaster aid continued to flow there was no acute concern for short-term survival, and basic needs were generally met. The major source of disquiet was worry for the future and the difficulty of securing durable ways of income beyond and independently of the temporary reconstruction economy. People in the area had always had to struggle to make ends meet so the tsunami did not constitute a significant change in this sense, but it did influence the local economy and alter some of the pre-existing patterns of livelihood, at least temporarily. It gave way to new sources of making money as well as stimulating old, familiar patterns of handling economic insecurity.

Ambiguities and uncertainties in the area of fishing, which was a major target for aid, and local professional relations as well as relations with the sea, will be paid particular attention in this chapter. It starts off by discussing various rationales and incentives of giving and receiving the gift of aid. Thereafter follows a description of what I call a temporary ‘reconomy’ (reconstruction economy) and how people have reacted to altered circumstances and the inflow of NGOs and aid goods. I will then introduce some of the most important means of livelihood in the village, and the effects the tsunami has had on each sector. Lastly, attention will be directed to local savings and credit arrangements, social networks and ritual action for economic security.

### **Philanthropy or Economy - Solidarity or Self-interest?**

In an article about the response to the tsunami in Sri Lanka, Fernando and Hilhorst (2006:301) argue that the analysis of humanitarian aid has to be based on an understanding of everyday practice in order to avoid common pitfalls of stereotyping of aid providers. Starting from practice, they contend, has ramifications for the way in which we talk about humanitarianism.

Discussions (and fundraising campaigns) relating to international aid conjure up a world of professionals who are motivated by high principles, bidding for the admiration and the respect of the public at large. Media representations of agencies in the tsunami response often portray humanitarian organisations as mainly self-interested and competitive. By relating to the 'petty normality' of humanitarian aid, as we have tried to do here, it is possible to counteract distancing discourses about humanitarian actors. Humanitarians are not heroes. Neither are they selfish vultures. Nor indeed do they correspond to any other stereotype concocted by their friends or foes. Accounts of everyday NGO practices and dilemmas correct blind expectations, expose uncritical admiration, and put unrealistic critiques into perspective (Fernando and Hilhorst 2006:301).

I am sympathetic towards placing emphasis on the 'petty normality' of humanitarian aid and to the way this helps us see those involved as both 'heroes and vultures' trying to deal with problems from their own position, whether as a giver or a receiver of aid. The stereotypical portrayal of the powerful, exploitative westerner and the helpless, passive poor recipient is too simplistic. Interveners do not always have the upper hand and they may be exploited as well as having genuinely altruistic intentions. 'Victims' and 'recipients' are not only passive and submissive but they also use their positions in ingenious ways to seize opportunities suited to their own particular goals. My purpose is not to make moral judgements but to explore the dynamics of these relations in the context of the tsunami gift.

The local economy of reciprocity that framed the giving and receiving of disaster aid in Tharugama may be illuminated with the help of Mauss' notion of the triple obligation: to give, to receive and to repay. Kowalski (2011) notes that Mauss emphasised that what is given is symbolic of the nature of the relationship it fosters, and that the self-interestedness inherent in the gift is not primarily about what is to be received in ex-

change but in the relationship that giving evokes. A gift incites the recipient to respond in a way that will define the relationship between giver and receiver from then on.

In the case of tsunami gifts in Tharugama, donors often implicitly expected some return (e.g. specific behaviour, compliance, gratitude). Although aid was ostensibly given as a 'free gift', on closer examination it was often associated with expectations and obligations. However, the 'self-interestedness' inherent in these gift-giving acts, I suggest, had to do with the symbolic capital and moral satisfaction this generated for the giver; giving was rewarded with credibility and it could engender more generosity from donors in one's home country. The relationship that this initiated between the giver and receiver of the tsunami gift had less to do with creating social bonds between donors and recipients on site or with demands for tangible returns. For recipients the issue of return was not usually considered and instead aid gifts were largely viewed as 'free' – free of moral imperatives to give in return.

Perhaps because of this moral disengagement of the new flood of gifts, the relations they fostered were fraught with contradiction, misunderstandings and justifications; the *cycle* of reciprocity was problematic. Foreign philanthropists and NGO workers gave a 'free gift' but often with the expectation of a particular response: compliance, cooperation and gratitude. When beneficiaries failed to live up to these expectations or responded in unexpected ways, this could spur strong reactions. A few months after the tsunami, I met a person who had privately donated a substantial amount of relief aid and had supported a local tsunami rehousing scheme. He was keen to show his involvement in the relief distribution, house design and construction, and he stressed that his personal control was decisive for successful implementation. At the end of the conversation, he suggested that I should do a study of peoples' brains instead of their cultural system, because he was upset and disappointed by the fact that those he had helped seemed unable to take responsibility for reconstruction and they were lazy and disorganised. He could not understand their behaviour and described it as 'something genetic'. This kind of attitude was not uncommon among the NGO workers, tourists and holiday homeowners I spoke to.

Frustration was also evident among recipients. In her foreword to Mauss' book, *The Gift* (2002 [1954]), Mary Douglas explains why recipi-

ents of charity may feel antipathy towards donors and she argues that the gift is never 'free'. While charity is meant to be a free gift, a voluntary surrender of resources, it hurts. Stirrat and Henkel (1997) similarly note, when examining the relationship between western NGOs and their southern counterparts, that although "the gift is given in ways that attempt to deny difference and assert commonality between the rich giver and the poor receiver, a gift in practice reinforces or even reinvents these differentials" (Stirrat & Henkel 1997:69). Donors I interviewed often emphasised the 'free gift' of compassion and solidarity but also complained about the lack of gratitude and of appropriate responses from recipients. In this way they reinforced the hierarchies and differentials that they were trying to avoid. Correspondingly, receivers were working to transform imbalance and resolve contradictions in terms of legitimacy, power and morality, much in line with what Stirrat and Henkel write.

From the point of view of the receivers, the nature of the gift can be radically reinterpreted. Thus some argue that today's gifts are simply repayments for past exploitation, a sort of delayed compensation. Others ... that these transfers are not gifts but payment for work performed. Indeed, there is a continual effort to reinterpret transfers in such a way that the asymmetry of the situation is denied or at least neutralized. Yet, for all that both parties may wish to deny it, there is an indissolubly asymmetrical relationship between the partners (Stirrat and Henkel 1997:76).

In Tharugama people responded to this situation by trying to transform gifts in a way that made them morally acceptable. For example, some claimed that the aid was 'compensation for past exploitations', arguing that donors were morally indebted to the locals. It was common to bad-mouth donors portraying them as morally flawed, unjust and self-interested. Receivers were thus able to level out the economic and power asymmetry by asserting their own moral superiority. In other instances, poor recipients of donor aid maintained their moral status by purchasing counter gifts or inviting donors to elaborate meals in a gesture of repayment. The donors in turn often interpreted these efforts to make charity less painful as irrational.

The effects of tsunami gifts in Tharugama also depended upon how personal they were. Giving ranged from distribution from a logo-bearing truck en masse at aid checkpoints, through ceremonial giving of houses by particular individuals from well-known organisations, to delivery by brokers such as local monks. Impersonal gifts of aid from faceless do-

nors meant that the 'free gift' was received as a justified transfer of goods from the affluent to the needy. When I suggested to my field assistant and her friends that this aid may involve a sacrifice on behalf of the individual donor, they responded that most of the villagers saw foreigners as having extra resources, so giving was no sacrifice. Foreigners were associated with wealth and with the power to withhold or share it. If the foreigners' gifts had been seen as a sacrifice on their part, this would presumably have given them both moral and economic superiority in local eyes, and this may have provoked anxiety about the need to make returns.

Laidlaw (2000) has noted that gifts and commodities cannot necessarily be distinguished on the basis of impersonality; impersonality may be just as much a feature of the 'free gift' as it is of 'pure commodity' (Laidlaw 2000:632). The material presented above supports this line of argument, since both donors and recipients tried to frame the tsunami gifts as impersonal *and* pure and therefore as carrying no moral imperatives.

### **A Temporary 'Reconomy'**

The advent of the tsunami and the following inflow of aid organisations created new economic opportunities for some time. As many as 500 INGO's arrived in Sri Lanka after the disaster (Silva 2009:67), and the inflow of foreign currency was of such scope as to make the Sri Lankan rupee rapidly rise in value (Stirrat 2006:13). A vast number of individual philanthropists, international and national NGOs, foundations, national bodies and multilateral agencies were involved in the relief and rehabilitation process.

After the disaster there was a high demand for local people with language skills who could act as interpreters and assistants to the foreign organisations. This sometimes created problematic situations; international organisations often offered far more attractive salaries and drained local organisations of skilled staff. INGO's and agencies were seriously seeking out local 'partners' but at the same time local NGO's often felt that they had unequal access to the post-tsunami rehabilitation and found many areas to be taken over by bigger actors (cf Khasalamwa 2009, Silva 2009). Besides the competition over local partners, personnel and territories, resentment sometimes arose within organisations because



'tsunami workers' were paid more compared to workers in other operations. Some of the existing programmes also suffered, as the INGO's pulled out resources and personnel from them to more lucrative tsunami programmes (Silva 2009:68). The struggle and competition between aid agencies was primarily not about getting resources but about spending them and about finding people and projects to spend them on. International and foreign based NGO's furthermore had to make sure they spent it in the 'right way'.

NGO representatives were only too aware of the presence of TV teams and reporters, and many organisations had their own film crews to record their activities: in one case a three-person mission from an overseas NGO consisted of two officials and one cameraman. The result was to privilege certain sorts of activities, such as distribution of new crafts or constructing housing, rather than less visible or more indirect forms of disaster relief (Stirrat 2006:13).

Due to the extraordinary demand, overall costs rose and it was difficult for donors to calculate accurate budgets. Houses were sometimes left incomplete (as in the case of Lokuwatte) and sometimes fewer houses were constructed compared to initial pledges. There were agreements in place on how much to spend and on standards of shelter and housing, but these were adjusted over time and sometimes 'standards' degenerated into a strategic discourse to 'get rid of' money that gave uneven results (Gaasbeek 2010:135ff). Villagers in Tharugama often commented on the fact that unskilled labourers were employed in the reconstruction of houses (this pertained not only to Tharugama, see e.g. Gaasbeek 2010:138). On one hand, this was positive since more work was available and jobless persons could receive work that they might not get under normal circumstances, but on the other hand the poor execution affected recipients negatively.

Some places along the south and southwest coasts became popular with INGO's, and they were considered suitable locations to house staff and coordinate work. At tourist destinations, guesthouses, hotels and small businesses catered for aid workers, while tourism was low due to the disaster, and some places became centres for reconstruction activities. Organisations stayed on for anything from a few months up to periods of about three years.

In the Tharugama area the first few years after the disaster, some guest-houses were occupied by NGO personnel (most had few tourists). This was a much-needed income for the locals even though they were not seen as equally attractive guests as the tourists. A waiter at a popular guesthouse I regularly visited further up on the south west coast complained that, even though the 'NGO-people' had upheld his livelihood for some time, it was not to compare with a regular tourist season. Usually he depended on tips and the NGO-people tended not to tip in the way the tourists did. The extra money he normally earned during the tourist season supported him and his family for the monsoon months, when his workplace was closed and he had no income. He expressed frustration about the way the NGO-people went off each day to offer resources and help to other people, and he felt passed over by the massive aid flow. In his opinion he was affected by the tsunami even though his house was not destroyed. As he saw it, the NGO only went to the places where "many people died and where the houses were completely broken", but he lost a considerable part of his livelihood and considered himself as much entitled to get help as the people in the devastated villages close by. Similar frustrations were common, both among 'affected' and 'non-affected'; a sense of being the one who 'lost out' whilst seeing so many others being so much luckier. The large quantity of aid resources could not be missed; it was reported in papers and TV, talked about in the villages and highly visible on the many logoed vehicles. Aid personnel, delivered goods and reconstruction springing up along the coast affected. This period of rapid inflow of aid and organisations was, as has been mentioned before, often talked about as 'the second wave'.

Aid dependency and passivity are well known problems that have to be addressed by interveners. De Mel and Ruwanpura (2006), conclude that a milieu of dependency and paralysis was found in the tsunami aftermath, and aid hand-outs were not seldom seen as means of subsistence, even livelihood. They exemplify with an illustration from one of the villages they studied in which female informants, if they were not already in a socio-economic activity or benefiting from the philanthropic organisations, were passively awaiting their turn and opportunity to be rewarded. When they did not belong to the 'victim category', they mentioned their reliance upon other forms of goodwill and generosity by the philanthropic foundation. They described the tsunami as the 'golden tsunami' and pointed out that those with the right connections were most likely to benefit from aid flows and generosity. However, the un-

derlying expectation was that everybody would ultimately have a change of luck because of the foreign influx (de Mel and Ruwanpura 2006:19ff). This observation held true in Tharugama as well. It recalls widespread Asian notions of patron-client relations and ideals of a ‘benevolent king’ providing for his ‘subjects’, who reciprocate by offering their subordination and loyalty. This contrasts sharply with the ideals of egalitarian solidarity. ‘Dependency’, ‘passivity’ and the ‘taken for grantedness of receiving’ made sense in terms of local ideals, as will be elaborated and expanded in Chapter Five.

Still, there was a common image of people becoming lazy and spoiled by receiving too much attention from NGOs and foreign philanthropists, without making any efforts. During my fieldwork in Tharugama in 2008, in the ‘third wave’, most of the tsunami organisations were gone and many people were left with unfulfilled expectations. In conversations, small talk and interviews with villagers, frustrations were often expressed in a way that portrayed the ‘people who got a lot’ as not being truly deserving.

Imanie:

After the tsunami people got a sickness for money. When they see a foreigner they do everything they can to take the money from them. The mentality of the people have changed; it was not like this before the tsunami. Then there were no foreigners and no NGO’s. Then people managed anyway. With the tsunami all this came and people started to believe that the only way they can get houses, money, a better life is to follow the foreigners (*sudhan alawanawa*). This is now what is in their minds and they just sit and wait (*kammali alaskama*) for somebody to give them things. They are not doing the work themselves (080310 no.23).

Vandana:

People have forgotten the way they used to live. Some people are proud and think they are big people now. They are not working after the tsunami, they are waiting until other people come and give the things. They don’t want to work and stand up. They only want to sit and if somebody brings something they take it (080607 no.38).

Coupled with these accusations of passivity there was an image of plenty, that aid resources were almost endless. It was merely a matter of finding a way to tap them. But the “underlying expectation that everybody would in the end benefit” was changed over time to a more cynical view

in which there was still plenty of resources (held by foreigners and international organisations), but only a few would actually benefit (and those were not necessarily the ones most deserving, rather the ones most cunning). But as much as people talked about dependency and passivity, the opposite was also going on; people were actively seeking out new opportunities and working to understand new power relations, social structures and ways to access power and material resources.

### **New Relations and Opportunities: Victims, Vultures and Heroes**

With the arrival of foreigners in the village the ability to speak English became a great advantage enabling easier contact and possible assistance from foreign NGO's, and philanthropists. Before the disaster most knew as little about NGO's as about tsunamis. According to Imanie there were no NGO's at all in the village before the tsunami. During fieldwork I found that children in the village school talked about wanting to learn English properly so that they could communicate with NGO's (and tourists), and teachers used this argument as an incentive for children to study. People in the village with no English ability expressed frustration of not being able to convey their grievances and concerns and as being disadvantaged compared to those who could.

The increased presence of foreigners and the fact that many survivors had uninhabited beach land opened up for another kind of 'golden' opportunity. From the local point of view land on the beach side has traditionally been seen as less attractive and valuable compared to the jungle side close to the main road. The salt in the constant shower of sea spray during the monsoon makes corrosion ferocious and the land unfertile for most fruits, vegetables and flowers. Since I was living close to the sea during fieldwork, I had first hand experience and it was troublesome indeed; all electrical equipment had to be scrupulously protected and even my spectacles corroded.

On many occasions, I was asked to come and have a look at plots of land and houses and asked if I, or somebody I knew, would be interested in buying. Besides the sale of property to a foreigner bring a profitable affair to the local seller, the new, more or less temporary, residents add to the local economy in various minor ways. They employ builders,

cooks, cleaners, drivers and gardeners, and they use shops and other small businesses in the area. A few also, to different degrees, were involved in some kind of community welfare activities and/or supported needy friends, employees or neighbours.

I assumed that the influx of wealthy foreign neighbours would be resisted rather than welcomed because of the buying up of beach land and of restricted access to fishing, storage of boats and equipment that it implied. However, most people did not view this as a problem, as long as it did not interfere too much with fishing activities. On the contrary, the arrival of foreigners in the village was mostly greeted with indifference or welcomed as bringing new economic opportunities. If resentment was expressed it was more commonly directed towards ‘undeserving’ and ‘immoral’ locals, who breached local norms or were thought to be exploiting the new situation.

It needs to be noted that neither ‘foreigner’ nor ‘locals’ were homogeneous groups that behaved in certain ways. Foreigners encountered with holiday homes in the area varied a lot in how they engaged in the local community and how much time they spent there. It ranged from those who had taken on long term commitments to support families and community projects and saw themselves as part of the village to those who considered the place as primarily a temporary holiday retreat and had no intention to engage more than necessary with the locals. As mentioned earlier these new ‘villagers’, and tourists, temporary visitors and humanitarians (all lumped together as being *sudhu*, ‘white people’) were often seen as potential resources. To make contact and develop a relationship with a foreigner could be seen as a form of security measure for the future, and villagers had various attitudes and expectations towards them. Some would for example highlight friendship and curiosity (about getting to know people from another culture), while others pursued relations explicitly aiming for financial or material gain, and of course cases of everything in between.

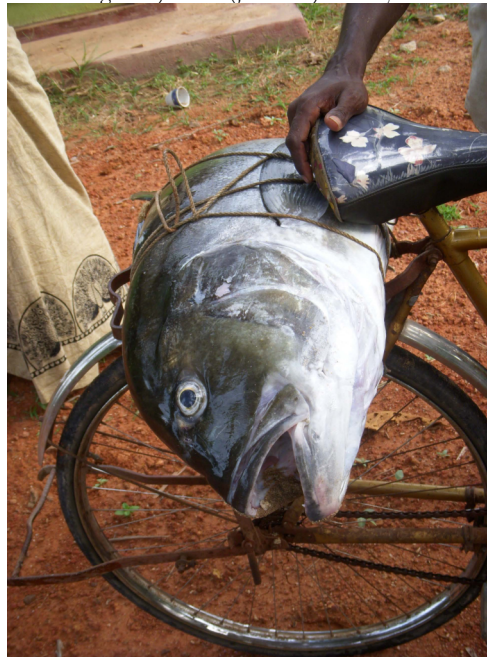
A phrase used by villagers was to ‘chase foreigners’, (*sudhan alawanawa*), which more literally means to ‘attract/allure the white people’. This implied an attitude towards foreigners that explicitly meant ‘going after their money’, an activity/behaviour that allegedly increased after the tsunami. A Buddhist code of conduct and ‘good manners’ was, according to informants, what kept people from pursuing these kinds of en-

deavours. With the increase of opportunities and more and more people trying their luck, this way these tacit ethics seemed to have lost hold and rendered 'chasing' more widespread and uncontroversial. A few expressed the opinion that to not take advantage of these opportunities would be stupid and insisted that "since foreigners are rich and we are poor it is okay to take their money", and "anyhow they are not from here and will return to their countries and never find out about it". The flood of aid exerted pressure upon local moralities, at least temporarily, and people found themselves struggling to reposition themselves and others in terms of shifting values.

### **Livelihood (in)Security in Tharugama**

In Tharugama the majority were engaged in fishing related activities before the tsunami. The disaster had radically disruptive effects on this sector but, during my fieldwork in 2008, the most common occupations were still in fishing related activities. Besides fishing, the coir industry and lime production provided many people with work opportunities before the disaster but this somewhat declined afterwards. Various types of everyday services were, and still are, provided in the village by a number of carpenters, electricians, tailors, traditional healers and shop owners offering basic food and retail items. There are a few governmentally employed (e.g. teachers, police officers and soldiers) but not in any significant number, and the tsunami did not change this. Still, many people have, as will be shown in this chapter, chosen or been forced to look for new means of livelihood or have to deal with new problems in their trades, temporarily but also permanently. The shortage of job opportunities and the demand for long-term sustainable and locally suitable ways of making a living were a major local concern.

As in the case of housing the recovery agenda for livelihoods was built on particular value systems that were not always attuned to the local context. It forged new differentials and to some extent set up a field for opportunism, greed and conflicts that challenged local norms. Furthermore, fundamental relations with the environment, on which humans depend, were knocked out of balance by the flood of gifts, in this case boats and fishing equipment.

Figure 3) *Paraw* (jack fish) on bicycle

*Recovery of Fishing and the Morality of Exchange with the Sea*

Crosby (2008: 66) notes that the tsunami was seen in rural Sri Lanka not as an impartial and random act of nature but as a response to “the moral decay either of a particular group, of the country’s leaders or of the world as a whole”. This rationale of understanding natural phenomena as the responses of nature to the moral behaviour of mankind is widespread in Asia. It is also noted by Schlehe (2010:115) in the case of the tsunami in Indonesia; all the so called ‘ills of modernity’, associated with Westernisation in the local scheme of thought, were seen as a threat to Javanese cultural heritage and values and cited as causing the natural disaster. The disaster was interpreted as intending to show the Javanese people that they have to return to traditional rules, language and custom, to make offerings to the spirits of Java and to stop destroying nature (Schlehe 2010:115).

When misfortune strikes, a natural explanation may be accepted as the cause, but among Sri Lankan villagers, reasons will also be sought<sup>48</sup>, and often found in disordered relationships between man and nature, man and man or man and non-human beings such as spirits and demons. This links into the Sinhalese idea of multiple explanations of misfortune introduced in the previous chapter with reference to Obeyesekere (1981:107). Misfortune could be interpreted as a breakdown of harmonious giving-taking relations between various actors in the cosmological scheme. The specific causal theory rests in the larger one and is ultimately encapsulated by the most general causal theory of *karma dosa*.

In Tharugama, I found multiple, mutually compatible explanations that referred to moral order. While villagers were aware of the physical cause of the tsunami, they also gave various kinds of co-existing reasons that did not have to do with the sea *per se* but with the relationship between humanity and nature and with the deterioration of norms and values in Sri Lankan culture. The sea was understood as both benevolent and life-giving but also powerful and dangerous, and which of these she manifested depended upon the way in which mankind cultivated his relationship to her. A middle-aged fisherman, Arjunath, who was no longer able to fish due to an accident at sea, reflected:

Our people forget the past. That is the problem. If they don't break the coral there is no problem with the sea. The coral also saved us during the tsunami, it broke the waves before they hit the land. For 3 or 4 months after the tsunami all the people stopped doing *bad* things to the sea but then they started again (080530 no.40).

Fishermen often referred to the sea as a mother or a father who should be treated with the gratitude and respect due to elders who give and protect. For some, particularly men who were skilled in seafaring, even the terror of the tsunami could not break this intimate relationship and familiarity. Like a child who understands the wrath of a parent whom he has wronged, Gamini, who had lived close to the sea all his life, explained to me that he had immediately understood that something was wrong when the tsunami was approaching because of the sound of the

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<sup>48</sup> This is common in many parts of the world; cf. Evans-Pritchard's (1937) classical study of witchcraft accusations among the Azande.



ocean. Well before he saw the waves, the unfamiliar roar had alerted him and he was consequently able to take his family to a safe location in time.

I was on my way home to my house along the beach when I reacted to a sound. It was like trumpet blasts from an angry elephant herd. I am a fisherman and I have heard the sounds of the sea since childhood and I never heard anything like this!

His bond with the sea persisted despite the terrible ferocity of the tsunami and instead of blaming the sea for her cruelty, he appeals to *karma* as the ultimate explanatory model for understanding any misfortune the sea may cause him:

Still after what happened I am not angry at the sea or afraid of it. Before in my life me and my family were poor. It was like we were down on the floor, but the sea gave me opportunity to work and put away some money and because of that I am now up on the bed. We had a good relation with the sea before the tsunami and we will have a good relation again .... Only three days after the tsunami I slept in the house by the sea, I was not afraid. You can't escape *karma* what happens will happen, this is life (050602 no.9.2).

Even when describing his decompression accident in 2000, Arjunath stresses the life-giving and therapeutic powers inherent in nature and the moral charge in mankind's relationship to the environment,

I stayed in the old broken house by the sea for six months until the villagers came and took me away. They told me they did not want to be responsible for me in case another tsunami come. But I do want to stay there. I love the sea. It is my mother and father. I believe the sea saved me when I had the accident, I could not move my body, I was in a bad condition but still the sea did not take me down. I floated paralysed on the surface and I kept my eyes on the temple in *Kirinda* (coastal town famous for its temple), I kept looking at the *Bodhie* (Bo tree) there. Every time I am close to the sea today I pray to it and I pray at the *Bodhie* as well, but these days I can't go often. I would like to go more often to the sea but it is too difficult for me. I believe that if I swim a lot I will become better. The only medicine for me is the sea (090409 no.2.3).

Arjunath was, understandably, ambivalent about the new house he received at Lokuwatte after the tsunami; he was grateful for the generosity

yet extremely reticent to leave his old and now damaged house by the sea. The donors' gift of security would remove him from the element and relationship from which he and his family had received so much. However, while the people of Tharugama have long enjoyed the gift of life and livelihood from the sea, the sea may also withhold her gifts or even take the lives of human beings when relationships are disordered and harmony threatened. Arjunath explained

When I was a small boy there were no boats in Tharugama, people did fishing with the *pitte* (rod) from the shores or from the stilts<sup>49</sup> and there were plenty of *bollo*. There were two great areas for fishing in Tharugama and people caught mountains of *bollo* there. They even achieved a record and people came to take pictures. In 1977 they stopped this kind of fishing since somebody had made *yantare mantare* (black magic) that caused all the fish to vanish (090409 no.2.3).

In the wake of the tsunami disaster the relationship between the villagers and the sea is indeed shifting. Although most Tharugama villagers continued to fish or work in fishing-related activities, much about their relationship to the sea changed as new ways of fashioning security arrived. For the fishermen, proximity to the sea had formerly been fundamental for their livelihoods and the sandy strip between the sea and the main road had been home to many fisher families, particularly those who kept their *oruwe* (traditional non-motorised boat) close by or who fished only with the *pitte* (fishing rod made from branches of the *kittul* palm tree). Living close to the sea enabled them to keep their equipment close by and protected and to observe the weather conditions closely and decide when and where to go out for fish. Relocation further inland, after the introduction of the no-build buffer zone, has profoundly affected this.

In the reservation area in Podiwatte all the families were engaged in fishing before the tsunami. Now most of us got moved here, to Lokuwatte, a

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<sup>49</sup> Stilt fishing is carried out by sitting on a cross bar tied to a pole planted on the bottom of the reef close to the shore. It is a common picture-postcard image of Sri Lanka and popularly displayed for tourists, but here it is for subsistence. This technique is used mainly for catching the valuable *bollo*, which is a small seasonal type of mackerel (*selar crumenophthalmus*). Other types of local fish are e.g. *koraburruwa* (spotted herring), *burullu* (spotted sardinella), *paraw* (jack), *thora* (seer), *gal issa* (lobsters), *kelavalla* (yellow finned tuna) and *attaya* (sea cucumbers)

few went to other places further away. Almost all people are *karama* (fishing caste) but now many have stopped fishing. Some have gone abroad to work (*rate yanneva*), some go to work in garment factories and some are taking day jobs (*kam kari*). Most of them earn less than they did on fishing but there are less fish now. There is also the monsoon season and for six months (May – October) we can't fish. During that time there is no income, it is not good, so they look for other jobs. Before this was not a problem because there were plenty of fish and during the monsoon, they could live off the earnings from the good season. The cost of living is also higher now. Fishing has definitely gone down here (090409 no.2.3).

Relocation was one of many factors that had an impact upon the villagers' relationship to the sea. They continued working with selling fish, loading boats and trucks at the harbours, diving for shellfish, ornamental fish and shells, but not to the same extent and in the same way. Most of the local fishermen fished on small-scale using rods (*pitte*) from the shores or the traditional *oruwe* while others found employment on larger vessels at nearby harbours. Selling took place on foot or by bicycle, locally rather than purchasing larger quantities for sale at more distant markets. However, at the time of my fieldwork, the village shores and close-by open waters were no longer reliable for fishing because, the locals told me, overfishing, coral mining and the use of dynamite had depleted fish stocks and made it difficult to catch enough to sustain a reasonable livelihood. Before the tsunami there were about 6 motorboats and 17 *oruwe* in Tharugama, as told by villagers, but when I was there, there were more than 20 motorboats and 30 *oruwe* using the small village beaches as their base. In the neighbouring village of Polkanda, the number of *oruwe* boats more than doubled after the tsunami to about 100, and this, I was told, accounted for the abandonment of the stilts from which they had formerly fished. The irony of the donors' well-intended generosity in giving boats to the villagers was captured by Arjunath's observation.

Now even the people who don't go to sea have an *oruwe*. There are even boats growing in the gardens! They just lie there and get overgrown by grass and bushes. I think there are about 30 more *oruwe* in use in Tharugama now. Some have sold theirs or just keep them in their yard.

However, changes had begun well before the tsunami. Traditionally, stilt fishing was the technique of choice for catching the valuable *bollo*, a small seasonal type of mackerel, and this is still practised in Polkanda but in

Tharugama this had apparently ended after the fish suddenly stopped coming into the bays in the 1970s. Arjunath told me:

First we had the *oruwe* and then more and more people got an *oruwe* and then some began to buy *podu botuwe* (small boat with an outboard engine). After the *bollo* disappeared they started to catch *malu pettau* (ornamental fish) to sell abroad. The motorboats came to catch *malu pettau*. This began in the 1970s in Tharugama and in the 1990s in Polkanda. In Polkanda they still have *bollo*. In their bay the people protect the fishing environment and they don't use nets. In Tharugama they are using *dyna* (dynamite) and it destroys the place. The small stones and coral are important for the small fish and the fish eggs. Before you could easily catch the small colour fish close to the beach but because of the *dyna* and breaking the coral (*gal kadilla*) they are gone and now you have to go far out to find them, you need a motorboat for this (090409 no.2.3).

The sea was evidently withholding her generosity in response to changes that may have been greatly accelerated by the post-disaster wave of aid, but which had already begun taking place in the local moral economy well before the tsunami. Despite formalised efforts to prevent the destruction of the sea and the local marine ecosystem, many are aware that it is ultimately the moral integrity of mankind and the harmony of his relationships that are decisive for the environment. Although Arjunath noted that just after the tsunami, people stopped behaving 'badly' towards the sea, as if they recognised that their behaviour had provoked the disaster, he also remarked that they soon began again.

*Gal kadilla* has been going on since the 1970s, and it is illegal now. There used to be a man who informed the police about it, to stop people from breaking the coral, but he died. Now people do it all the time. I believe that people do it because they have financial problems. One bag of coral pays about 125 rupees, 3 or 4 bags are enough to feed a family for one day, but also I think it's because they are stupid. In Tharugama they kill a lot of *param* (jack fish) when it is too small. If they let the *param* grow and become big many families could live from fishing here. If the place is protected and the fish grow people don't have to go far away to work, they could stay here, catch the fish and live. I think there should be meetings about this and maybe the navy could do something. But even if we had meetings and tried to explain, some people would agree and others would object, and there would be fights (090409 no.2.3).

Poverty, competition and modern techniques are all given a role in the erosion of local harmony between communities, and between people and the environment, and in the rapidity with which these changes take place. Arjunath describes how this exponential rate of change has an impact upon relations between the neighbouring communities of Tharugama and Polkanda.

There was a big fight between Tharugama fishermen and Polkanda fishermen, still it can break out from time to time. The Polkanda people don't like that they put *dyna* and nets in Tharugama because it affects the *bollo* in their bay negatively and disturbs their fishing. But when they put *dyna* in Tharugama, the Polkanda people come and take the dead fish floating around. They come from other places as well. There are no fights about this. The people who put *dyna* know it is prohibited and when people come to take some fish they let them take it. They don't want somebody to send for the police, then they can get fines and the police will take their catch. Many people are angry but they are afraid to go to the police. I think there are more *dyna* being used these days than before the tsunami. Before people only took the coral that was already dead, now they take all. They go far out and put the *dyna* and break the corals (090409 no.2.3).

Traditionally, local groups controlled fishing rights and management, and there was formerly a culture of mutual assistance and obligation between distinct fishing village communities (De Silva & Yamao 2007:388-89). Each fishing village had its own 'village identity' and their fishing activities were separated from those of others (Amarasinghe 2003). However, the division between Tharugama and Polkanda and the tacit norms and agreements over borders and conduct in terms of fishing have clearly become blurred, and the mores by which exchange between the groups was formerly governed appears to have been replaced by tension and distress on both sides. Lahiro, a middle-aged fisherman from Polkanda told me:

When I was young I took the *pitte* and went out to try and catch fish, I liked it so I continued and my father taught me how to use the *oruwe*. But I don't want my son to do it. It is tough work. For six months during the monsoon (*warakam kaliye*) I can't fish and we suffer. Fishing has changed a lot since I started. Everyday now there is a new fisherman, so there are less fish. There are more people and less fish. When I started in 1985 there were about 20 *oruwe*, now there are over 100. I think maybe the amount of fish is the same but there are many more people. If there are

100 one year the next there will be 200. This year when there was a lot of *bollo*, 20 new boys were fishing here. They were all from the village so we can't tell them to stop, and even if outside people would come we can't stop them. We scold them when they make mistakes and disturb us but that is all. Everybody is hungry so we just allow them to fish.

During the *warakam kaliye* we buy on credit in the shop, borrow money and we sell our gold. Some break the coral during this time and sell it, but the police might catch them. I can't run fast so I am afraid I will be caught. The police are giving us a lot of problems. I don't have money so what can I do, I can't go and steal and rob people can I, so I break the coral. But we will not use the net, that is prohibited here. If somebody does that, there will be a big fight. In Tharugama they use the *dyna* and the nets, then only a few families can live from fishing, but here with the *orume* and *pitte* 100 families can live. If you put *dyna* in the shallows close to land it is bad, if you put it far out it is not that bad. We are angry with the Tharugama people for destroying for us, they catch a lot of fish. When the police come it is too late. A person from Polkanda went to the Tharugama side after they put *dyna*. He only took two dead fish home to eat but the police caught him. Now he has to go to court for that, and he is in big trouble. He did not put *dyna* like the Tharugama people, but he got caught. When we go there to get fish after they put *dyna*, it is only for eating, not for selling. We are angry with the people who put the *dyna* but the fish is dead anyway and floating there, so we take it home to eat. If we take many dead fish we have to give half to the Tharugama people or else there might be trouble. (080709 no.3.1).

The above description contains many elements common to the stories told by other villagers. Particularly among the middle-aged and older, there is a prevalent sense of ongoing loss and change that began before the tsunami but that has been intensified in its aftermath. Although population pressure and the new norms, values and desires of competitive individualism and a monetarized market economy may have started to make themselves felt in the village some forty years ago, the older villagers often commented on how people were less concerned about money when they were young than people are today, even if they were poor. They recalled being able to exchange items and services within the village without involving money, and they maintained that people were more content with what they had since they were unaware of the many needs that are now being advertised as essential for a good life. Today, people in Tharugama are increasingly dependent on money for their living and, like the fish, it is a resource that is often in short supply. The

gift of aid, in the form of massive material support to the fishing sector, interfered with local reciprocal relations between humans and the sea, between colleagues and between neighbouring communities. The human/nature relation is also epitomized in the causal explanation of the disaster as contingent upon abuse of this implicit contract.

### *Ravaging the Reef - Balancing Security and Morality*

The potentially dangerous crossing of moral boundaries and the exploitation of nature in order to secure a viable income are at play when using dynamite for fishing and when mining coral reefs for making building material. People get drawn into new structures, networks and practices that effect norms and values, as new opportunities as well as uncertainties present themselves – largely, but not exclusively, because of the three waves.

The house we rented during fieldwork was situated on the verge of a bay bordering on fishing areas for the two villages of Polkanda and Tharugama. On several occasions I heard explosions from the Tharugama side and saw Polkanda people running to fetch “*dyna* fish”, and returning they often carried a few sacks. *Dyna* fish had a reputation of not being as good and healthy as fish caught in the ‘normal’ way, and was therefore avoided if possible. According to villagers the use of *dyna* was most common during the monsoon, when fish were scarce in the bay and strong waves made it impossible to go outside the reefs (this was what Lahiro explained above). It was also during this time that people took coral from the reef and it was often done openly during daytime. The coral was put in sacks and stored by the beach, covered with palm tree branches. At night a truck came, loaded the sacks and transported them to buyers and lime mills.

During my fieldwork, one incident with the police and local fishermen occurred. They came and tried to catch a man suspected of illegal coral mining, and chased him on the beach. The man escaped by hiding in a cave though. This was the only occasion when I saw the police, but I heard of several instances of police showing up in Tharugama trying to arrest people for illegal activities at sea. Many people expressed great worry and were upset about the local *dyna* fishing and the breaking of coral reefs, but they were reluctant to interfere. Generally people were

cautious in relations outside their immediate family and avoided open conflict. The unspoken norm seemed to be not to intervene in other people's business. Even though most people knew exactly what was going on in the area illegal activities<sup>50</sup> were rarely reported to the police or other authorities. Informants' assumptions about this tendency to keep quiet, I was told, involved fear of upsetting delicate relations. To interfere might cause problems and jeopardise vital social, economic and political relations, and even put one at physical risk. Rumours and gossip abounded with violent stories of retribution. Furthermore, to inform the authorities was seen as largely futile, since they were considered biased, corrupted, inefficient or plainly disinterested. However, I also found some amount of understanding, as Lahiro expressed earlier, for people pursuing illegal means of livelihood when lacking other ways of income. When poverty and children to feed were part of the picture, it could be seen as justified. Moral judgement depended on the situation and the intent of the actor. If it was purely for adding wealth and personal gain, it was likely to be considered as bad and immoral. For as much as people bemoan dynamite fishing and breaking of the coral reefs, many still do so to sustain an income and are glad to be able to make a buck and get ahead in the new system of values.

The distribution of boats after the tsunami was, along with building new houses, attractive to donors, because it was a concrete way to restore lives but also because of the possibility to show fast and tangible results at home. The vast majority of the fishermen I discussed this with were of the opinion that fishing related aid flooded local communities and was perceived as randomly executed without consideration of local conditions and needs neither before nor after the tsunami. The traditional *oruwe* boat is well fit for local conditions, to handle the rough waves, and the shape of the canoe, with a swelling at the base and a narrow top, makes room for water as a stabiliser and as storage for the fish.<sup>51</sup> *Oruwes* in the same colour as European flags or with names and emblems giving

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<sup>50</sup> This not only pertained activities at sea but e.g. brewing and selling alcohol, drugs and crimes like rape and incest.

<sup>51</sup> The larger motorised, *maba oruwe* travels farther out, stays out longer periods of time and has a larger crew. The small versions are suitable for one or maximum two persons and not for long journeys.



credit to particular donors in the North, are common sights in local bays as well as on land. As proposed by Benthall (2008) and Korf et al. (2010), this signifies a commodification of the tsunami gift and the importance of making benevolence visible in order to keep funds pouring into the disaster aid cycle. Locals understood and went along with this kind of 'advertising', also as a way of showing gratitude. A similar discourse of reciprocity between benefactor/beneficiaries exists in Sri Lankan politics as may be seen in the common media representation of a generous politician handing gifts to a grateful recipient at inauguration ceremonies for new dams, roads, hospitals and so on.

A major concern was that the distribution has been unfair and that some got more than one boat while eligible fishermen received none. In some cases people who were not even fishing at all before the disaster received new boats. Besides the unequal allocation, the quality of boats and equipment varied. Some of the unused boats lying around were apparently not built in a proper way and not functional at sea. Other examples were equipment (e.g. engines) that would be too difficult and expensive to repair and unfamiliar types of nets that endangered long-term sustainability and were unfit for the type of fish or fishing at a particular place.

At the same time the massive provision of boats provided people with fast recovery of livelihood (sometimes only in the short run though) and in a better situation (e.g. compared to fishing from the shores without a boat). However, heated anger, deep disappointment and intense frustration on the subject of fishing aid made a familiar picture. I did not come across a single fisherman who was content with the outcome of aid, even if he got a new boat, and even several boats. That a great amount of resources and money had been wasted in this sector, on overlapping and unsuitable equipment, was locally agreed upon. It was furthermore clear that relations and regulations related to fishing, developed over generations, suddenly got disturbed, not only creating anxiety and confusion but also aggravating exploitation and competition over resources in near shore fishing waters.

Lahiro, from before, had some thoughts about this.

My family has been fishermen for generations and I have been fishing all my life, but I did not get a boat after the tsunami. I went to several NGO's and I presented them with letters but it did not help. Some of

them promised to give me a boat but it was false promises. All the boats you see here in the bay are new boats. One Sri Lankan employed by a European NGO came and told me to give him 5,000 rupees and then he would get me a boat, but I did not have 5,000 rupees to give. One person here got 3 boats. People took boats from many different places and the people did not check if they already had boats. Some have sold their extra boats and some keep them. A political party also gave out boats but only to their supporters. But I got some help from a villager, he gave me some money to repair my boat. I took the money but it was anyway not enough to mend the boat. In the end I had to buy a boat for 25,000 rupees. There were 5 persons here that did not get any boats. I don't know why. There are 100 oruwes in the bay now. There are too many *mudelalis* (fish mongers) and fishermen now, so this is a big change. I am not changed, I am working in the same way as before. In the closest village with a harbour, a lot of new big engine boats were given, I think 20. One boat like that is worth 80 *lak* (800,000 rupees). I know a family that got two new boats, so they are lucky (080709 no.3.1).

Stirrat (2006) writes that the Sri Lankan department of Fisheries and the FAO (UN Food and Agriculture Organisation) were in charge of rehabilitation of the fisheries sector and pushed for a restructuring of this sector that was seen as employing too many fishermen that were over-fishing the inshore waters. This policy was, however, rejected by relief agencies, and a few months after the tsunami there were probably more fishing boats in operation off the south west coast than before the tsunami (Stirrat 2006:16). In the Tharugama area this was undoubtedly the case, as Arjunath and Lahiro described above. Furthermore, the gift of boats not only affects local relations, practices and values regarding work and income generation, but also with the way locals perceive and express relations with the sea.

### *Protection and Good Luck in Fishing – Relations of Dependency*

As when making homes out of houses, as seen in the previous chapter, it is not only physical and material aspects that matter also when it comes to boats and fishing. The Sinhalese rural society is knitted into relationships not only with other people or with material objects but also with the environment. Human activity is framed by the relationship with environmental and cosmological powers, as seen both in the case of household and in fishing, which also is associated with ritual activity designed

to order relationships/harness powers and thus ensure safety and wellbeing. Kapferer (1991) describes how human beings occupy a position between deities on the one hand and demons and ghosts on the other, and the Sinhalese often refer to the cosmological system as being ordered into three 'worlds'; the world of deities (*deva loka*), the world of human beings (*minis loka*) and the world of demons (*yaksa loka*). These various worlds represent different levels of phenomenal existence, which, while separate, nonetheless interpenetrate. The principle of hierarchy is central to the order of Sinhalese cosmic totality in relations of beings ranked within and between the various levels. Rank is then linked to morality and purity/pollution, and to the extent to which various beings are perceived of as following the Buddha's teaching or given to the dominance of nature disordered in their being and action (Kapferer 1991:159 [1983]).

Jayaranga brought up the importance of turning to the non-human realm for successful fishing.

The old generation prayed to the sea and made special rituals to get good catches. In Bathgama (another village) they are Christians and they pray to Jesus for fish, and they have a lot of fish there. In the old days when there was no fish people brought an *edure* (exorcist/demon charmer), and in Polkanda I think they still do it sometimes.

Even if the old ways of fishing activities associated with bringing harmony and security by attending to the needs and requirements of the non-human realm are weakened, they are not abandoned and insignificant. When a new boat is taken on its virgin expedition it is done with joy and concern to give it the best start possible. Hence symbolic protection and particular rituals bestow luck, making visible the important interplay between moral and cultural beliefs and economic activities. I was told that donated boats were not always inaugurated in this way since so many were given within a relatively short period of time. But in comparison with new houses much less ritual activity is involved, so it was not that problematic to maintain a basic level of local tradition.

A stormy day at the end of the monsoon a new boat was to be inaugurated at the beach where we lived. We received news of the calculated auspicious time and set off in wind and rain to observe the occasion taking place close to our home. The boat owner, its future crew and some local fishermen were present. At the outset incense and strings

with lime and chilli were attached to the boat, a measure to advert *as vaha* (evil eye). A new boat could incite jealousy and to ward off potentially malevolent gazes of ill-willing people, this precaution was taken. In addition, the boat was purified with smoke before being launched at the predetermined auspicious time. Earlier that morning the owner of the boat had served a meal of milk rice to the boat crew, their families and to neighbours and friends in the area<sup>52</sup>. By giving generously this supposedly rubbed off in terms of generating good luck and abundant catches when out at sea.

When the boat finally took off the engine gave them problems. The crowd gathered on the beach watched the boat at a distance, struggling in the waves to stay clear of the reefs. There was something wrong with the engine and they could not get it to run properly. To turn around and return to shore was not an option since the auspicious moment would be lost. To me it looked dangerous since they had to go beyond the reefs out on open water to get any fish. With an untrustworthy engine and rough weather this seemed like a risky venture. The boat circled the bay inside the reef for some time, restarting the engine over and over again. Finally they set out beyond the reef and later returned safely. The importance of ritual preparations for protecting people from the inevitable dangers at sea, for ensuring its generosity and from the risk of giving rise to ill-willing envious gazes are brought out in the above vignette.

However, as Lahiro commented earlier, magic and rituals surrounding the sea and fishing have declined. Reciprocity between the human and non-human realm is one way of trying to get good catches and to call on protection from accidents. In the area it is common to make a *bara* (vow) to a god/goddess. In exchange for a good catch or safe return, a promise is made of an explicitly stipulated offering, e.g. a certain number of oil lamps, incense sticks, to give a *binganante dana* (almsgiving to poor people/beggars) in the name of the god. This would be a form of balanced reciprocity, i.e. one gives and expects a specified fair, tangible return. If

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<sup>52</sup> They called this *kiri dana*. This was confusing given the well-known *kiri amma dana* (almsgiving to seven milkmothers) used to guard against diseases and various kinds of evil influence in which the goddess Pattini has a central role. I tried to get more information about the *kiri dana* associated with the inauguration of boats but unfortunately my material is limited on this point, I was told that it had nothing to do with Pattini or any other gods.

the ‘contract’ is broken, in terms of not reciprocating a good catch with the promised response, a ‘negative’ return is to be expected (in the form of bad luck, sudden misfortune, illness and the sort).

To the fishermen, the temples in *Kirinda* and *Dondra* were recognized places to go to, but people also made this kind of vows at the *Gambara Bodhie* in the village. Fishermen’s wives often go to pray and ask for protection and safe return for their husbands. Dilini is 29 years old and lives in the Lokuwatte project. While awaiting her husbands return from the sea she said:

I am worried. My husband has been away for over a month. I got news from the harbour that the boat he works on can’t come to land because of strong winds. I also heard that they lost their nets. I am worried and now we don’t have any food in the house (they have four children). When he went away he only gave me 600 rupees for us to live on. Now my mother has to support me. I have become a beggar and I feel ashamed. I don’t have milk for the children and they are not going to school. When I have problems I go to the *Gambara Bodhie* not to the *Pansala* (temple). The *Gambara Bodhie* is a good place. I go there when my children are sick and when my husband is at sea. I went there the other week and after that I received the news of my husband’s situation and heard that he is all right. But still they have not come ashore (080516 no.2.7).

The Buddha, most fishermen maintained, is not considered appropriate to turn to about fishing, since it involves killing but in practice people did (not for luck, mainly for protection). This highlights an ambiguity regarding the polluting propensities of fishing. In Tharugama and Polkanda people do not fish during *poya* (the Buddhist holy day), but many restrictions related to Buddhism have been relaxed or disregarded over time. The older generation told me that in their days there were many more days that prohibited fishing on religious grounds<sup>53</sup>. I did hear people say that the reason behind fishermen being those most severely af-

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<sup>53</sup> Another effect of the tsunami was that no eggs were sold in local shops during *poya* since it was considered opposed to Buddhist ethics. Before the tsunami this was not a big issue. I was told that this lasted for some time, then people went to Muslim shops for eggs and then again they started to be sold everywhere, this underscores the dynamic interplay of moral and cultural beliefs and economic activities.

ected by the tsunami was related to the fact that they were taking lives. I rarely heard fishermen themselves support this opinion though and over all it was a subject rather left untouched. The moral dilemmas born out of this were not easily resolved. Fishing is certainly considered as a somewhat polluting or morally tainting business, and *Kali* is the special goddess for the fishermen, known for her blood thirst and often depicted with a string of skulls around her neck. In a discussion on *gini pagene* (fire walking) with a fisherman at a religious festival, he said that he could probably not do it since he has been fishing (i.e. killing) all his life. He considered himself unclean and unfit for the trial of walking on fire. To be able to succeed, he claimed, you would have to live a pure life with meditation and vegetarian food, he said. Gombrich and Obeyesekere note that in Sinhalese Buddhist understanding;

The universe is a moral hierarchy: power, comfort, and longevity all increase as one ascends the universe, an ascent that is itself the result of virtue. All however, are irrelevant to salvation, for that is something which no being has the power to grant or withhold. If a god favours you or a demon punishes you, it is only what you deserved (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988:17-18).

When, Omila, one of the local priestesses (*māniyo*) got her *waram* (warrant /boon from the gods) and started to work as a *māniyo*, she could not stand the smell of fish. She became sick and fish made her vomit and gave her rashes. Any type of meat was bad for her, and she and her family moved inland, away from the fishing community where she set up a private shrine. She firmly believed that her husband's fishing was really bad for her and asked him to give it up, but he did not want to stop for lack of alternative means of income (080418 no.1.10). The descriptions above about the morals and mores of fishing capture that ideas and ideals, in which notions of purity and pollution, risk and security, the individual and the collective, and relations to the cosmic whole have to be taken into account in the minute decisions of everyday life.

#### *Altered Local Material Conditions - New Moral Concerns*

Another natural resource that has played an important role in the area in terms of livelihood is coral, which is used for the production of lime. Sri Lanka has a long history of use and production of lime, and coral mining on the living reef is an old activity, especially on the southern coasts.

Besides mining on the reefs, fossil deposits further inland are also used. For centuries the mined and processed corals have been used for building houses, temples, tombstones and parapet walls (Terney P.B et al. 2005).

Beside the raw material being rapidly exhausted in most areas, there is also a shortage of fuel wood, which is needed in large quantities in the kilns. The state has banned the mining of coral within 300 meters inland from the high water mark and for a distance of 2 kilometres of shore, due to severe coastal erosion. There are also a number of restricting rules about the transport of fuel wood, due to rapid deforestation all over the island. These scarcities have resulted in increases in the price of lime (Practical Action 2008).

In a study on the condition of the coral reef and coral mining activity in Polkanda from 2004, before the tsunami, one bag of mined coral was sold at the mining site for 45 rupees, and at the limekiln for 75 rupees (Terney P.B et al. 2005: 237). Compared to what Lahiro stated earlier, a considerable increase in profits has occurred. The same study concludes that miners were predominantly young, early school leavers within the age of 15 to 30 years. Most of them were ornamental fish collectors or rod and line fishers, who switched to mining activities during the monsoon (May-October) when the sea is rough (Terney P.B et al. 2005).

I did not have the possibility to get any definite statistics on mining activities during fieldwork, but the study from 2004 was conducted at a reef close by where I could make regular observations. I did not make systematic counts of bags or people involved, but my impression was that coral mining has decreased on this particular reef (compared to the 2004 study). Villagers assumed that it was because of more vigilant policing together with changed attitudes towards coral mining, that this has become more negative after the tsunami. But, this has not stopped or lessened the use of *dyna* in Tharugama, on the contrary, the common understanding was that the use increased there. It is clear from what the locals say that they perceive the reef to have a protective and nurturing role but that economic pressure (rather than ignorance) is the reason proffered to explain the ongoing destruction.

According to villagers, illegal mining and burning of coral were still going on in Tharugama, because of the work shortage during the monsoon. It

was a relatively profitable activity and sometimes the only option available to sustain a family. In a mud house at the outskirts of the Lokuwatte settlement Jayaranga lived with his family. He is in his 50-ties and worked as a *kam karo* (day labourer) at that time, but he used to do coral mining on the reef before the tsunami.

Jayaranga;

I have a big family, six daughters and three sons, but I have always managed to feed them. Now five daughters are married and live with their husbands' families but when I cared for them I had money because I used to break the corals (*gal kadilla*). After the tsunami I stopped to break the corals since many people said that it was the reason why the tsunami hit us so badly. These days I also think that it is bad to do it. I believe that at the places where we have taken away the coral the waves came stronger. It is also *pau* (a sin/misdeed) because the small fish lose their home. But still some people in Tharugama continue doing it, some do it at night. In Tharugama before the tsunami there were 31 places to burn the coral, today there are only 5 left.

When you take the coral you use a crow bar or iron rods to break it and put the coral in baskets and carry ashore. It is easy. At the burning place they have a kiln, first the coral becomes red, then white. When it is ready they take the powder and bag it. The leftovers they use for fertilising potatoes. One bag of powder is the amount of four *pol tel* bottles (coconut oil) and for one bag of powder you will get 100 rupees. One man can collect 20 bags of coral in half a day so he can earn 2,000 rupees. Even though we can only stay in the water for half a day we can still make a lot of money. The people who used to break the corals and work in the kilns before the tsunami have other kinds of work now. Some got an *oruve* and do fishing; others are going as day labourers. They all have other work. After the tsunami I also got a job with a foreign NGO. I built toilets and temporary shelters. I did that for 1 year and 8 months but now they have all left (080714 no.2.13).

Earning 2,000 rupees for half a day's work was a good income (the average wage for a day labourer was about 600 rupees/day<sup>54</sup>). Jayaranga not

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<sup>54</sup> The average income per month at the time of field work for a local fisherman would be in the area of 10,000 rupees, but varies between types of fishing, whether the person owns a boat or hires one, and whether they are employed at bigger boats that are out for weeks at a time. This can be Footnote continued on next page



being able to do coral mining entailed a considerable loss of earnings, but attitudes towards coral mining changed in the wake of the disaster and this caused the industry to decline. Together, social, moral and economic changes generated by the tsunami and the disaster aid forced him to find alternative means of livelihood, which he also did for some time.

Jayaranga's story captures the problems of making a living in a world of limits and it highlights how the tsunami, by destroying nature and unsettling social, economic and moral configurations, also altered income generating practices on the whole. The mining of coral reefs was stopped because of recognition of the reef's protective function, and because it was seen as having contributed to the disaster in the first place. The reeconomy also offered new, often temporary, jobs that would not have existed under 'normal' circumstances. These were largely within male domains but to some extent also for women.

### *Women and Livelihood: Reinforcing Tradition*

In a report by SIDA (The Swedish International Development Agency) from 2009 on the links between relief, rehabilitation and development after the tsunami it is noted, that, in the case of Sri Lanka, "livelihood interventions have focused heavily on asset replacement in the fisheries sector, while other occupations, particularly those in which women predominate, have received substantially less attention" (SIDA 2009:68).

I found similar patterns in Tharugama that livelihood support was primarily targeting men, while projects focused on women often reinforced gender differences in terms of economic activities. Local women often complained about the lack of opportunities for them to earn an income, and the efforts made by NGO's in terms of livelihood do not seem to have made any significant difference. As in the case of houses and boats, competition and commodification was taking place, for better or for worse. Based on fieldwork in an eastern fishing village Katharina Thurnheer (2009) writes about livelihood and gender in the reconstruction process and she notes that support was usually in the form of financial

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compared to other average wages, e.g. policeman 21,000, doctor 20,000-25,000 and teacher 18,000 (numbers are based on estimates provided by villagers).

grants to establish small shops or to produce home-made meals for sale and “[...] the result was a host of small shops that were in most cases economically unviable because they offered identical goods or services within a small area. Support many times reproduced forms of dependency and marginalisation rather than enabling escape from such structures” (Thurnheer 2009:82). I found similar patterns in Tharugama that livelihood support was primarily targeting men, while projects focused on women often reinforced gendered vulnerabilities.

De Mel and Ruwanpura (2006) note that INGO’s working with local communities seem to fall back on maintaining existing gender hierarchies in the kinds of economic activity promoted through their projects. Importantly, however, they also found that women considered that earning a living is not only paramount to material and economic safety but also to a holistic sense of welfare – survival was not the only issue at stake. Those who sought livelihood support often did so, however, for the same type of activities they had been engaged in before the tsunami, i.e. traditional types of women’s labour and in the informal sector (de Mel and Ruwanpura 2006:16ff). While men had a strong preference for boats and fishing equipment in the kind of livelihood support requested, women often competed with each other in obtaining sewing machines, as reported by Thurnheer (2009:83).

In Tharugama, I also found that the most common requests by women were for sewing machines, also from those who did not sew before the tsunami. Certain kinds of goods seemed to be favoured and once word spread and items started to circulate, people picked up what there were chances of getting and reinforced these patterns. Women were pragmatic and sought out opportunities arising, and they prioritised prospects of short-term survival like cash exchange for a machine. Donors often complied without much questioning of actual needs and broader effects. Women often expressed that one salary was not enough to support a family and they lamented the lack of income generating opportunities close by. It was more difficult for them to leave the village for work once they had children and a household to care for. For younger women the one possibility was to go and work in the textile industry, which is common before marriage. Several women living in Lokuwatte believed that the best solution for them would be if a factory opened there. They complained that there was nothing for them to do here to earn money. A common approach to better one’s family’s economic situation is to work

abroad for a few years, and village women have often been abroad for some years<sup>55</sup>. But it also entailed a considerable economic input to finance the trip and pay fees to intermediary agencies<sup>56</sup>. Thus, my study support the findings of others when it comes to the gendered distribution of opportunities provided by disaster aid. Male livelihoods were privileged over those of women, and this furthermore fitted within the 'competitive spirit' that evolved in the village in the 'second wave'.

The ethnography presented so far in this chapter shows how some villagers experience the tsunami and disaster aid as having dramatically disrupted a local moral economy that was already undergoing transformation. Questions of morality were brought to the fore, generating doubts and reflections about 'proper' relations – human as well as non-human – and activities in terms of Buddhist ethics and moral transgressions. These unresolved dilemmas created tension in the community. The abundance of gifts impinged on the way people perceived the outside world to hold almost unlimited sources of material wealth to which the villagers often felt they had a moral 'right'. The gifts, e.g. boats, fishing equipment and sewing machines, were generally not seen as implying any reciprocal obligation towards the donors, and they did not create any moral entanglement between givers and receivers. However, they did affect established local relations. From the receivers' point of view there was an unproblematic social distance to the giver who was seen to be acting upon an obligation to give. This 'patrimonial rational' in local culture and its influence on the dynamics of aid have been explored by e.g. Sørensen (2008) and Korf et al. (2010) and it will be more clearly brought out in Chapter Five in the present work.

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<sup>55</sup> In 2008, 128,530 women work migrated (IPS 2009:21)

<sup>56</sup> Some countries are more expensive than others to go to, but also provide a higher return. According to informants, some 250,000 to 500,000 rupees are needed to finance the endeavour of working abroad. Places that demanded less economic input from the beginning, and were considered as difficult places to work at, were the Middle East (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait), and the most attractive ones, both in terms of income and working conditions South Korea and Cyprus.

### Local Social Networks and Relations for Economic Security

As already mentioned, the numbers of NGOs rose dramatically after the disaster but a few community-based associations, *samitiye*, were present in the village long before the tsunami. After the tsunami all INGO's, NGO's, CBO's were often talked about as '*samitiye*'. In Tharugama it was common to be involved in several associations, sometimes up to six, seven different ones, and it was primarily women who were engaged in these activities. The numbers of people engaged were high after the tsunami but declined by the years. One example was a *samitiye* group with over one hundred members in the first period after the tsunami and then four years later, only 26 were left<sup>57</sup>.

The most common reason informants suggested for attending a *samitiye* was economic but learning new skills and social arguments were additional motivations. The decline was explained by the depletion of tsunami resources, since at this point there was a scant chance of actually benefiting in economic or material terms, the incentive for coming to meetings was lower. Some said that the reason for pulling out of village associations was economic, because many of them included different forms of regular monetary input in joint savings arrangements. Attendance also meant loss of time for other things, and it had to be well spent and provide concrete gains in order for it to be considered worthwhile. Besides micro-credit loans, some of the *samitiye* had some form of skills development or awareness programmes. It could for example be to learn how to make products like candles or yoghurt to be sold, or how to handle household garbage and recycle it for gardening or for small profits.

Many NGO's established in the area were involved in some kind of micro-credit schemes after the tsunami. The fact that there were more possibilities to get small loans has not only been a positive development. In some cases people were taking loans from many sources and ended

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<sup>57</sup> People generally stuck with the old association that was there before the tsunami and increasingly left the new 'tsunami' organisations.

up with heavy interest to pay back. Most villagers did not have any savings or did not take any loans in banks. I was told that banks were for rich people and the demands they stipulated were too much for ordinary people to muster. It was moreover considered a time-consuming and complicated process compared with how easy it was to get micro-credit loans at NGO's. Trust in larger banks was also lacking, since several of them had been involved in scandals in the past. In an article about effects on coastal livelihoods in three tsunami affected southern communities similar findings are reported;

The subsistence fishing communities in all the research sites rarely used formal banking facilities to deposit savings. Instead they kept savings in other forms such as cash at home in the form of '*mutti kasi*' (the use of a clay pot to collect coins and notes), land and property deeds, livestock and jewellery. In addition informal money sharing practices (*sittu*) are common among the coastal communities. These systems were disturbed by the displacement or death of a partner. Moreover, most of the affected people were unable to raise formal bank loans because their guarantees or collateral were lost (De Silva & Yamao 2007: 398).

Informal money sharing practises were also common in Tharugama and people often took part in several *sittu* circles. They existed in many contexts, in small groups of friends or neighbours and in more organised village associations. The basic idea of the *sittu* was explained to me as consisting of a small group of people (about 10) who make equal input in the form of money, but it could also be rice, soap, household items etc. Every week they had a lottery for "small things" (e.g. soap) and every month for "big things" (e.g. money), and each time the winner's name was put aside until everybody had had a winning, then it started all over again. There were many variations and it was possible to skip the lottery occasionally and jointly agree to give the money to a member of the *sittu* who had a costly funeral or wedding coming up. I heard of both men and women taking part in *sittu* practises. The *sittu* showed that social relations and networks were important for economic security that the introduction of new forms of organisation might disturb. The *sittu* provided many people with a sense of security and an informal safety net in times of trouble. A break-up of social structures, entailed in relocation, has influenced everyday life in many ways. Relations with close by neighbours and family were important in that you might get support in times of scarcity. Commonly, women held a friend or a close-by family member to depend upon for help. The support given to each other could be

to send over food from their meals when the other needed help for economic reasons or because of sickness, i. e. support in small ways but still important for both material security and a more general feeling of well-being. In this case the gift and its 'challenge to the receiver' were recognised and the obligation to return it compelling, and thus building lasting and resilient bonds as opposed to many of the 'tsunami gifts' by foreign donors. The women I talked about regarding these kinds of cycles of reciprocity knew well that these gifts were not 'free' but nevertheless vital for everyday survival.

### Summary and Reflections

Besides involving important social webs with family, neighbours and friends, the local economy of reciprocity also depended on balanced 'cosmological' relations and exchange with gods and spirits. This might also serve as providing people with a sense of security in terms of financial precariousness. As described earlier, with the launching of a new boat, certain precautions were taken to ensure prosperity and avert bad luck or evil eyes. Likewise, it was common to symbolically usher commerce in good luck. If you were to venture into some new business you would probably obtain the auspicious time for starting and perform a small *pirith* and alms giving at the inauguration ceremony. You could also get help by turning to Gods for blessings and luck and make a *bara* (vow) built on the basic logic of 'I give so that you might give'. Offering and sacrifice to gods, spirits and demons, i.e. exchange with the 'other world,' compelled response and reciprocity in 'this world'. As will be showed with greater depth in the next chapter, these types of relations were destabilized and new networks and relations in a process of taking shape during the time of fieldwork.

In Tharugama there were certain types of behaviour that seemed to be prompted by the tsunami, to 'sit and wait', *kammali alaskama* (literally lazy inactivity), and/or to 'attract/allure foreigners', (*sudhan alawanawa*). This was not a clear-cut shift but in parts an intensification of ongoing developments prior to the tsunami. It is clear that attempts to restore livelihoods and capacities to make a living contributed to some negative consequences such as the disruption of established practices and over-fishing, which instigated local conflicts. The social organisation of local fishing groups and the tacit norms regarding fishing serve to protect

habitats from destructive exploitation, and to sustain a possibility of long-term viable incomes from nearby waters. As economic pressure and difficulties to get by on what the sea provides increase, 'traditional' protective webs get further eroded. Adding to that are the drastic rupture and following massive aid (new boats and equipment) that gave rise to intricate moral dilemmas regarding local relations and exchange, including those with sea/nature as well as colleagues and neighbours. Furthermore, efforts largely failed to address the situation of women and the importance of gender patterns, and social networks for livelihood and economic security were rarely taken into account.

As Korf et al. argue "gifts are not just material transfers of aid, but also embodiments of cultural symbolism, social power, and political affiliations" (2010:61). Their observations that the inflow of foreign money and agencies changed the dynamics and incentives in the gift economy and replaced practices of pure kindness and local solidarity with commodification and competition resonates with what has been described in this chapter. Again, citing Korf et al.

The gift became competitive in the evolving aid market and this commodification of the gift also saw the entrance of new kinds of brokers: consultants, foreign volunteers, and project managers with their own rationales and procedures largely shaped by actors from outside of Sri Lanka – private donors in the North expected to be shown the effect of their gift (Korf et al. 2010:66).

In everyday life in Tharugama, people were also trying to make up for economic insecurity by adopting social and ritual strategies, and in the context of the disaster aftermath, actively seeking out opportunities within their space of manoeuvre. The local 'reconomy' involved both destructive and creative disorder and processes of (re)negotiating moral obligations, social ties and power relations. The first wave (of water) clearly came with the bare force of nature whereas the second wave (of aid goods and organisations) brought with it other, more concealed, forms of power.





## 5. A World Up-side-down -Disordered Relations, Obligations and Expectations

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‘The people who had plenty did not get anything, the people who did not have anything got a lot’

The most frequent answer I received from Tharugama villagers in 2008 when asking how their community changed after the tsunami was phrases like the one above and that ‘the rich have become poor and the poor have become rich’<sup>58</sup>. At first I had difficulty understanding the implications of this and various similar expressions. What I observed around me did not unambiguously point in this direction. The rumours and gossip were plentiful about people ‘getting rich’ in dubious ways after the tsunami, and it was almost impossible to learn the ‘real’ circumstances since it depended on whom I was talking to, from which perspective it was seen, and accordingly deemed as justifiable or corrupt trickery. Relief and recovery allocation seemed largely random and unfair to most villagers, and some people were undeniably seen as ‘big winners in the tsunami lottery’<sup>59</sup>, which produced social tensions and instability. The eagerness and conviction in the way this expression was communicated indicated that there was more to it than jealousy about material

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<sup>58</sup> This is how it was most commonly expressed in English in Tharugama. Gamburd (2010:74) reports of similar sayings with variations on the same theme and that it stems from a Sinhala poem, *aeti minibaa naeti unaa, naeti miniba aeti unaa* (The person who had, lost. The person who did not gain).

<sup>59</sup> One example is the case of a family that received three resettlement houses even though their house was not destroyed by the tsunami (it had already partly fallen down from wear and tear), and on top of that they sold their old beach land to a foreigner.

redistribution. What I propose is that long established roles and relations became blurred in the recovery process and that this 'unsettling' gave rise to insecurity and confusion about how to navigate in a social and moral landscape at float. A complex process of sorting out and (re)defining roles and positions was ongoing, and people and places felt unclear about their status and roles. This pertained 'tsunami people' (*tsunami kattiya*) more than others, i.e. those who had to start again in new houses at new locations.

Mary Douglas writes about the danger emanating from marginal and transitional states and that people who are somehow left out in the patterning of society, who are placeless, may be doing nothing morally wrong but their status is indefinable, which renders them both vulnerable and dangerous (Douglas 2002:118). The disordered state that the tsunami and the following interventions produced left people and places at risk, not only were 'tsunami people' vulnerable but they were also often perceived by the surrounding society as 'threatening' to the order.

Societies, communities and people are undoubtedly in a constant process of change. However, what makes this case unique is the force and speed by which circumstances so drastically changed and compelled people to re-establish not only physical habitats but also social worlds and webs. It threw people into a 'stepped-away mode' of reflection and forced them to 'work out' ambiguities, contradictions and dilemmas. Beside anxiety about indeterminate 'floating' people and places, the disordered state itself was disturbing balance on a more cosmological level.

Until this point the ethnography has largely been describing events and processes during the first and second waves. Now we move on into the phase of the third wave. The chapter starts out with a brief discussion on notions of self, insecure sociality and community, followed by an overview of cosmological and social organisation. After starting out broad it will get more ethnographic and focus on local relations, obligations and expectations in the wake of the second wave. Lastly, collective ceremonies and their role in the local economy of reciprocity and for social unity are considered, and a few concluding reflections are drawn.

## The Individual and the Collective

Hylland Eriksen writes about sociality and security (2010), that in an environment of secure sociality a solid we-feeling exists, and that people are fairly predictable to each other. The ways in which people demarcate displeasure, for example, is immediately understood by others, and a kind of relaxed intimacy prevails. In a field of insecure sociality, on the other hand, improvisation and negotiation over situational definitions are more characteristic. Individuals' encounters in this field are much less secure as for whom they are dealing with, and less sure as for who they are looking at in the mirror. Also, "opportunities are more varied and more open to a person in a state of insecure sociality than to someone who rests contented in a condition of predictable routines of secure sociality, but the risks are also much greater" (Hylland Eriksen 2010:11). Insecure sociality appears in societies undergoing rapid change, "suddenly, something new happens, and one finds oneself in a setting with no preordained script to be followed. One is faced with rebuilding the ship at sea" (Hylland Eriksen 2010:12). The tsunami disaster did, in many ways, force people to do just that, to rebuild the ship at sea. As mentioned before it ripped apart not only physical structures but messed up social and cosmological patterns vital for the well-being of individuals and the community as a whole.

In Tharugama the collective is important for defining the self-image and the identity of the individual, the self is intimately connected and shaped in relation to others. Daya Somasundaram (2007) argues that a sense of community appears to be an essential protective factor for the individual and their families, and important for recovery in the aftermath of disasters, whether natural or manmade. He argues that conventional psychiatry tends to limit its perspective to disorders in individuals even though situations of conflict and disaster in 'collectivist' cultures might produce 'collective trauma'. The *loss of communality* following disasters, he argues, might be best approached through community level interventions, for example, by strengthening and rebuilding the family and village structures, as well as by finding a common meaning for the immense suffering (Somasunderam 2007:19). The consequences of collective trauma are e.g. mistrust, suspicion, brutalisation, deterioration in morals and values, dependency, passiveness, despair, and superficial and short-term goals.

Trust is the basic binding glue that keeps communities and societies together. Trust in relationships, that they will not be betrayed, that others will fulfil their obligations, responsibilities and undertakings, that their intentions are benign; trust in social structures and institutions, justice, law, values and cultural beliefs, the future and finally trust in themselves, their family and kin (Somarasundram 2007:14).

In Tharugama an atmosphere of distrust and disappointment was thriving, and the way people described the situation, locally and nationally, and their relations with kin, neighbours, 'NGO-people', and the state often reeked of mistrust and lack of hope. Besides suffering from the tsunami, people here have endured decades of civil war and two insurgencies. Argenti-Pillen (2003) argues that the Sri Lankan rural south constitutes a reservoir of violence, "a seemingly bottomless pit of bitterness", from which the Sri Lankan government draws soldiers at will (Argenti-Pillen 2003:6). The regime of terror she portrays is constituted by the war against the Tamil separatists in the north and, the less well known 1971 and 1988-1990 JVP (Janata Vimukthi Peramuna) insurgencies, in which tens of thousands of people were killed or disappeared. Civilians were abducted and brutally killed and people supporting both sides (the JVP or the Sri Lankan Army) were often neighbours, as were victims and perpetrators, who continue to live together in neighbourhoods marked by these upheavals (Argenti-Pillen 2003:4ff). Occasionally memories and stories from the JVP uprisings surfaced in conversations and interviews in Tharugama, bearing witness of violence and fear and of things not forgotten but rather kept unspoken of.

### *Hierarchy, Cosmology and Society*

The implications of a fragmented social world are, I believe, better understood against the backdrop of Sinhalese Buddhist cosmology. In the foreword of the 1991 edition of Bruce Kapferer's *A Celebration of Demons: Exorcism and the Aesthetics of Healing in Sri Lanka* (1991[1983]) Victor Turner writes:

The health and welfare of human society and the individual, the smooth functioning of the natural and cultural orders, the purity of society's places and times, a right relationship between and among all classes of living beings depend upon the recognition of and willing acquiescence in this cosmic arrangement of beings, persons, and things arranged in order of rank,

grade and class. For Sinhalese (not only the lower classes but middle and upper classes too), reality is mapped by this determinate, asymmetrical ordering of invisible and visible entities, at whose obscure summit is the Buddha (1991: xxii).

Louis Dumont (1986 [1983]) proposes that societies are organised by specific values expressed at different levels of society, and some values override (and encompass) values at lower levels. The hierarchy of cast on the Indian subcontinent, following Dumont, cannot be understood in part, only in relation to the larger socio-cultural whole. In *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980 [1966]), Dumont argues that the institution of caste in India is based on a certain cultural logic and a principle of hierarchy defined by the opposition of pure/impure and the separation of religious status and politico-economic power, "India was an unhistorical, holistic, hierarchical society: the antithesis of historical, individualist, egalitarian society in the modern West" (Barnard & Spencer 2002:58). Although criticisms have been levelled against Dumont<sup>60</sup> I believe his emphasis on caution against presupposing a universal egalitarian, individualistic worldview is valid

Bruce Kapferer (1991 [1983]) uses the term hierarchy in a similar way as Dumont, i.e. he stresses the principle of encompassment in hierarchy and claims that hierarchy in the Sinhalese cosmos emphasises status over power as the political is encompassed in the hierarchy and only secondary to forces with greater ordering capacities in the cosmic scheme (Kapferer 1991:342). The Buddha, who is theoretically nonexistent, transcends the Sinhalese pantheon. Beneath the Buddha is a number of superior deities (future Buddhas); these are the Four Guardian deities (*hatvaram devijyo* i.e. Natha, Vishnu, Kataragama and Saman), followed by a variety of other powerful deities (*devas*), planetary deities (*graha devas*) and minor deities (*devata, devatana*). Below these is a horde of demons including *raksas* and *yaku*, and lastly a variety of malign spirits (*kumbhanda*) and ghosts (*preta*). Human beings occupy a position between deities and demons and ghosts (Kapferer 1991:158-159). "This is reasonably close to the sense which Sinhalese have of the cosmological system in which they

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<sup>60</sup> E.g. of his narrow definition of 'religion', which excludes concern with deities, rituals and the religious role of the king and of his premise that India has 'no history' (Barnard & Spencer 2002:58-59).

act, and also the Buddhist ideas and traditions in terms of which Sinhalese organize their every day lives in relation to the supernatural” (Kapferer 1991:159).

This notion of a total, enveloping order does influence peoples’ worldview and their organisation of life (economic, political, social and religious) at different levels of society. In Sri Lanka there are links between religion and politico-economic power, e.g. expressed in the image of the King (of the State) as a protector of religion, as well as monks not only defending Buddhism but simultaneously the (unity) and survival of the State. But still, as noted by Kapferer above, the political hierarchy is encompassed in the cosmic (moral) hierarchy. The central political feature of an ideal past society is righteous and paternalistic kingship, and the basis of the social order Buddhist morality and righteousness (Seneviratne 1999:29).

The political patronage system in Sri Lanka reflecting a larger social and moral order rooted in the ancient kingdoms is also noted by e.g. James Brow (1996). In the ancient royal model of Sri Lanka, reciprocity between the king and the population was at the core. Attainment of peace and prosperity was a responsibility of kingship but also a sign that the king was virtuous. When the country prospered, rains and crops were bountiful; the righteousness of the king’s rule was confirmed. Conversely there was a risk that when social disorder broke out or natural disaster struck, it might be due to lack of virtuous leadership. Thus, Sinhala kingship did not permit the exercise of unrestrained power. In order for him to preserve his legitimacy he had to attend to the welfare of his people, the advice of religious experts, and maintain traditional custom (Brow 1996:39).

This could be translated into the welfare-for-votes relationship of today, and Birgitte Sørensen (2008) writes in an article on humanitarian NGO’s and mediations of political order in Sri Lanka that, although Sri Lanka today is governed by a president and not by kings, many scholars agree that the image of the righteous ruler is strong. She furthermore suggests that it might have left the Buddhist religious realm of its origin and become a feature of the secular national political culture, and might even inform the relationship between NGO’s and local communities (Sørensen 2008:103-104). “If so, the demands the resettling communities make are less a sign of dependency than a moral claim for good governance

presented to the NGO which in the present situation seems more resourceful than the government institutions due to the inflow of international assistance made available to them” (Ibid: 104). The underlying rationale draws upon the notion that the presence of welfare is interpreted as proof of ‘good governance’ and failure to distribute indicative of lack of power or will, this not only pertains the relation of government/president and the nation’s population but is replicated at all levels of society (Ibid: 104). The central argument in Sorensen’s article is that international and national humanitarian NGOs’, and their interventions, have far more fundamental bearing on the social reconstitution of Sri Lankan society as a political, cultural, and moral entity than is usually acknowledged, and this is an important point. It is primarily not a matter of interventions that creates ‘aid dependency’, a too simplistic interpretation, but about interference/involvement that unsettles relations and breaks up patterns that have consequences far beyond the intended areas of involvement and the present study, I believe, makes this clear.

Korf et al. (2010) analyse the commodification of post-tsunami aid, a process, they contend, that ‘contaminated’ the ‘purity’ of good intentions with the politics of patronage and international aid. The tsunami gift, according to them, reinforced and reconfigured exchange relationships among different patrons and clients in Sri Lankan communities. Gifts, by disingenuous patrons became patrimonial and the patrimonial rationale emerged as much from above as from below, creating a nearly reinforcing and inescapable dynamic (Korf et al. 2010:60). The wave of tsunami gifts clearly had an impact upon the local system of reciprocity in Tharugama and it affected relationships and obligations, and not only social relations but also more broadly cosmological.

Power and status, caste and class are at play in the village but they do not necessarily correspond, i.e. high caste does not always equal wealth, power and high status and low caste do not always equal poverty and low status. Villagers’ attitudes often emphasise money, “today it is money that counts”, “if you are rich you have power” (but not necessarily status). Caste matters in various situations, e.g. in choosing a spouse, in what temple you ‘belong’ to, and in some caste related services<sup>61</sup>. Fur-

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<sup>61</sup> For example are *radha* women important at girls’ puberty rituals and ritual drummers usually from the *berama* caste.

thermore, you might be highly regarded, low caste and/or poor if you behave morally, i.e. adhering to traditional values and customs, observing the Buddhist precepts, being faithful to the temple and performing religious duties. People with money do have a certain standing even if they are not leading a moral life and perhaps even earning money in illegal ways, but that is different from the respectability and status gained by being a moral person.

The term *abhinseka* is an epithet connoting innocence. The Sinhala word *abhinseka* is translated into Sri Lankan English as 'innocent' or 'harmless' and, *abimsa*, is the Pali word for non-violence (Winslow & Woost 2004:175). However, the famous 'Ahinsaka' in the Sinhala Buddhist imagination is the story of Angulimala<sup>62</sup>, who was once called Ahinsaka, a good, well mannered prince and a bright student, who then became a ruthless murderer in trying to fulfill a request of his teacher. The story is popularly used to show how good people can be misled, by others and by social conditions, and turn into bad people, and how bad people with proper guidance can become good people. *Abhinseka* carries with it a sense of respectability and is according to village informants used for persons who are considered 'pure'/'true', often a rural person of meagre economic means with traditional values and customs<sup>63</sup>. When looking at economic liberalisation, nationalism and women's morality, Winslow and Woost (2004) make an important observation in noting that besides connoting purity and sexual purity, it is also associated with cultural purity and implies being innocent from all foreign and 'modern' corrupting influences (2004:175). A rich person, according to informants in Thrugama, could hardly be *abhinseka*. One villager meant that it is referring to somebody that has accepted his/her place in this life and humbly bends to the laws of *karma*. A person that is *abhinseka*, in the village discourse, is a person who bears suffering without complaints or who resorts to immoral ways to overcome their situation. The *abhinseka* term implies that morality, and specifically a Buddhist morality, is at the core of how people understand events and evaluate behaviour in their everyday life. Buddhist moral behaviour supposedly comes naturally from mastering one's

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<sup>62</sup> Cf Richard Gombrich in *How Buddhism Began: the Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (2002), the chapter "Who was Angulimala".

<sup>63</sup> The chest tattoo on the front page of the thesis reads *abhinseka* and will be discussed in the final chapter.



ego and desires, and from cultivating compassion (*karuna*) and loving-kindness (*metta*). The root of suffering (*dukkha*) comes from craving (*tanha*) and clinging to desire and ego. These local idioms, in particular *abinseka* (innocent) and *leajayi* (modest/shy), and the overarching cosmological principles of order and unity give clues as to how to understand the impact of disaster aid on the local moral economy, as will be further developed in the final chapter.

### **Opposition and Opportunity**

Even if there has been considerable relaxation of caste separation, the spatial organisation of the village is largely based on caste and different castes tend to be more common in certain areas. Many of the *karawa* caste live close to the sea and the *durawa* and *goyigama* further inland, mirroring connections to traditional trades. The majority of those relocated to Lokuwatte are *karawa* and they used to live in Podiwatte where most houses got destroyed in the tsunami.

After this broad outline of local social and cosmological organisation, the following section will become more ethnographically grounded and will be divided in three parts. First, focus will be placed on Tharugama south and on people who rebuilt and stayed in the ‘old’ neighbourhood. Secondly, Lokuwatte and those who were relocated to the newly built Montana project area will be the focus of attention, and lastly, the ‘unaffected’ villagers and their experiences in terms of changed relations, expectations and obligations in the wake of the second wave of tsunami gifts, brought forward.

#### ***Tharugama South - A Changed Neighbourhood***

As described earlier, many families were relocated from old neighbourhoods and the most drastic demographic change in the village was the transfer of families from Podiwatte in the south to the Montana village at Lokuwatte in Tharugama north. In village gossip, Podiwatte often figured as being a rowdy place before the tsunami, with drinking and fighting as a routine feature.

While walking around the southern part of the village in 2008, I was struck by how tranquil and peaceful it seemed. The main road was not too close, as to allow the intrusion of the busy traffic noise from the main road, and houses not cluttered close together, areas of greenery breaking through, and the ocean close by brought in a nice cooling breeze. The impression was that of a place where people were relatively well off and few simple houses could be seen, a contrast to the way it was before the tsunami.

Geetha is in her early forties and lives in Podiwatte with her family on the border of the old reservation area. Their house got partly destroyed and was rebuilt at the same location with the help of a political party and a government grant<sup>64</sup> within the 'home-owner driven' programme. Geetha has four children, two are married and moved out. The other two live with her and her husband, who is a driver. One is still in school and the other is working at a local garment factory.

Before the tsunami there were many more people living in this area. Now it is lonelier. But I am happy because there were a lot of fighting at the beach side and a lot of noise at night. One boy died here in the tsunami. He was eight years old and got stuck under a roof sheet. At first, after the tsunami, we were upset and sad but that has changed. Because this did not only happen to us, it happened to so many. We are happy we saved our lives. The people who used to live by the sea are not coming here any more. I never see them. I think they live happily in Lokuwatte now. People have changed a lot after the tsunami and many have become proud (*adamberè*). They walk with the head high. I did not get a lot of things after the tsunami. I got some pots and a mosquito net; that is all. The people in Lokuwatte are proud now; they do not speak with us.

Everybody do things in secret. If there are sewing machines to be handed out nobody will tell because they want them for themselves. Many people in Podiwatte are like this; they are not willing to share. I am not like that; if there are some things to be handed out I will go to other houses and tell them about it. Nothing after the tsunami happened in the correct way, not even the work of the NGO's. Everything was unfair. In Tharugama north the tsunami did not come but they also took things. I think the organisations treated people who were inside the 35-metre zone

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<sup>64</sup> At the sum of 2.5 laks (one lak=100,000 rupees).

in special ways. They got more things than the people outside this limit. The money we got from the political party was not enough for us to buy the necessary things for the house. We don't have any money to finish the second level of the house and I am thinking about going abroad to work to get the money we need to do it (080508 no.1.16).

Geetha hints at recurring attitudes concerning changes in the village; that former neighbours and friends are seen as distant, even treacherous, that 'closeness' between people has deteriorated, and that perceptions and practice of sharing, exchange and morality have changed. The danger of persons in transition, as in Mary Douglas' notion, is also reflected in Geetha's account. Unclear identities and roles give rise to insecurity and suspicion and attempts at pinning down and labelling. The former neighbours that Geetha refers to are the 'tsunami people'.

Nimal, an old man also living in Tharugama south, but further from the sea and the reservation area, raised similar opinions. His house was untouched by the tsunami but he felt that changes affected him too. Even though he did not suffer materially he is confused and upset about village development in its wake. He belongs to a 'higher' caste compared to Geetha and is also better off economically. At the time of conversation he is loud and expressive and the subject of conversation clearly stirs strong emotions.

The tsunami changed a lot in this society. I can see it with my own eyes. Not only here, the whole country changed. Now the people who lived in mud huts before have a lot of money, and they got it from the government. We cannot tell that they are poor anymore; they are always going in a three-wheeler<sup>65</sup> (considered an expense only the well-off can afford). All the people at the Podiwatte side got a lot of things and nice houses. People's minds have changed after the tsunami. People have become proud and do not respect others anymore. They do not care what anybody says to them. They do not feel that they are any different from other people. Before they were more humble and respected bigger people. Before people did not look each other in the eye when they spoke, as a sign of respect. When the village officer came on the road they were hiding but to

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<sup>65</sup> Three-wheeler, trishaw, or tuk tuk; a local form of taxi

day they don't care. I believe that people everywhere have become less kind and more unselfish. They only care about themselves.

A long time ago in this area people were big and strong, now they are tiny and weak and they are too lazy to work. They don't even bother to grow chillies and coconuts in their gardens. The *sirit virit* (customs/manners) has changed. For example, people used to value the elders but they don't do it anymore; most people don't even respect their mother and father. In the Asian countries we have always respected our parents. Some children are still helping their parents but it is not like before. It is not only in Sri Lanka that life is changing, it is happening all over the world. There are a lot of bad things. Before people worked and helped each other. These days people do not work and they shout at their mother and father to bring them food and things. I can see this in the village (080507 no.1.15).

Nimal relates the changes after the tsunami, to developments in broader society, and he fears the break-up of traditional values. He hints at a new world of desires in which each individual may expect to have the same, "you cannot tell that they are poor any more". According to Nimal some people suddenly behave like they are somebody else, "they do not respect other people". It is not only 'respect' between classes and castes that he finds eroded but also the culturally highly valued relation between parent and child. Nimal describes a shift in attitudes regarding relations and rationales of reciprocity and exchange at different levels of society, from that between family members to that between the state and its citizens. There are new expectations and new obligations in which the deep-rooted organising principles of hierarchy and the idea of unity being essential for security are being compromised.

The way Kapferer (1991) describes how demons, in the local worldview, are masters of illusions and cause illness by acting as if they belong in a higher place in the hierarchy than they actually are, and the emphasis on a 'well-ordered whole' is instructive here. Tharugama villagers often showed strong reactions towards people who violated 'order'. When listening to Nimal it is tempting to draw parallels with Kapferer's demons, and some 'tsunami people' as "masters of illusions", and some as causing sickness (disorder) by acting as if they are somebody else. Kasun and his wife are *durava* and regarded as 'middle people' (*madiyama kattiyē*). They live close to the area in Podiwatte where many houses got destroyed. He is in his thirties with a white-collar job in a close-by town.

He too believes that something has happened to social unity in the community after the disaster.

People in the area have changed a lot after the tsunami. Before they were close but not anymore. Now they have money and that changed the people; there is a lot of jealousy (*tanhawe*). I believe that at the places affected by the tsunami people have changed. They are not close anymore and when people meet in the street they don't look at each other. I don't think people got things in equal ways after the tsunami. Those who were strong to take, they managed well, but those who were weak and innocent (*ahimseka*) did not get enough help. People are angry because of that; that all were so differently treated. The NGO's that came are good but sometimes they did not do things in the correct way. There was little control. After the tsunami there were winners and losers. Some people told lies and said that their house was destroyed when they were not affected. Some people who needed a lot did not get anything and others who did not need anything got a lot. We have learned a lot from the tsunami. About people, about who is a friend and who is not. We also learnt about the environment and about the country and what is going on. Now we are keeping an eye on everything.

Kasun depicts a dwindling sense of trust and escalating suspicions corresponding to Sonasundram's description of loss of communality and collective trauma. His wife was present at this occasion and added that;

I am happy that some poor people who did not have a proper house to live in got new houses. For them it is good that the tsunami came; they would never have managed to get a house like that without the tsunami. Some people in Podiwatte have stayed for 20 years in a mud hut. Some people say that it would have been nice to live in Podiwatte at the time of the tsunami because then they would also have got everything (080717 no1.26).

The first time I heard somebody saying that they wished they would have been affected by the tsunami, I was astounded. But it repeatedly happened and locally, with a few years of distance to the actual disaster, it was an uncontroversial viewpoint, and Gamburd (2010:75) reports similar findings. Ravindra, a retired fish seller whose family runs a grocery shop, belongs to the 'category' of those who 'had before and lost'. Ravindra's family would perhaps not be considered rich but at least as a well off *madiyama* (middle) family. His property is close to the reservation

area. It was partly destroyed by the tsunami and repaired by the help of a local political party.

We have bought things for one *lak* to the *kade* (shop) because of Christmas and New Year, and the tsunami destroyed everything. Just 13 days before the disaster we had bought a new three-wheeler and it was also ruined. The insurance did not cover the loss and we did not get anything for the destroyed merchandise. The only compensation we got was 5,000 rupees from the government. I can see with my own eyes that some people got a lot of help from NGO's and it was not a fair distribution. There is a lot of *irchiame* (jealousy) here, and the people who go and lament and cry and beg near the people who give, they get many things. But we cannot do that; walk here and there to look for help and beg. We have sent many letters to different aid organisations and we hoped that this would be enough. I really don't like to go and beg here and there and chase the organisations. We have worked hard and came to a certain level before, and we can work hard and come back to that level again. We have worked hard but still we have not reached that level (080522 no.2.19).

Ravindra describes how his family could not bring themselves to 'beg' for aid, and this is typical of a widespread reluctance among villagers of higher standing to accept 'charity'. The custom of giving to the temple or to the poor is associated with status and respectability, while receiving may lower one's status. Several other high status villagers stressed how they had given in the wake of the disaster, and they spoke of the greed of the lower status villagers. I was often told, "they have no shyness (*lae-jayi*)", meaning that they lacked pride and were not ashamed to 'beg'. Gamburd (2010) also notes the association between high status and refusal to accept tsunami aid, and she points out that it was not necessarily the rich who refused aid but simply respected people whose families had a long history of social standing. The local norm that it is beggars who eat and accept food at public charity events is echoed in these dynamics (Gamburd 2010:73-74).

In Tharugama another example of this was a *goyigama* family who owned farmland and had many locals working on their coconut plantation before the tsunami. Amanthi, the eldest unmarried daughter in this extended family household told me that at the time of the disaster many people came to their house, and she and her family offered them food and shelter. Then "everything changed after the tsunami", she said.

These people, whom Amanthi considered poor and uneducated, “got money and houses but they still have no brain”. She compared her family’s generosity and morality with the greed of the “tsunami people” who, she told me, not only benefited from disaster aid but often also sold their sea properties with a considerable profit. “There will be more stupid people with a lot of money and more alcohol, and *ganja* (marijuana). If this disappeared from the village it would be good. I don’t want money - I want good behaviour, a good life” (080305 no.1.7).

Returning to Ravindra, he too expressed disappointment over the behaviour of former neighbours and customers, and he describes a disordered social environment that he finds difficult to navigate.

Many people owe us money from before the tsunami for things they took from the shop. We have made a list and tried to collect it but without success. Most of the people who owe us money live at other places now; they got relocated after the tsunami. When we see them we tell them to give us the money and they say that they will, but they never do. The thing is that people have changed a lot after the tsunami. Many people from here who now live in Montana don’t remember where they came from. When we meet them they do not speak to us and they have become proud and act like big people. They think that they are big people now because they live in a nice house. Most of them had mud huts or wood houses before. We had a lot of things before the tsunami but we lost it; they did not have anything but they got many things. They have changed their lives. Today there are also fewer customers coming to the shop because fewer people live here these days. It is hard for us (080522 no.2.19).

Ravindra’s son Ruwan was also present during the conversation with his father and he joined in. In both their accounts a sense of confusion is expressed. Their position in the village has changed and people do not behave in the same way towards them. Former neighbours who had to ‘stay on good terms’ before, so that they could get credit in times of need for example, suddenly turned their back on them.

I agree that people have changed after the tsunami. I think that people are good to a person until they get help, and after they get the help they don’t care about that person. They are not friendly and nice for real, they just act until they get what they want. Then they never look at you. The people who lived here before had mud huts or wood houses with a roof of coconut leaves. A small wind could blow those roofs off, and now they live in

good concrete houses but still they are not satisfied. When you leave our house (referring to me) all the people will come and ask what we will get from you! Everybody looks out for foreigners to catch more things. They will be curious and think that you are rich! (080522 no.2.19).

At the time I told Ravindra and Ruwan to tell those people that I am the one who wants something from them, I want their stories. Ruwan and his father laughed and said that they will never believe that is true.

As demonstrated by informants, people who were not relocated and continue to live in this part of the village feel that their life world has changed. The area is not the same, some houses are gone, and some are new and altogether fewer people live here. Feelings of frustration abound, of being ignored and left behind while former neighbours have become distant and behave like 'big people'. People who formerly were in a position of dependency towards better off villagers could, at least temporarily, act more as independent equals by relying on outside, anonymous assistance instead of fellow villagers.

The flood of seemingly limitless gifts, handed out in ways that conflicted or did not resonate with local understandings of fairness, order and respectability, set in motion a radical reorganisation of relationships. Former relations of reciprocity and obligation were called into question and this gave rise to moral anxiety and confusion.

### *The Montana Project, Relocation to a New Place*

The impression of Lokuwatte, compared to the south side of the village, is different. Here more people and houses have been added instead of disappearing, and houses are situated in neat rows closely together along narrow dusty roads. So far the jungle that was cleared to make way for the project has not fully grown back and there is a stark difference between living spaces and the natural environment surrounding it. Some homeowners have started to plant vegetables, fruits and flowers in their yards, but most of the plots are looking dry and bare. Before the tsunami there were only three houses here, now there are almost 80.

As a new settlement within the village, Lokuwatte lacks many of the features of an established community. Even though most families come from the same area in south Tharugama, former social bonds and shared



experiences as ‘victims’ of the tsunami do not seem to have created any lasting common identification.

This particular area, that was mostly thick jungle before, had a reputation of being somewhat dangerous and host to supernatural beings. The looming danger and ambiguity about the place as situated in a borderland, between the village and the ‘wild’, were sometimes a worry. In Pushpa’s narrative, recounted in Chapter Two, the problems took concrete form as frequent intrusion of poisonous snakes and constant battles to keep nature at bay and fenced out. Pushpa chanted *pirith* to keep snakes and evil spirits off the property, demarcating an invisible border against the wild, and protecting the domestic(ated) area.

People on the south side of the village frequently talked about people here as being fortunate, of having changed their lives and ‘come up’, of having forgotten where they came from and being proud and greedy. When looking at the poor quality of the houses here, how small they are, how they lack proper kitchens and toilet facilities and are cramped together away from the main road, it is difficult to grasp. But many people did not have any concrete houses before the tsunami, and they had not much hope for improvement of their life situation, of substantial material progress and of advancement in the local power hierarchy. The previous, often poor, situation of many of the relocated families facilitates some understanding for the reactions from both envious former neighbours and the relatively content settlers.

The importance of having your own house for a sense of confidence and security was clear and made explicit in some cases, as in a conversation with Erandie. She is 45 years old and lives with her family in one of the newly built houses in Lokuwatte. She makes coir ropes and her husband rents an *oruwe* and fishes in Polkanda bay. They are *karawa* (fishing caste) and would be seen as *dukpath* (poor) to other villagers.

I had a difficult life before the tsunami and I still have; my life is in many ways the same today. I am still making the coir ropes but I am glad that we stayed in a wood house when the tsunami came because now we have proper house. This is the only change for the better in my life. Our work and economic situation has not changed after the tsunami. A lot of people got help from the small scale fishing association after the tsunami but not us. I filled in many forms and went to many organisations but it did not help. My husband had some nets before the tsunami but he did not re-

ceive any compensation. I was sad after the tsunami and all the deaths but now I am happy because we had a hard time before. I am not sad because other people got more help than us; some people are lucky and others are not. There is nothing I can do about it.

I do not have any problems with the people in this new place and I am not going to where we lived before; it belongs to the government now. Now I want to stay here even if there are some problems in the community. You should just stay away from people and not become too close; then it is all right. I don't go to other houses to talk or to have tea. I only go to my daughter's house and my other children's houses. They all live here too. All of us had wood houses before the tsunami. I think it is better to stay alone and not get involved with other people. Then you will not have any problems. If you get too close there will be fights.

Many things have changed after the tsunami. Many people suffered because of the losses but I am happier now. I feel safe in this house and it belongs to us. Even if it leaks and the floor is breaking (which it is) I am happy. I constantly recall how our life was before, when we did not have this house. This house will be my children's and their children's in the future because the government has given us deeds and it is good. My sons are fishermen too so they will have to live here in the future as well. It is a bit far from the sea but some people got houses even further away so we have to be satisfied even if it is a bit more difficult for my husband and sons to go fishing today (080212 no.2.1).

When listening to Erandie describing her situation it is apparent that the possession of a proper house that will stay in her family and be inherited by her children is important to her. It is also clear that they have not become rich after the tsunami but continue to struggle in much the same way as they did before, with the difference that they have gained some hope, confidence and increased sense of security by owning a house.

Not all the families relocated to the Montana village were poor, and some lived in concrete houses before the disaster, like Lashini. She and her husband had a small but decent house. Their new house in Montana is standing out in that they have done a great deal of work on it by themselves. It has a new kitchen area and tiled floors, the walls are plastered and brightly coloured and they have a nice garden dotted with flower-pots and plants. Their daughter works as a teacher and they have two sons in South Korea on 3-year work contracts.

Before the tsunami we stayed in the reservation area in Podiwatte. We had a small house there that was totally destroyed by the tsunami. All our valuables and things went with the water. We had saved some money to renovate our house and we lost that money too. But I am not sad because I think we have more now than before the disaster; everything is better for us now. Before the tsunami we had a difficult time because we spent a lot of money on our children's education. They have all passed the grade 13 exam. Now they are working and that is good. By the help of God we will not have any sadness in our life now. The neighbours here are good. We have many relations living close by and I am happy for that. We don't have any problems in the community but we are careful not to mix too much with other people. I stay away from the other houses and gossip. This is the way to live, in this way we are staying happily with everybody.

Where we lived before there were a lot of bad people and problems. Some people can't understand that we managed to raise our children to become so good despite living in such a bad environment. But I think that that area is not like that anymore because all the bad people were affected by the tsunami and they have new houses at new places now. We are still friends with these people and talk and laugh with them, but we keep our distance and never go to their houses. I think the Montana is a much better place for us. If a person here needs help, we will go and help them but we will not spend a lot of time there and eat and things like that. In Montana people are not helpful and not close. Everybody has their own problems and matters to solve and they take care of themselves (080321 no.2.2).

Lashini and her husband live a relatively safe life. She is happy with her situation and as long as she keeps her distance to people she believes that there will not be any problems. Minding your behaviour, keeping a low profile and a distance towards others was an implicit rule in the area, but a few persons stuck out in their engagement in the community and their fearlessness of speaking their mind.

Padmini, was one such person. She is 32 years old with four children. Her husband is a fisherman and goes out to sea for several weeks at a time. She has a job that she is proud of. Few women have paid work here. The donor organisation hired her to look after the community house and the Montessori school. She believes that they chose her because she is talkative and forward and not afraid of conflicts, she says. But she is worried because the NGO will pull out all resources soon and she will lose her income. Support from the donors lasted for three years

and she is sad because there is still much more to do. Nobody has come to teach them how to use the computers sent from USA, and soon the Montessori school will be without money to pay teacher salaries.

Before the tsunami we lived in Podiwatte, first close to my mother in law. We made a wood house in her yard but there were too many fights all the time so we bought land close to my mother and started to build a wood house there. It was just becoming good when the tsunami came. The house, along with all our things and savings, was lost, so when we came to the new house here we were happy. We could never afford to build a house like that one more time. We really wanted to stay in this area even though they offered us to go to Bathgama for example. We do not have any bad experiences with this place and this house. We got a lot of help and things from different organisations. We did not consider that the house did not have good *pade* and we did not do any *pirith* or the *Bahiraweera puja*. If we think like that we cannot have a happy life. We cannot think like that. I have heard that other people complain and blame their houses for their misfortunes, for example that a person doesn't have a job or is sick. I have tried to talk with them and explain that they have to be patient and try not to think like that. But for me I have to admit that if I got a chance to move to a better place I would do it. I would not be sad to leave but for now I am happy here. People are good to me. When I call on somebody they will come. I have many friends and I know all the people in Montana. Still, people have changed a lot after the tsunami. The poor people got everything, but they try to get more and to be the richest persons. I don't like people like this. I want everybody to stay in the normal way, not to show off their power or pride. There are many people here in Montana who compete like this and like to show off. But I have learned a lot from the tsunami, I am not scared. I can go up to anybody and speak my mind (080419 no.2.4).

Padmini gives a strong impression, and she has established a space within the community where she feels confident but she is beginning to worry that her privileges in the area will end with the support from abroad. Padmini's sister Nuwini also lives in Montana and they see each other regularly. At another time Nuwini told me that her sister is the only person she spends a lot of time with in Montana. She has also noticed the changes in people's life style and mentality and gave an illustrative example: "Many people have changed their life style after the tsunami. Before they always wore dresses but now they are wearing trousers" (080616 no.2.11). Nuwini's statement hints at the influence of

western culture and values. You rarely see women in the village in trousers and it is, for most people here, considered 'un-Sri Lankan' and inappropriate. Nuwini's description of people changing from dresses to trousers might be seen as symbolic of recent changes.

With the arrival of foreign NGOs' came more intimate exposure to western styles, values and behaviour. NGO personnel had a stronger influence compared to temporary tourists who are largely confined to certain places and more distant to the ordinary villager. Parents often questioned me about western culture and expressed worry that the young people coming to work as volunteers from abroad brought bad habits with them, exposing village youths to smoking, drinking and casual relations with the opposite sex. These parents felt that their capacity to protect their children and raise them according to their ideals was in jeopardy. Thus outsiders were often seen as both a blessing and a threat, and their presence playing at desire as well as danger. Many narratives give a picture of an environment where relations are loose, insecure and potentially treacherous. Before the tsunami, people were more certain about who was who, and thus how to relate to others and behave in various situations. A lack of transparency and participation in the distribution of aid has eroded trust further, and created an air of suspicion and self-interest, but the intervention also provided new opportunities of empowerment and material and social advancement. However, people generally found it difficult to make joint efforts to improve the new settlement and overall functional interdependence was largely lacking. Complaints and uncertainty were common about who was responsible for upholding and creating a common living environment<sup>66</sup>. During fieldwork I was approached, on several occasions, and asked to donate money for communal projects in the settlement. Once donations of paint for the community house had been received and I was asked to pay workers to do the paint job. At another time it was to pay for a bulldozer to make way for a playground donated by a local NGO. I was not surprised by the requests since I clearly represent a type of person (fair-skinned/presumably rich tourist/NGO worker) whom they have grown accustomed to come and offer donations of various kinds during the years after the tsunami. It was not a large sum of money and I asked why

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<sup>66</sup> Issues of concern were for example drainage and wastewater systems, and protective walls to prevent soil erosion from the heavy rains or flooding from the swamps during the monsoon.

they did not collect it from the households in the settlement or came together and did the job. The answers I received were that the people without children would not pay for a playground and that it was impossible to get people together to do something like this. Nobody cared, they said.

It should be noted, that reluctance or even refusal to do certain things, for example to be practically involved in building a donated house, are also tied to the perceptions of what is considered 'appropriate' in relation to your caste and position in society. In other words, carpenters are carpenters and should do the job of carpenters; it should not be randomly done by just anybody because a house was lost. People could generally not at all grasp why they should be involved in the physical construction of their new houses. Occupational and caste related separation are tied to proper conduct and played into behaviour in the disaster aftermath, often to the dismay of donors. Here, I suggest that Sørensen's (2008:103) 'secular notion of a righteous ruler' and a patrimonial rationale also might influence recipient behaviour, i.e. that demands and behaviour of the resettling community are less a sign of dependency than a moral claim for good governance presented to the NGO which, in this context, seems the most resourceful 'authority'.

In the Montano resettlement scheme, there was an initial intention from the donors to consider social development in the settlement. A community house was built but not entirely functioning, as Padmini described earlier. A load of second hand computers was sent from USA to set up a training centre, but they collected dust in a corner with nobody knowing what to do with them. The community house was mostly rented out for a small sum of money to, for example, wedding parties (the rent paying for electricity and water bills). The small primary school had problems competing with other resource stronger schools in the area (ones that e.g. offered free uniforms and equipment after securing large and long-term funding from abroad after the tsunami). Provision of salary for the teachers has been another problem and was based on the good will and support from foreign philanthropists.

The unwillingness or lack of enthusiasm for co-operation and signs of social disintegration were evident, and a preference for keeping a distance and not going to other houses for 'chit chat and tea' was the tacit norm. Nevertheless, to uphold a certain level of politeness was critical in

order to avoid the risk of offending somebody and endanger social ties that might serve you well in the future or cause grounds for black magic attack.

*(Inter)Dependence and Protection - Freedom and Insecurity*

So far voices from people directly affected by the disaster have dominated; i.e. from those who have rebuilt homes and those who have been relocated. But those ‘unaffected’, those who lived beyond the reach of the waves, were not untouched by the waves of the disaster. If not affected by the first wave, they were inevitably drawn into the second and third. They did not have to worry about rebuilding their homes but had to come to terms with many of the changes the disaster instigated, not least socially. Unspoken norms regarding obligations and expectations and patron/client relationships established over generations were twisted and turned. Dulani, a widow living in one of the oldest houses in Tharugama north, is held in high regard in the village. She is *durawa*, a caste that has been strong in this area, and a patron for the local temple. Her children are well educated and some of them work abroad.

I am famous in the village for supporting the temple and helping the poor. My mother was the same. If there is a wedding for example we lend out all our plates and cups and things like that. If somebody needs money we will help. I am close to the head monk (*loku hamvuduru*) at the temple. I am going to *Gambara Bodhie* sometimes but the most important place to me is the temple<sup>67</sup>.

Dulani’s emphasis on her status as a local ‘patron’ relates again to the interplay between giving and status, but she also makes reference to the way in which moral anchors and social landscapes have been cast adrift,

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<sup>67</sup> This also reflects a notion of status and a kind of middle/working class divide that Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) discuss, i.e. that practices related to spirit religion are more common amongst the working class while the middle class tend to harbour ideas of a ‘pure’ Buddhism in which these practices are considered not to belong. Although Dulani expresses a preference for the Buddhist temple in her rhetoric she was well known for seeking the assistance of local oracles and healers and in general I did not find that there was a clear difference between low/high caste or class. This may then reflect a rural/urban divide rather than a class or caste based differentiation.

partly because of national and global developments that were set in motion long before the tsunami, but also because of the changes associated with the disaster.

Things have changed a lot compared to when I was young. Even if people earn more money, their expenses are much higher. Salaries were lower before but people could live, today we can't save any money. Before, we did not have a lot of income but we could save and we lived happily. I also think there are many more people in Sri Lanka these days, they all have to live, work and be fed. The customs and manners (*sirit virit*) have changed and gone down. Before, people knew how to respect people but today they don't. I have always been respected but I see how other people are treated. But anyway we have to allow these people to come up, they cannot always stay down. But I don't like when some think they are big people and don't respect others, and I never know what they are saying behind my back.

Before we did not have a lot of money but I always had a small amount in my hand. Today I get a big amount but I never have anything in my hand. I always ask my friend if she has any money and she always asks me. This is the way everybody talks these days! *Ajyoo!* (lamenting expression). Before, we never asked for money from anybody; we were too ashamed to do that. Today there is no shyness (*laejay*). Rich and poor are all asking for money without shame. This all started 3-4 years ago, and it might have something to do with the tsunami. But anyway, the tsunami people (*tsunami ajye*) are rich now. They get things from everyone but we have to work for it. We are earning and they are only spending. Even the foreigners give them many things but they will not help me. It has all changed and all is upside down after the tsunami. Now people are proud. Before, they lived in small huts and now they have a big house with tiles and cement, so they think they are big now. They are not respecting and remembering who helped them and they are not educated. The main thing is that they are uneducated, that is lagging behind. They have money and they are passing exams but they have no manners.

After the tsunami, people are always going around the foreigners saying do this, give me that. I do not like it. I think the foreigners are spoiling the people. They are constantly looking for things to get for free, they are not earning. They are not saving a cent, only going around foreigners and spending. If they don't get anything they are scolding them. Before when somebody needed a house they got some small help here and there. Some stones, some bricks, a little help. But now they are expecting a foreigner to give a full house with everything. They are not trying and I hate that. We are Sinhalese people and we must have some self-respect. We should have



some pride. We have our customs and good manners, we are not like the foreigners and we should be proud of that. Sri Lankans are good people but these days they are all the time trying to copy others. The things and ways the foreigners are living they will copy. But England people are good people, they have respect.

After the tsunami all this bad influence came. We are sorry for that. In the future in Tharugama things will become worse. All the respect will go down and there will be more robbery, rape, alcohol and drugs. In Montana the boys will go fishing and there will be no educated people. If you want to raise a child in a good way you should move from here. More foreigners will come and buy land close to the sea. When I was young the village was good, people were poor but they were good. The most important thing today is money. Before money was only one important thing of many, now it is everything! The man who has money is a big person, even if he earned it in bad ways and is not a good person. This is why people always go to the foreigners. In those days the foreigners were better. The people who came in the old days were respectable. If they went to a *kade* (shop) they never asked for the price. The *mudelali* (merchant) would tell a price and the person would pay, no argument. Today there are always arguments. I respect the good people, not the money. I know many people and I respect my village people. I will always try to help and people are good with me (080423 no.1.12).

Relationships, local values and social hierarchies have changed due to development in society (e.g. relaxation of caste separation, new class formations, increased education, modernisation, economic liberalisation), and in some ways, changes were intensified by the tsunami and the interventions. People behave in unexpected ways, not always recognised as ‘appropriate’ by others, and persons formerly in the ‘patron’ role (as Dulani) are not sure about their responsibility towards and expectations of former ‘clients’. Why should they sustain the poor when they received plenty of aid and charity and have other sources of support (NGOs, foreign philanthropists etc)? Why should a person in need ‘bend to another villager’ when they can ‘keep their head high’ and tap more lucrative foreign funds? I also find her reference to England people (the colonial ruler) as “good people who have respect” interesting in the light of frequent opinions of present day ‘lack of respect’ amongst villagers. This, I believe, depicts a deep sense of ‘propriety’ and sensibility towards breaches of ‘proper behaviour’ i.e. a person’s behaviour should reflect their social standing and the associated local norms and values. This was not only expressed by people of higher rank in the village but also by

those considered as low caste, poor etc. I often hear the phrases like “they have no respect”, “there is no respect anymore”. This links to the widespread opinion that tsunami people were not being *leajayi*, i.e. not showing any shame in accepting gifts. The word '*lajja*' / '*leajayi*' literally means 'shy' / 'shame' and is commonly associated with the disciplining of women and socialisation of children, and it has gathered further layers of meaning such as modesty, decorum, respectability. A common term is '*lajja-baya*' which means 'shame-and-fear', and a popular saying goes that a girl should be brought up with '*lajja-baya*'. The concept of '*lajja-baya*' thus draws gender lines across society<sup>68</sup>. It also, I suggest, maintains social divisions and functions such as what Jeganathan (2001:50) refers to as a 'gate-keeping concept' of Sinhaleanness in the micro-politics of everyday life.

In the light of the above, it is important for Sri Lankans to respond to gifts by behaving, in keeping with the norms of the local moral community. Therefore, it is considered inappropriate also for a foreigner, who is assumed to be rich and of higher status than the average villager, to act as though he is an equal with the villagers and fails to maintain requisite social distance. My personal behaviour sometimes caused reactions - I should sit on a higher chair, flash my money and never ever, walk but take a three-wheeler – and my behaviour should reflect my status. When attempting to live more in line with villagers, i.e. not go to the expensive supermarket but the local market or not wear an expensive *sari* at a local wedding, this was not intelligible to many villagers - I should 'show my power', as expressed by my field assistance.

One might question what will happen when tsunami resources are completely drained? Are local social orders, with their emphasis on hierarchy but also on mutual obligations, a fairly stable form of security and perhaps more conducive for overall well-being compared to the rivalry of securing temporary and random help from external aid? I do not intend to make an argument against people's strive for self-reliance and equality, I but suggest that social disorder in the wake of the tsunami gave rise to new insecurities for all people, regardless of class or caste, rich or poor,

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<sup>68</sup> As conveyed in personal communication with Sri Lankan writer Hasini Haputhantri. For further references, see works by Sri Lankan scholars such as Kumari Jayawardena and Malahati De Alwis and also Obeyesekere (1984).

and that anxiety stemmed from the sudden inability to recognize familiar social patterns and behaviour.

The saying stated earlier that “the poor have become rich and the rich have become poor” is not to be taken too literally. It is not only a matter of money and tangible material gains or losses but also about local symbols of status and power and transgressions of established invisible social borders that complicate abilities to make the local life world intelligible. People are not sure who is who, and how to relate to each other. Who is strong and who is weak? Who can you trust? What can you expect from others and what are your obligations? What is right and wrong? Enveloped in the recovery process was social negotiation and moral deliberation and, I suggest, on the whole more incentives for acting on self-preservation, causing social fragmentation, than opportunities for (re)building cohesion and community.

### **Aligning Otherworldly Relations: Healing the Social Body and Protecting the Self**

The large-scale collective ceremonies, as reoccurring events in the village, are occasions when villagers gather for common goals (practical, religious and for leisure). Besides the activities related to the temples, of which some include mass participation and often demand cooperation, there are others outside organised religion. I will describe two events by most villagers considered as indispensable parts of village life, even though they are less frequent than they used to be: the *gam maduva*, a village ceremony, and the *tovil*, a household healing ritual. Both are about healing and protecting the individual, the family and the village and about (re)ordering ‘the whole’ (cosmos) according to constant principles. In ‘*Demons and Development: the Struggle for Community in a Sri Lankan Village*’, James Brow (1996) examines how ‘development’ is experienced in a particular village and how the social fabric of rural society is being disrupted by ‘progress’.

Thus the people of Kukulewa inhabited a culturally constructed world in which their interactions with one another had immediate implications for their relations with gods and demons, and vice versa. In this context encounters with gods and demons, and statements about them, constituted a set of discursive practices that addressed fundamental issues of commu-

nity.[...] I am not suggesting that, although they were dealing with gods and demons, they were *really* conducting a discourse about community. Crude reductionisms of that kind are as unnecessary as demeaning. No, they really were talking about gods and demons. But the idiom of gods and demons was extraordinarily rich and multifaceted, and its concrete imagery comprehensively encompassed the kinds of issues that I, as a social anthropologist, have been trained to address in the comparative but more abstract language of concepts like “community”, “identity” and “solidarity” (Brow 1996: 182-183).

Brow expresses uncertainty about for how long traditional ideals of community will be able to withstand ‘progress’ and ‘development’ and that it might not be too long before it summons up nothing more substantial than a “nostalgic yearning for an imagined past”. But still, he argues, in the village he studied, it is “by reference to interactions between human and supernatural beings that Kukulewa villagers make the most intelligible sense of their lives, it was still the ethics of kinship that furnished the most convincing codes for conduct, and it was still the village and caste that remained the most compelling focus for the definition of identity and experience of solidarity” (Brow 1996:192).

Even though my study is done several decades after that of Brow’s, much of his findings is similar to what I found in Tharugama and I agree with much of his analyses that local social institutions and religious and spiritual beliefs constitute compelling sources of security, identity and meaning. However, ‘progress’ and ‘development’ do not seem to have had the effect Brow anticipated, and local culture and traditions, at least in Tharugama, prove to be reasonably resilient. Rituals are perhaps somewhat reinterpreted and reworked but continue to be highly relevant in people’s lives. In fact, many rituals observed and described more than half a century ago by Paul Wirz in *Exorcism and the art of healing in Ceylon* (1954) were still practiced in Tharugama in much the same way.

### *The Gam maduva Village Ceremony*

Fernando (2000) writes that the *Gam maduva* is a grandiose and spectacular ritual based on age-old traditions and customs to invoke the Gods for the welfare of the community<sup>69</sup>. (Fernando 2000:52). It might also be described as a ceremony of thanksgiving in which the whole village constitute a congregation (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988) and it is mainly devoted to the goddess *Pattini* (Kapferer 1991).

A *gam maduva* used to be held yearly in Tharugama but now it is organised every fifth year. According to a villager, knowledgeable in local traditions, it involves special rituals, games (*porra-pol gaseema* /coconut throwing) and sharing of food and it invokes blessings for the village and protects from epidemics (e.g. small pox). It is also for pure pleasure, since there is a lot of fun and play, dancing and delicious food involved (080211 no.9).

In Tharugama, it is held at the *Gambara Bodhie*, the place in the forest that contains a large Bo tree, a house for the Buddha and several shrines for the Gods. It has been singled out in peoples' accounts earlier as of major importance, and it will be further explored in the following chapter. Below a summary of a conversation about the *Gambara Bodhie* and the village ceremony is recounted to illustrate its symbolic richness and the ritual and social significance of the *gam maduva* and the *Gambara Bodhie*.

Gambara Bodhie is at a place where there was a forest a long time ago. It was a place where they tied the king's elephants and here lived a special man, he was tall, like a giant and he was the one who started to pray here. He made a fence and started the *Bodhie*. At that time, more than 200 years ago, there was a small Bo tree. Now there is a new *Bodhie*. After one hundred years, they constructed a wall and the small *Bodhie* died so they planted a new one. The whole village belongs to this place and all the

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<sup>69</sup> Depending on which gods are propitiated rituals might be classified into two main categories, the first form is the ones where supernatural beings such as *yaksbas* (demons) or *raksbas* (planetary demon) are invoked, the other are *shanti karma* ceremonials where the four main gods are held as the main recipients of offerings and pleadings, the *gam maduva* belongs to the second category (Fernando 2000:52).

people's problems belong to *Gambara deiyo*. This is the god that has a snake around his neck, a white towel on his head, and he is riding a horse. His main place is near Kegalle. Just as *Kataragama deiyo* has his main place and main *devale* (shrine) in *Kataragama*. This is the same.

There is a lot of power at the *Gambara Bodhie*. The paddy field people started to pray here and got good harvests, then the fishermen started to pray and got fish. The farmers started a game called *porre pol* (coconut throwing). Before we had this every year, but now we do it every fifth year at the *Bodbie*.

If you take part in the game, you should not eat meat or fish or go to *keilli* (taboo/polluted) house for three months. But these days, with the new generation, they stay like that for maybe one month. In the evening the people who throw the *pol* go in a big *perahera* (procession) around the whole village and it ends up at the *Bodbie*. First, in the *perahera* come the men with the sticks. They have to alert the people that the *perahera* is coming, they are fierce. There should be all sorts of different kinds of dancing, *kavadi*, Sinhalese, Muslim and Hindu dances and *capirinia*, which is like Spanish dancing. There are mock fights and things about the colonial powers, like the Portuguese. They need people like that also in the *perahera*. They wear trousers and a coat. There is a story about a white man whose leg was cut and his wife carries him. There is English dance too. There are the men with whips so that people will move away, people with the black faces, the ladies carrying the water pots, the people cutting the paddy, people making the rice, the people with beards. They are like *māniyos*, making blessings, the *bracmaniyo*, the people with the white cloth on their heads and dancing in white trousers. When they start to dance around the *Bodbie* these have to dance first.

Then there are the people with the stick, sounding like an instrument, the people with the knife, the British people. They pretend that they are making a survey. Then there are a British husband and wife, the people dressed like ladies; they are for the people to laugh at. Then there are an old lady and an old man, but they are children dressed up like that. Then a crazy man. Then there is a person making fire from his hands (the same as at the *tovil*). Then there are the wolf, the fox, the lion and the horse. Then the people with masks portraying the demons, the *gara yakkha*, and there is the *naga*. It is a female snake, she comes like a beautiful lady but if we upset her she transforms to a snake. Then lastly comes *Pattini* and then they break the *pol*. All of this is from ancient times; nothing is modern when they go around the village and dance and address the ghosts. The *dosa* (illness/moral faults) in the village goes away. You have to keep some special things for the dance, like ash pumpkins, *keown* and *kokies* (a kind of cookies), meat and fish, all is for the ghosts and *yakkhas* (demons). When the

dancing is finished they have to take all the *tattuve* (offering baskets) to the river. When they put it to *Monara ganga* (river) they start to make *dana* (almsgivings) at the *Bodhie* to the Gods. The *dana* starts and people put mats on the ground and sit down. They give *bath* (rice) and *elevelou* (vegetables), like tomatoes, ash pumpkins and banana curries. No fish or meat.

In 1979 we stopped doing it every year. It is difficult and many from the older generation with traditional knowledge who care for these things have left the village or gone abroad. If you are involved in this you can't drink arrack (alcohol). It's hard to get people together and collect the funds and do all the work. But if we don't do it, it is *agunmai* (unwholesome) for the village, we lose the *sampath* (the goodness) and diseases will come. When we do it, it is *seth* (blessing) for the whole village. When you start the *gam madu* the whole village has to be clean, all the houses too. If there are any big problems in the village, like a bad sickness is spreading, we have to go to *Gambara Bodhie* and tell. This has nothing to do with religion (*agama*), so even a foreigner who goes there to ask will get good results.

On this occasion, when listening to the description of the *gam maduva*, I wished I had better timing and managed to arrive for fieldwork in a year when the village ceremony took place, sadly this was not the case. Luckily villagers were willing to share their knowledge and experience and I suggest that it works on many levels to build community, security and identity. It demanded a great deal of cooperation and engagement of the villagers and provided them with a sense of belonging, in the village but also in the larger scheme of things. It furthermore regulated relations with gods, spirits and demons, and reassured villagers of divine protection from misfortune and disease. At the time when I had this ceremony described to me it was as if the whole cosmos paraded through the village and their history was played out in vivid scenes on the dusty roads. It is beyond the scope of the present study to make any deeper detailed analysis of the *gam maduva* but I simply wish to make note of the general symbolic and social features.

### *The Tovil Healing Ceremony*

Another large-scale village ceremony that is more frequent than the *gam maduva* is the *tovil*. Bruce Kapferer (1991) writes that demon exorcisms (*tovil*) are a regular part of everyday life in the villages and towns of the western and southern coastal areas, and that they have attracted attention

both for the insight they provide into the occult world that influences the lives of Sinhalese but also for the magnificent costumes, marvellous masks, exciting rhythms, dance and drama that are preformed on these occasions (Kapferer 1991:18).

In Tharugama, *toivils* are preformed but not to the same degree as they used to. Nearly every house I visited in the area has had a *toivil* done in their household, or in their extended family. During 10 months of field-work in 2008, I attended one *toivil* and heard of several more in the area, so it is not a forgotten or abandoned practice. Several villagers claimed that the main reason for its decline was monetary, not loss of faith in its relevance and healing potential, and that people rather resorted to less costly rituals to deal with ghosts, spirits and demons. A local *edure* (demon master) agreed that *toivils* have decreased significantly but he claimed that minor healing, protective and black magic rituals have markedly increased (more on this in the following chapter).

Beatrice Vogt (1999), who has done in-depth studies of the *toivil*<sup>70</sup>, sees it as a form of culture-specific psychotherapy. Her study is based on four years as a pupil of a *toivil* healer in the Kandyan Highlands, and she describes the *toivil* as a public healing ritual that lasts all night and takes place in the patient's house. During the *toivil* a number of dancers and drummers, led by a master (*gurumansa*), dramatically display episodes from the lives of the gods and demons. The *yak-toivil* is performed by a *yak-edure* and his students, and as the name indicates, it is mainly directed towards demons (*yaka*). As opposed to all other healing rituals, the diseases treated in the *yak-toivil*<sup>71</sup> are caused by demons, or in some cases, by discontented ancestral spirits (*preta*). Demons do not exclusively play a role in *toivils* but are also present in *puja* and *pirith*, and with their ability to bring illness and misery upon people, they are an immutable factor in Buddhist cosmology. Therefore, demons must be relegated to their rightful place in all healing rituals (Vogt 1999:18-19).

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<sup>70</sup> The *toivil* can be subdivided according to the predominant elements in the procedure, i.e. there are different kinds of *toivils*, but she is focusing on the *yak-toivil* (as did Kapferer in his work mentioned above).

<sup>71</sup> There are a number of different *yak-toivils* e.g. the *Mabasona toivil* and the *Kalukumara toivil*. These two are well-known demons who personify particular difficulties.



Kapferer writes that demonic attack is a sign of a disturbance of the cosmic order and is furthermore potentially “a total disordering of the person in all dimensions of his or her existence”. At its extreme, demonic disorder is a “disruption of the complete physical, mental and social being of the patient” (Kapferer 1991:322). Demonic illness is moreover not necessarily a purely individual problem. “The social “strategic” aspects of demonic attack [...] are integral to the logic of exorcist diagnosis, whereby the patient’s distress is made meaningful by reference to an outer world of daily action” (Kapferer 1991:324).

Demonic ceremonies are healing rituals and household rituals, and the one is coterminous with the other. Demonic attack pollutes the victim and also the house and threatens the well-being of its members. Additionally, it makes the house potentially dangerous to others and can be disruptive of social relations centring on the house. Major public exorcisms present to the neighbourhood the purification of the victim and the house and establish the basis for the re-establishment of normal inter-household relations. A symbolic significance of the food distribution at major exorcisms is the rearticulating of the household’s social relations. The reordering of the household into its wider social context at an exorcism is consistent with the overall logic of cure, which is to restore the structuring of relations at each level within the cosmic totality (Kapferer 1991:324).

When I had lived a few months in Tharugama, the word spread about a young man who had been subject to demonic attack. It happened at one of the local Buddhist temples during a festival. He was there at night with his friends, sitting at the wall of a well and he got caught by the *distiye* (malicious gaze). After the tsunami, there used to be a temporary camp here and the young man’s family was one of those who stayed here for several years. At the time of the attack his father had been dead for about a year. A few days after the incident and before a planned *tovil*, I visited the young man and his family. He, his mother and two siblings lived in the new settlement in Lokuwatte.

My son has to go to work on a boat on Sunday but he got this sickness, he can not go to work with this sickness. This happened at the *kitilgolla* at the well where he used to spend a lot of time with his father. He has given 200 rupees to the monk who announced over the loudspeakers that my son had given this money and that the *pin* will go to Ranil (the father’s name) so that he will be reborn in a good place. After giving the money, he went to the well to sit down. Then he saw his father and he hit my son

on the back and told him to go home. Then suddenly my son became strong and started to hit all his friends. They could not control him. He became *piiso* (crazy). Then they remembered that there is a skilled *edure* in *Monaraduwe*, who had cured about 9 *piiso* people. They took him there in a three-wheeler and the *edure* cut lime (*debi kâpima*<sup>72</sup>), bathed him and gave him medicine. All night they stayed there and they did not tell me right away because I have not been well and they were afraid to tell me. I have had a lot of problems before and also here in Lokuwatte. Before we came here we did not have our own land and there have been many fights in the family. In the morning they brought my son to me and I am thankful to the friends. Without them he would have died.

I brought Bandula (another *edure* from the area) but he said that he can not do anything. We had to go back to the *edure* from Garanduwre. Anyway, Bandula told me that he got *anrude distiye* (possessed by the malicious gaze) and that they have to do a *tovil* to cure him. My small son stayed at the house when I went to *Monaraduwe* to talk to the *gurunansie* (demon master). I was afraid, and the *gurunansie* said that he had given my son some things to see what was wrong and try to help him. He *maturowewa* (infused with magic words/spells) lime and oil and gave to him to drink. When he had the *distiye*, he was strong. They had problems to hold him and he wanted to run away. He put a security thread (*arakscha nule*) on my son to keep until we had the *tovil*. I have never seen this kind of sickness, and I don't know what I would do if this happened in my house.

The *Gurunansie* told me that his father has not come with good intentions and to protect him and the family has to do the *tovil*. They will do half the *Mabasona* (the great cemetery demon) *tovil* and will not be dancing during the day. They are doing half because there is *kodivine* (black magic) too; something has been done that is not good for this house. That is the reason they do it in this way. There is a person that is angry with this house. If we don't do this *tovil* the whole family will get the same sickness as my son. He has the *peretiya distiye* (malicious gaze of an ancestral ghost; the father). If we do it, the whole family will be well and we will also punish the person who has put the *kodivine*.

My daughter was in Colombo (at her husband's house) when all this happened and a neighbour called her. She and her husband came quickly and they decided to spend the money and do a *tovil*. The daughter's husband told me that he would pay for it. In this house it does not matter

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<sup>72</sup> Lime-cutting ritual to ward off effects of evil eye and sorcery.

how much money we bring, it is always going out. I bless my son-in-law. Even if we have other relations they are of no use. I was staying with my husband's brother after my husband died but he put us out of the house. Even my husband was no good, drinking and hitting me. I had a hard life. My husband did not think about the future. He died and if we did not have this house we would be living in the street.

The *tovil* will be on the 26<sup>th</sup>, and after the *tovil* is finished we have go to Kataragama (a famous temple) with the *gurunansie* and give a *binganante dana* (almsgiving to the poor people), which will cost us about 50.000 rupees (080820 no.54).

I had the opportunity to talk with my son-in-law before the *tovil*. He said that it was because the boy was not strong that this sickness came to the body. He said he did not believe in demons and devils but if you are weak things can happen to you. He is from Colombo and he says that in Colombo, people would go to the doctor but here they do *tovil*. He laughs when he says this. Imanic adds that she did not think a doctor could cure the boy, that he should think about what happened, that he had been fighting and trying to run away and had acted like a crazy person.

I later attended the *tovil* that lasted from evening until morning and was lead by the *gurunansie* from *Monaradune* and his group. It was performed in the house and yard of the patient and attended by many neighbours and villagers. The *tovil* is a symbolically extremely 'thick' event and here it is not possible to depict and analyse it in detail (see e.g. Wirtz 1954, Kapferer 1983, Vogt 1999).

Some time after the *tovil*, I had another conversation with Samanthi. I wanted to thank her for having me at the *tovil* and to enquire about the health of her son and the situation of the household.

After the *tovil* my son did not go to work because he had a cold, but now he is cured. They have *matrella* (incantation) the *tämbili* (lime) and given him and now he is good. The same people that did the *tovil* did this. Now he is 100% cured from the *distiye*. Now the house is good; before the house looked lonely, like nobody was living inside, now it is not like that.

At the *tovil* I was busy the whole time. I got help with the cooking from my brother's family and my auntie but no one helped with the money besides my son-in-law, who paid for it all. From my husband's side nobody helped but they are having a hard time. They have many children,

and they can't help because they are also poor people. My son's friends did most of the work. The day after the *tovil* I was tired. It was a lot of work. After one or two months we will go to Kataragama, we have made a *bara* (vow). My son-in-law has gone to Iraq now, where he is working on an oil ship.

Somebody did the *kodivine* because we lived in a coconut leaf house before and now my daughter is married to a good man. The people around us want us to go down everyday. The well-educated people will not do things like this but uneducated they do. I found some objects in our yard and I knew that there was something done to us (black magic). After that the *edure* told me it was true. After I found those things, there were fights in the house and my daughter left. The fights came because of that. The people here are jealous. We are not good with the neighbours. The Sri Lankan people are like this. If we eat something good and stay in a nice way, they feel like doing something bad to us. People are like animals. I always close the door and stay inside. It's hard to stay here (080828 no.64).

The whole incident of the *tovil* and the situation of this family show that the individual body might be an arena for expressing both individual physical and mental disorders, as well as disorder in relations. Disorder here carries the double meaning of illness and dis-order and is symbolic of how disorder as a social or cosmological condition is paralleled to individual sickness.

The *tovil* and the *gam maduva* are losing ground in the area and the community is increasingly oriented towards more individualistic behaviour and smaller units of solidarity, while large-scale communal events like the *tovil* and the *gam maduva*, which could be seen as potential counterbalance against (community) dissolving processes, are deteriorating. Can it be possible that the increasing pressure of 'modern society', new norms and values, and changed economic patterns diminish incentive and space for collective rituals in everyday life? Paul Richards (2010) proposes that those who intervene in crises must take care to ensure that assistance does not undermine the processes through which social cohesion is generated or restored, thus humanitarian agencies should not only provide practical assistance to livelihoods, but they need also to create space for the ritual agency on which social cohesion depends. He contends that "establishing space for ritualisation within humanitarian programmes is an obligation for those who wish to do no harm" (Richards 2010:138).

## Summary and Reflections

The aim of this chapter has been to show that the situation in Tharugama during the period after the tsunami is marked by a process of re-establishing ambiguous borders and re-writing scripts according to changed circumstances. It is a situation in which many people experience a new kind of insecurity related to identity and belonging, which includes reformulation and resistance but also opportunities and acceptance. In Hylland Eriksen's words it is an environment of *insecure sociality* in which individuals' encounters are not secure about whom they are dealing with and not sure of whom they are looking at in the mirror. Opportunities are varied and open but risks are also substantial (Hylland Eriksen 2010:1) That previous patterns of reciprocity were more beneficial to some than to others also holds true in the case of the tsunami gifts and new patterns of exchange. The disaster laid bare some former power relations but also created new ones. Local hierarchies, exploitative relationships and moral obligations were 'untied' and under a process of (re)tying. This, again, further nuances, or complicates if you wish, the question of 'building back better' and of presupposing the disaster as a window of opportunity.

According to Somarasundram (2007), the consequences of collective trauma; mistrust, suspicion, brutalisation, deterioration in morals and values, poor leadership, dependency, passiveness, despair, and superficial and short terms goals are echoed in many villagers' own descriptions of their community after the tsunami. Opinions like "you should not mix with other people, then there will be fights and problems", "there is no respect anymore", "people are like animals", "there has been a tsunami in people's mind", "people have forgotten where they came from", "you can't tell who is poor any longer", "people just sit and wait, they don't want to work", "people have got a sickness for money" are pointing towards features of Somarasundaram's collective trauma list. I am generally not prone to find these kinds of clear-cut lists helpful, since they are attempts to fit a complex and messy reality into neatly constructed schemes, but in this case it says something about the disaster's impact on social webs. The tsunami, I argue, reinforced a pre-existing culture of mistrust. Beside an increased mistrust, a significant feature is the (re)structuring of relations as a way of 'curing' disorder and restoring an intelligible life world (social as well as cosmological). In this complex process of a reordering/realigning of individuals, households, houses

CHAPTER 5

and places, spirits and gods, local rationales and practices of reciprocity are instrumental.







## 6. Disaster and Local Religious Life - Reciprocal Flows Disrupted

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These days Buddhist people think; we don't need a religion we only want a way to live! They are thinking; we need a house, we need work and money and we are not so interested in Buddhism.

Tharugama village monk

The previous chapter dealt with a social landscape under pressure and exposed a process of shifting relations, expectations and obligations in the wake of the second wave. In this chapter moral dilemmas and transformations in the sphere of religious life are tied into this process, and the chapter looks closer at the local economy of merit-making and at the shifting roles of givers, receivers and brokers in the context of disaster aid. The religious and spiritual dimension of local life worlds has essential bearing upon people's struggle for being on an existential level but also, I contend, for more general well-being and management of everyday life. The recovery process and the way aid was controlled and distributed played into ongoing developments in larger society and erosion of Buddhist values and trust towards established religion. As noted by Vokes (2007), "questions of religious change are also questions of shifting power relations and changing political contexts" (Vokes 2007: 329).

The tsunami gifts sometimes drew temples into a pivotal position at the interface between outsiders and insiders, donors and recipients. The trajectory of the gifts altered the monks' roles within the scheme of giving and receiving, and their shifting role in the moral economy became a condensation of many of the processes of change taking place. However, people continued to seek the temples for restoration of order – merit

making, refuge – even as the temple was being drawn into a new and different order.

In this chapter I will show that the local monks and temples, as brokers of tsunami gifts, affected their position in the community, their morality was increasingly questioned as was their ability to generate religious merit. Thus, people tended to look for spiritual protection and support outside the local Buddhist temples. The growing popularity of fortune-tellers, demon charmers, and secular commercial priests and priestesses indicate that people resort to more short-term, individualistic and materialistic alternatives instead of the otherworldly guidance and collective ceremonies of organised religion at the Buddhist temples. The aim of this chapter is to show that the disaster hooked into global discourses of “a world in which ends far outstrip means, in which the will to consume is not matched by an opportunity to earn [...], a world in which the *possibility* of rapid enrichment, of amassing a fortune by largely invisible methods, is always palpably present” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999:293), and to show how this is expressed in the lives of villagers, the merit economy and everyday religious practice. Following Schlehe (2010:115), the reconstruction of life worlds includes complex cultural dynamics beyond economic and social structures, including not only local factors but also outside influences and notions of modernisation.

I first want to draw attention to how the tsunami disaster was interpreted and fitted in the local worldview, then follows a discussion of how Sinhala Buddhism and the traditional authority of monks are contested. Thereafter will be examined the tsunami and the intervention’s influence on local religious life and how this relates to ‘societal moral crises’ and ongoing national and global processes. Here I want to add that ‘religion’ is largely studied as lived and acted in concrete situations and the formal texts and discourses included basically reflect the understanding and usage in daily lives of the informants. Furthermore, as emphasised in the introduction, a broad approach to ‘religion’ as religious life is used including local beliefs and practices (of ‘spirit religion’). Gombrich’s and Obeyesekere’s (1988) concept of ‘spirit religion’ refers to beliefs and practices outside ‘Buddhist religion proper’ (e.g. spirit cults, demon charmers, diviners and priests/priestesses of the Gods). I use the concept of spirit religion and include it in ‘local religious life’, since it operate within the same cosmological field, even if ‘Buddhism proper’ focuses on more elevated predicaments and goals, and spirit religion on more

worldly dilemmas and desires. When I distinguish or label specific practices and beliefs as Buddhist and/or spirit religion it is for analytical purposes and for ordering the material, not for denoting clear separateness or making any evaluations about legitimacy.

### “Why Did it Happen and Why Did it Happen to Me?”

People do negotiate manifold co-existing explanations and copying strategies in an entanglement of secular and religious interpretations of disasters (Schlehe 2010). In the case of Sri Lanka and the tsunami catastrophe, Buddhist concepts about *karma*, suffering (*dukkha*), and morality (*sila*), and Sinhala Buddhist mythical stories figured as a means to interpret and ‘make sense’ of the disaster. On my interviewing the head monk of a local temple involved in relief work in 2005, he pointed out that tsunamis are nothing new to Sri Lanka, they have happened before, and such incidents are recorded in the *Mahavamsa* (a famous Buddhist monastic chronicle) and in the *Jataka* tales (stories of former lives of the Buddha).

People do not have any prior knowledge of a tsunami, but these things did happen in the past as well. Some people remember these stories from our ancient history, especially children because they learn about them in school. But many people have forgotten that what happened is nothing new. There is one example in the *Jatakas* about giant sea waves sweeping several kilometres inland. The people received a warning prior to the arrival of the destructive waves but only the wise and good people listened and were able to escape. All the bad selfish people did not listen and they all perished. Another example is the story of *Vihara Maha Devi*. It is a story from the days of king *Duttugamunu*. It is told that the king once boiled an *arabant* (holy person) in oil and threw his body into the sea. The *devas* (gods) of the sea became angry and sent a dreadful storm; huge waves rolled up and swallowed the land. The people of the villages had to run for their lives further inland. They lost their huts, property and precious coconut palms. Higher and higher came the waves and the people called out to the king to help them. The king’s priests advised him to sacrifice his only beloved daughter to the *devas* (gods) of the ocean, she was beautiful and pious. The daughter agreed and gave herself willingly as a sacrifice and she was put out to sea in a small boat. As soon as the little vessel was launched, the ocean stilled its waves. The *devas* were satisfied and did not want to let the waves swallow the girl so she floated safely ashore. The sea

gods stopped the flood but the greater part of the kingdom was already lost.

You will find evidence of this if you dig deep into the ground. Inland you will find seashells and other things belonging to the sea. These stories testify that disasters come and go and that this event is not unique or unnatural” (Ivarsson 2005:24).

The reason that the king (*Kelanie Tissa*) ordered the *arabani's* death in the story of *Vihara Maha devi* was that he was the message bearer of the adultery of the king's wife. The daughter who was saved later married a king in another area and gave birth to king *Duttugamunu*, the historical Sinhala cultural hero who defeated the Tamil king *Elara* and unified the country under Sinhala rule. Gamburd (2010) notes that people in her study area knew this story but that they only in hindsight equated the disaster with the recurrence of past events, and that this historic disaster must have been a tsunami (Gamburd 2010:81). Her informants furthermore drew implicit parallels between historic and contemporary political dynamics (Gamburd 2010:82).

The *Mahavamsa* story draws on and reinforces a number of identities. First, it draws clear boundaries around acceptable femininity: bad women cheat on their husbands and cause much chaos in nature and in culture; good women risk their lives to protect their country and give birth to heroes. The dutiful daughter redeems the sins of her adulterous mother. Second, the story reinforces the necessity of proper Buddhist worship to minimize dangers from unpredictable natural events. To prevent further disasters, a good ruler should promote Buddhism and give generously to Buddhist institutions. Third, the story links cultural history, the tsunami disaster, and ongoing ethnic politics (Gamburd 2010:82).

The common features, during my fieldwork 2005, in informants' accounts of why the tsunami happened included *karma*, moral decline in society at large, abuse of nature and its 'revenge', and references to mytho-historical incidents. Most people were fully aware of the scientific explanation, but it was not enough to make sense of the catastrophe. They emphasised that their behaviour in the present situation was important in order to protect them in the future; to refrain from self-interest.

Crosby (2008) depicts a discrepancy between more Buddhist doctrinal interpretations and understanding and the actual reactions amongst ordi-

nary laypeople. She and other scholars saw advanced Theravada Buddhist theories (e.g. *utu-niyama*<sup>73</sup>) as giving adequate explanations for the tsunami to view victims as innocent, and they did not expect *karma* to be used to explain the disaster, but her informants proved the contrary. It turned out that those furthest from the action were not discussing it in terms of causes connected to human behaviour, while those most involved readily made such connections, sometimes with apocalyptic vision (Crosby 2008:59-61). Crosby “was struck by the variety of interpretations in the spontaneous attempts to grapple with the devastation, and how these contrasted with what I had presumed would be the dominant Buddhist interpretation. I was also struck by the extent to which they drew on traditional, especially local, Buddhist teachings” (Crosby 2008:54). The most common themes that featured in interpretations of the tsunami in Crosby’s material were bad *karma* and especially bad *karma* defining a particular group, failure to keep the Buddhist precepts, angered gods, and foolish unwise leadership. An additional theme was the decline of the *dhamma* (Buddha’s teaching/way) followed by the arrival of a new future Buddha and of a new golden era (Crosby 2008:62). The tsunami was far from seen as an impartial act of nature, but rather as the “indicative of the moral decay either of a particular group, of the leaders of the country, or of the world as a whole” (Crosby 2008:66).

In my material, both from 2005 and 2008, similar findings (to Crosby’s) appear. They also resonate with Schlehe’s (2010) findings in the case of the tsunami in Java, that people make sense, and cope with disaster by linking it to specific world views, and that this dimension interrelates with those of economic recovery and physical reconstruction (the primary focus of humanitarian interventions). A widespread perception in Tharugama was to regard our ‘time’ as one of ignorance, darkness and moral decline, and some believed that this was bound to happen before a new Buddha is to be born. Some even maintained that the tsunami was a sign that a new Buddha had arrived. Bad leadership and collective *karma* were often brought up.

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<sup>73</sup> *Niyama* is a range of constraints that determine possible patterns for the unfolding of events and why causality is not random. *Utu-niyama* (‘constraint by nature/season’) explains such things as seasonal changes and less predictable natural phenomena such as earthquakes (Crosby 2008:59).

Concepts in doctrinal Buddhism and understanding amongst ordinary laymen are not always concurrent, and Disanayaka (1993) maintains that *karma* to most people does not mean volitional action and its relation to cause and effect but something that can be more easily comprehended, as a kind of fate or destiny; something that an individual can do nothing but to face (Disanayaka 1993:84). A Tharugama villager put it like this:

You can't escape your *karmie*, its like fate. It is told in your horoscope. If you have that you are going to die, you might get some extra few weeks if you do *pujaves* (offerings) and *dana* (almsgiving), but you can't change it. People are all the time blaming *karmie*. Like Chandrika; she has always supported the temple and helped the poor, now she is sick and people say it is because of her *karmie* (no.62).

In general, people were disinterested in elevated spiritual goals and *nirvana* and they were preoccupied with problems and possible improvements in their present life<sup>74</sup>. Kapferer (1991) found a widespread belief that action in this life can actually have its results in this life and that the individual results of *karma* in this life can affect persons that are closely associated with that individual (Kapferer 1991:22). Groups might also share or be collectively saved from a particular fate and the bad or good *karma* of one person affects a whole group, a kind of collective *karma*. The overflow of *karma* to others is, according to Crosby, a phenomenon that appears in Buddhist narratives from the earliest to modern times (Crosby 2008:62).

In Tharugama, *karma* figured prominently in everyday life, in interviews and casual conversations. Not only in reference to the tsunami but also to life in general, people often expressed profound fear to be reborn as lower beings and they emphasised the importance of collecting enough *pin* (religious merit) to warrant a good rebirth. *Pin*, religious merit, is an influential concept, and during one's life it is of paramount importance to acquire *pin* in order to accumulate good *karma* and to ensure a good rebirth. In 2005 I met with a local doctor in the Tharugama area who

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<sup>74</sup> With age, religious devotion and spiritual matters generally become more pronounced. The most frequent participants at temples during religious holidays are the elderly and they spend more time on spiritual development and religious duties, organise almsgivings (*dana*), go on pilgrimages to famous religious places and support the local temple in various ways.

worked with mental relief. He was convinced that the local religion, and for example concepts like *pin*, had a positive influence on individual recovery processes and he exemplified with a patient he treated at that time:

A woman who lost her youngest son in the tsunami came to see me. She has two children who survived the tsunami but her youngest was her favourite and now she feels bad for neglecting the ones who survived. They are needy and want her attention all the time, and she is sad and gets angry with them. She knows she is not behaving like a good mother. I gave her watercolour, paintbrushes and paper, and I advised her to paint together with her children, and others too if they want to join. I told her that if she makes her children and other children happy, this would create a lot of *pin* for the dead boy. I believe the collection and transfer of *pin* for lost ones is one way of coping with grief (050510 no 7.2).

Gombrich and Obeyesekere in *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (1988) illustrate human suffering, morality and the karmic process in the following way:

However, the mixture of pleasure and pain, which is the human lot, is essential to attaining salvation. Lower beings are suffering too much to think with sufficient clarity, gods are too comfortable to be fully aware of suffering and hence feel no urgency to escape from it. Only men and women can rise above gods to leave the cycle of existence forever. Gods and demons are, like us, evanescent inhabitants of this ever-changing cosmos. Like us, they are subject to decay, death and re-becoming. Indeed, in a sense they *are* us, for if we are good, we may be reborn as gods, if bad, as meaner spirits - in due course to die again. For the universe is a moral hierarchy: power, comfort, and longevity all increase as one ascends the universe, an ascent that is itself the result of virtue (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988:17-18).

### **Religious Life in Tharugama**

As stated before, people generally made a distinction between Buddhist religion (*agama*) and beliefs and practices related to gods, spirits, and demons. Seneviratne (1999) contends that the term Buddhism signifies an imagined Euro-Buddhist canon that derives from early western interpreters of Buddhism. For these people, anything that did not conform

was considered to be non-Buddhist. The latter included spirit cults, animism and supernaturalism. “In the western codification of the texts, an essentialised high Buddhism was made into a relic and was polarised from the folk religion” (Seneviratne (1999:3). These ‘non-Buddhist’ beliefs and practices in Tharugama were just as important in people’s lives and did by no means compromise their identity as Buddhists. “Buddha is always number one” as somebody told me while explaining that it was no problem for him to make offerings to a deity, hoping for winning a land dispute, or consulting a diviner to find out about a suspected *kodivina* (black magic). In terms of protection, health and material welfare, a broad variety of specialists, rituals and practices (secular, religious and spiritual) are available and regularly used.

It was conveyed by villagers that the temple is not considered the appropriate, or ‘the best’, place to go and ask for help and solutions to ‘this-worldly’ problems. For mundane problems they rather saw specialists outside organised Buddhist religion, better suited for particular problems. There are a broad variety of persons and places where one might turn for assistance and help in different kinds of matters (e.g. economic, material, spiritual, family or love relations, health) and specialists often have a small practice in connection to their homes (a few have private shrines and practices separate from their homes). These ‘helpers’ in the local context were the *vederala* (traditional doctor), the *edure* (demon master), the *kapurala* (priest of the gods), the *māniyo* (priestess of the gods), the *sastere* (diviner/fortune teller), the *shastrakarya* (astrologer), and the doctor (western medicine).

At the *Gambara Bodhie* in Tharugama north, several popular female priestesses (*māniyo*) and a few priests (*kapurala*) operated and provided their services. At a moderate cost, a range of rituals are conducted aimed at pleasing a deity or deities, with the purpose of helping clients with particular problems. Individuals who get assistance of a *māniyo* and/or other types of specialists do not compromise their Buddhist identity or go against Buddhist ethics, and the same holds for the specialists themselves. The persons in Tharugama working with spiritual guidance, healing and mitigation of problems outside organised religion consider their vocation instilled with Buddhist goals and values. Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) find that Sinhala ecstasies, such as the *māniyo*, locate themselves ethically, however confused they may be doctrinally, within the



local great tradition of Buddhism (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988:462).

*Traditional Authority of Monks and Buddhism - Buddhism Transformed?*

The relationship between monks and the laity is traditionally one of reciprocal support. The Buddha ensures that monks and nuns maintain daily contact with the laity, forbidding them to keep money and to store, grow and cook their own food. Thus monks and nuns depend on the laity for material support. On the other hand, the lay community depends on the *Sangha* for inspiration and guidance in matters concerning the *Dhamma*. Buddhism thus extends its moral consideration to include an entire society and envisions a cooperative society bound by spiritual and material reciprocity between the monastic establishment and the laity (Kapur-Fic 1998:271).

Monks, householders are helpful to you, as they provide you with the requisites of robes, almsfood, lodgings, and medicine. And you, monks, are helpful to householders, as you teach them the *Dhamma*, admirable in the beginning, in the middle, and in the end. In this way the holy life is lived in mutual dependence, for the purpose of crossing over the flood, for making an end to suffering (*Itivuttaka*<sup>75</sup> :107, Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2010).

The *Vinaya*, the disciplinary rules for Buddhist monks, forbid them to handle money. If the monk becomes directly involved with money, he risks compromising his religious legitimacy<sup>76</sup>.

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<sup>75</sup> *Itivuttaka*, a collection of 121 short discourses, takes its name from the beginning of each discourse; this (*itī*) was said (*vuttam*) by the Blessed One (the Buddha).

<sup>76</sup> It should be added that a new role emerged for monks during a movement to modernise Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism in the twentieth century. It sanctioned a more 'this worldly' engagement in society (Seneviratne 1999, Tambiah 1992). In South and Southeast Asia, Buddhism has become an establishment not only in religious but also in economic terms. In Sri Lanka monastic establishments were recipients of large endowments and monks became landlords. Seneviratne makes a distinction between a proto-Buddhist or Indian Buddhism, with a free, propertyless and

Footnote continued on next page

Interaction between monks and the laity in traditional Sri Lankan society emphasises the needs of the monks rather than that of the laity. The laity must provide for the monks (alms/*dana*) whereas the monks' 'village of focus' (*gocaragama*) is also referred to as the 'village of prey' (*godurugama*), "What and whether the laity received was non-material and immaterial respectively" (Seneviratne 1999:33). The monks are under no obligation to repay villagers' gifts, but the givers automatically earn merit (*pin*) by providing for the monks. However, the monks reciprocate by preaching the *dhamma*, or Buddhist doctrine. The major purpose of both accepting *dana* (alms) and *bana* (preaching) is directed towards enhancing future lives rather than this one (Seneviratne 1999:33-34).

The study by Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere of the changing nature of Sinhala Buddhism in Sri Lanka, already mentioned, was published in 1988, but the bulk of the material is from the 1960s and 70s. Even though this is more than 40 years ago, some data are interesting in comparison with contemporary material from Tharugama. They emphasise a recent growth of spirit religion, especially among the 'lower' classes of the urban poor, where new 'cult groups' provide a needed sense of community (1988:67ff). They claim that changing socio-economic conditions, unmet needs and desires presents the Buddha, and even some traditional Sinhala deities, as 'too distant' and 'too moral,' whereas deities with 'dark sides' have a greater emotional appeal. These deities are related to magic, sorcery, and urgent worldly aims, including vengeance and other morally suspicious motives (1988:33ff).

They furthermore describe the traditional role of Buddhism and the *Sangha* and write that it was the monks of the *Sangha* that were the educators of the Sinhala people, that literacy was taught at the Buddhist temples, that texts were Theravada Buddhist and were written, kept and transmitted by monks and the monasteries (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988:445). The integrity of the Sangha is conceived to "rest not so much on its orthodoxy as on its orthopraxy" and the Buddhist tradition prescribe that monks guilty of disciplinary offences are deemed to leave the Order. (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988:446-447).

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charismatic *Sangha*, and Classical or South and Southeast Asian Buddhism, with an established, landed, and routinised *Sangha* that has strong connections to the state (Seneviratne 1999:23).

According to Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) the *Sangha* began to lose its monopoly as the source of cultural values and information in the middle of the nineteenth century when the British introduced state education on a western model. The new education was purveyed in English and associated with the current political power. The *Pali Canon* was translated into English and made accessible to educated Sinhalese laity without intermediaries long before it was translated into Sinhala and this decreased the influence of the *Sangha* (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988:447-448). They maintain that changes in Sinhala Buddhism are related to rapid changes in Sri Lankan material and social life, e.g. the destruction of traditional village community and identity, the emergence of new class formations, and the rapid escalation of population, urbanization, educational opportunities, and unfulfilled expectations (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988:8ff).

As social historians of religion, we believe that great social change will, in due course, entail great religious change, however complex the causal process. It therefore comes as no surprise that when the mass of the Sinhala population is experiencing dramatic change in its material circumstances its religious life too is being transformed (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988:8).

Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) in fact distinguish three forms of Sinhala religion: *traditional Buddhism*, the Theravada of the Buddha, the *Sangha*, and the Pali Canon, *spirit religion*, and *Protestant Buddhism* (1988:4). Protestant Buddhism, according to them, appeals to the urban middle class and departs from traditional Theravada by undoing the dichotomy between the dominant and essential monks and the subordinate laity<sup>77</sup>. It emphasises the individual's capacity to seek his or her salvation without intermediaries and traditional authorities (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988:202ff). This has, in some ways, contributed to the undermining of the status and role of the *Sangha* and greater social egalitarianism, but in other ways also caused social fragmentation and given rise to new phenomena often described as Buddhist 'fundamentalism' that claims to be

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<sup>77</sup> Protestant Buddhism started in the late nineteenth century and was influenced by the 'modern' values of the British colonialists. It incorporated characteristics of Protestant Christianity while also representing a Buddhist revival and protest against the privilege and domination of the British and Protestant Christian missionaries (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988:202ff).

a more authentic Buddhism than traditional Theravada (De Silva 2009:21).

To what extent Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) reveal widespread, actual changes in Sinhala Buddhism might be questioned, and they have been criticised for over-generalising from largely Colombo-based studies and to overemphasise Protestant Buddhism (cf Holt 1991). Furthermore, it is not clear if the prevalence and specific forms of spirit religion they present represents a significant change or to what extent such phenomena were actually an influential part of traditional Sinhala religion. Still I believe that they make some interesting points; that it is necessary to recognize changing socioeconomic and political conditions in order to make sense of religious change and to examine how radically different conditions have contributed to new sufferings and needs as well as opportunities. I suggest that the tsunami disaster (including the first, second and third wave) affected the local moral economy with ramifications for religious life in Tharugama.

### *The Tsunami and Tharugama Buddhism, Monks and Temples*

The previous chapter revolved around a disordered social world and the (re)tying of webs of reciprocity to establish social boundaries. Another example of transgression of borders and of transformation of established roles, how once insiders suddenly become outsiders, appears when a closer look is taken at the local temples. After the tsunami many people fled to the temples, and it was often here that relief camps were established. They quickly became places to which aid organisations were drawn to find recipients to implement their relief agendas. Monks played an important role in the village before the tsunami and often became 'brokers' of the tsunami gift; those who controlled and distributed a substantial amount of material and economic support. In this process and in the encounter with foreign NGO's and generous private persons, many monks gained new experiences, e.g. learned new languages such as English and French and received substantial economic support for development and improvement of the temples.

To many international NGO's it was convenient to identify and organise support through temples situated along the main road of the devastated coast but also, in my view, western NGO's often held an idealised view

of Buddhism and had an exaggerated degree of trust in Buddhist monks. They were enchanted by the saffron robe and could not see the person in it. Many had little knowledge about the life of rural monks and the possible consequences of introducing them to a 'new world' (of material privileges, western values and habits).

In some cases, monks and temples, and their function as intermediaries between NGO's and victims, have put their relation with the lay community out of balance. It is important to note though that not all temples and monks were involved in relief work. In Tharugama, two temples were active in relief work. However, villagers also go to other temples in the area that had a minimum of contact with NGO's and these did not receive any support to speak of. In 2008, those are the ones most popular, as they are seen as being more 'traditional' and 'authentic', and the monks are regarded morally superior compared to colleagues at temples with extensive foreign contact and funding. Most village monks had limited knowledge of and exposure to western culture prior to the tsunami, and they often came from poor rural backgrounds. It is thus not difficult to picture that the sudden massive attention they got from foreigners who were seeking and 'competing' for local 'partners' and the resources they offered seemed attractive and hard to resist. It must have appeared as a great blessing, but in hindsight it turned out to not be without certain costs.

As indicated by Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988), the authority of monks, tie into moral behaviour and practice and to the preservation of tradition. Some Tharugama monks and their intimate relations with foreigners, who often were considered morally dubious, coupled with incidents, suspicions and rumours of corruption (monks acting on personal gain) tainted their reputation and affected their position in the village. Some monks got invites and support to travel to Europe to tell about their 'projects' and to raise money for further development work in connection to their temples. Seen from the perspective of the villagers, these temples and monks are now rich and belong to those who have managed to attract the 'golden wave'. Their positions are displaced from being rooted amongst the people to slipping towards being associated more with outsiders and the foreign that exist outside the familiar village environment. The monks' authority in religious matters, their aptitude as spiritual advisors and sources of merit (*pin*) was seriously tarnished. They are still considered powerful, but perhaps in another, more 'this-worldly',

way that has had negative impact on their status. Seneviratne notes (1999:32) that under British colonial rule and in the Buddhist revitalisation/modernisation/purification paradigm, foreign domination or even intimate relations like intermarriage with foreigners leads to separatism and loss of unity within the social order. “Thus purity, morality and unity are different manifestations of the same wholesome state” (Seneviratne 1999:32).

A widespread opinion in the area was that the traditional work at Buddhist festivals and rituals was increasingly not prioritised or done in the correct way at some temples. Distrust and discontent with the work and morality of monks did exist also before the tsunami, but this was reinforced and confirmed by mismanagement of aid resources and ‘bad’ behaviour of some monks. At the same time monks sometimes felt disappointed and estranged from the lay community as a consequence of the tsunami and the aid process. In 2005, only a few months after the tsunami, I had a conversation with Arjuna Thero, a young head monk. We talked about peoples’ behaviour in the disaster aftermath and if they could, from a Buddhist point of view, find any meaning in their suffering.

People should act according to *dhamma*<sup>78</sup>. People here are born Buddhists but they do not follow the Buddhist precepts. This (the tsunami) should be an awakening amongst the people that they cannot ignore the truth. They should learn from this experience and act as true Buddhists. Some people do understand this opportunity and the way to find meaning in their suffering but there is also a negative side and some people act passively, sitting and waiting for others to help them. They expect others to provide them with money and things. So I believe that because of the tsunami there will be a big change in our society and it includes both negative and positive aspects. People understand that they should do good things but they are also interested in getting benefits for themselves. What happened after the tsunami is that the villagers were exposed to something new, all these people and organizations came to give them things. This changed their minds and they have become more selfish. It even created

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<sup>78</sup> Sanskrit from *dhri* “to support”, law, justice, the social or moral order, the unity of life, the Buddha’s Way or Teaching (*The Dhammapada*, trans. E., Easwaran 1986:202).

hatred and jealousy between people in terms of who gets what and how much. What has happened in Sri Lanka is that people are much too occupied with what they get and compare it with their neighbours. They forget to act with love for the whole nature as they did before. So you can't really say that they find meaning in their suffering, they do not make use of the opportunity to learn about the true nature of things. I indirectly let people know about this but I cannot force them to understand. They are more powerful than me. It is true that these people are helpless; it is true that they are in need of many things; but when I advise them they do not understand that I do it to help them, for their benefit. They take it the other way, that I deny them things. I have given them all the help I can, I have done everything. But some people only want more. Sometimes I think there was not only the tsunami in nature, there was also a tsunami in people's minds (050507 no.7.1).

About four years later, in 2008, I talked with Arjuna Thero again. His temple had by then received steady support for several years from several foreign NGO's and he said that:

I am grateful for the help I have got from the foreigners. They funded a new pre-school and it opened last month. Next month I am going to Europe, because I have been invited by an NGO. Most people in the area who were affected by the tsunami have got new houses now, and they are working again and life is back to normal. Some families have not received any help though, I don't know why. Many of those who received help are still not satisfied and happy, I don't know why. People have regained their lives but not their happiness (080128 no.6).

On this occasion Arjuna Thero gave an impression of disappointment that both he and his congregation have changed irreversibly. According to him, he and the villagers will continue to coexist and, in some ways, be dependent of each other, but the intimate closeness that he once felt seemed lost. I was impressed by the improvement of his English abilities since our last encounter four years earlier. At that time he only knew a few words and now we were able to talk freely without an intermediary interpreter. The tsunami apparently radically changed his life. From running a small worn-down village temple according to familiar routines to having relations with people from other countries, receiving and managing monetary and material resources and even getting the opportunity to travel repeatedly to Europe. All of which seems distant, not to say impossible, to most villagers.

Another more senior monk, Seneviratne Thero, did not receive as many benefits as Arjuna Thero in the tsunami aftermath, but still funding for different activities and renovations at his temple arrived years after the disaster. He expresses worry for the state of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and tried to explain why the religious life of the villagers has changed.

The Buddhist religion is not taught 'by law' or 'by force'. Muslims are advised to pray five times a day. In Christian religion there is a way, you have to pray daily. In Buddhism the Lord Buddha is not telling -You have to pray! To be a Buddhist means that you have to think about what you are doing, if it is good or bad. In Thailand and other places there is perhaps Buddhism in an other way but in our country we are not so close to Buddhism. The Christians and Muslims are trying to spread their religion but Buddhists are not like that. These days Buddhist people think, we don't need a religion we only want a way to live. They are thinking we need a house, we need work and money and we are not so interested in Buddhism.

In America, England and Australia they are now starting to believe in Buddhism. Many scientists made experiments in Buddhism and they contend that the only religion that will last is Buddhism. After the tsunami you can see how Buddhism has spread all over the world. All the Buddha statues were protected and did not become destroyed in the tsunami. You can see that the trains were broken, big bridges and houses. So all these big things were destroyed but the small Buddha's were untouched. That is how powerful Buddhism actually is.

After the tsunami, people have changed a lot and are begging for things all the time. They do not want to work; they just want things to be given to them. The people who faced the tsunami do not come to the temple a lot. They do not come to the temple because they only want material help. When the tsunami came, the temple first helped the people, but when they started to get help from the NGO's they only ran after them. Then they did not care about the temple. People are going to the *Gambara Bodhie*, that is for everyday use to solve their problems. They are not going to the temple for that. At the temple their private problems will not be solved, the *māniyo* for example tell their name and their special problem and ask for it to be solved. This is different.

I believe that another tsunami will come in 2012. There will be a big disaster and not only in Sri Lanka; many people will die. To prepare ourselves to face that disaster we have to start praying. We have to believe in Buddhism and start praying, and then we will be protected. We have to believe in the religion and *Dhamma*. If you stay with Buddhism at all times, you will not be badly affected (080518 no.34).



Developments in the community and personal experiences in connection with the tsunami have made some villagers stop going to temples they have belonged to for generations, while others show more tolerance and separate monks as persons and what they represent, and they claim to 'still respect the robe' even though their trust and support for the local temple has declined. One village woman expressed it convincingly by claiming that the only reason she kept attached to the temple and the monk was that she needed him for her funeral. That is all. She worried that if she did not give *dana* and support the temple, she could not be sure that her funeral would be done in a good way, and that she would be reborn in a good place. Were it not for that, she would not care for the temple at all. Others were a bit more forgiving towards the monks and saw the novelties, strain and temptations the foreign NGO's exposed the monks to being the main source of the current problem.

The monk is actually good; it is the foreigners that make him bad. After the tsunami he changed, and today he does not care for the village people. It is fine that the temple has a nice school now and that the children learn English, but I don't like that the monk talks to the children in English. I am sad about this monk (080327 no.1.8).

An elderly man living close to one of the temples made a clear distinction between religion and the monks, and he saw the tsunami as a main cause of the latters' moral deterioration. Crucially, his commentary shows how it is through the practices of giving and receiving that the changing relationship between the people and the temple is expressed and shaped:

Buddhism will never be destroyed. It is the people that are bad, but Buddhism will always be the same. If people live according to the Buddha's teachings they will not have any problems, then you will have good protection in your life. It is the temples that have problems. Our monk did not behave in a good way so we stopped to give *dana* (alms) to x *Pansala*. Now we give to y *Pansala* instead. The monk at the x *Pansala* does not look after it in a good way. He should have cared for the *Buddhu ge* (Buddha's house) first, before making new buildings (a new school, living spaces etc). He got too much money after the tsunami. This is why he changed. Many things given to the temple were not given to the people. The temple should be a place for praying, nothing else. Since he behaves badly, many people have stopped going there and support other temples. When I was young this temple was good and powerful. Everything changed with the

tsunami, but I believe that the monk would still be good if the tsunami had not come (080515 no.1.17).

Alms (*dana*) from the lay community are fundamental to uphold the relation between the temple and the monks on the one hand, and the lay people and the surrounding community on the other. They are not given with the same naturalness any longer and the exchange of material support against religious merits (*pin*), spiritual guidance and ritual services is increasingly questioned.

As the temples became recipients of generous gifts of aid from abroad, their status as donors of merit to the community was regularly called into question. One example is that it is harder to collect alms (*dana*) to the temples amongst villagers. A woman who is a faithful supporter to one of the local temples had a difficult time to collect *dana* (alms) for *vesak poya* (an important Buddhist holiday). She was constantly told that people were not willing to give, since they thought that the temple did not live up to its religious, moral and social obligations and that it had received enough money and support from abroad after the tsunami. The temple referred to here has gone through a total transformation. From being small, old and worn down it has become big and well equipped. In several instances, I was told how the head monk prioritised the recently finished construction of an foreign funded pre-school on the temple premises instead of caring for the old temple buildings, and how he was absent for important religious events in the village because he had meetings with foreigners. His behaviour after the tsunami was often described as inappropriate for a monk. The current development on temple grounds to make way for a meditation hall aimed for retreats for foreigners was not seen with gentle eyes and was commented as e.g. ‘it is not a temple anymore, it is a luxury hotel’, or ‘that place is not for us anymore’. Many villagers were not comfortable with the changes at the temple, and people tend to have a clear idea about the proper behaviour for monks and react strongly on deviation from norms. As temples became drawn into the new gift relationships with foreign donors – outsiders to the community - this had numerous knock-on effects upon other relationships of reciprocity within the local community. If monks no longer constitute a source of merit (*pin*), due to their immoral behaviour, people may resort to other solutions as one villager explains below.

We still go to the *x Pansala* but there are problems there. This place has changed, the monk has changed and the ancient things are lost. We have actually stopped to give *dana* to this temple, and now we support an other one. Now I feel that *x Pansala* is a hotel, it is *pao* (sin/a shame). The monk is not good because he does not care for the poor people and does not treat everybody in the same way. He took many things that were given by the NGOs' and gave only to special persons. We don't like this temple anymore. A proper monk has to bless all the people at *poya* (Buddhist holy day) and he has to go for *dana* to village houses, but he does not do this. If a person has given a lot of *dana* to the temple he has to remember that and pray for that person, but he does not remember their name. These days we do not pray to the monk, we only pray to the robe. This is also why we go more to *Gambara Bodhie*. We have the books of the *gathas* (verses/stanzas) and can pray ourselves. We can do the *Bodhi puja*. If we have a big problem we get the help of Omila *māniyo*, she is good (080508 no.1.16).

There was much talk about the decline of magical power at the *x Pansala*. Before, villages claimed that one could see a glow around the *Bodhi* tree as a sure indication of the presence of benign deities since they are drawn to the pure and moral in order to gain merit and to achieve better rebirths. The monks' behaviour and neglect of duties is seen as weakening its attraction and power. One villager even claimed that in Sri Lanka there is no *Buddhagama* (Buddhist religion) any longer, only *Sanghagama* ('religion of the *Sangha*).

Another example of aid having an impact on long standing relations of reciprocity between villagers and monks is the case of a temporary relief camp in connection to a temple. People were forced to stay for several years in the camp before getting transferred to permanent housing, and this put considerable strain on both the community of monks and those displaced. Over time, the head monk became weary of the presence of the displaced and their constant needs, and this coincided with the decline of attention and support from NGO's. In the end it developed into an outright conflict between the head monk and the few remaining families in the camp. It was the monk's desire to build a large Buddha statue on the grounds that caused him to want the 'tsunami-people' off the land. I was also told about this by several villagers and one of the village *māniyos* claimed to have helped the head monk with this 'problem'.

I am the person who helps the Thero. At the time when he wanted to get rid of the tsunami people at the temple grounds, I was the one who 'did the work'. I lit *paban* (oil lamps) and hit *pol* (coconuts) for seven days. I also made a big *bara* (vow). If the people left the land I promised to give 121 *paban*, 121 lotus flowers, 121 *bullat* (beatnut packages) and 121 *hunung kuru* (incense sticks). However, to this day still the monk has not done the *bara*. This is bad! It is not good for me. Now perhaps when I ask (the god) for help I will not get it, since I have become a liar! Nothing will develop in a good way at this temple if the monk does not fulfil the *bara* (080602 no.1.20).

### **Decline of Buddhism and Rise of Spirit Religion?**

At the same time as the weakening and questioning of the role of the monks and the temples in the area were going on, and various practices outside organised Buddhist religion were becoming increasingly popular. In these it is predominantly individual instead of collective prayers and rituals that are preformed at places outside temples, without the monks' supervision, and they are more about welfare here and now than salvation beyond this life. Local spiritual specialists dealing with planetary influence, demons, spirits, and gods are increasingly used after the tsunami. Sudhu, a well-reputed local *edure*, lives in a nice and spacious house with his family. He learned his skills from his father and his father in turn learnt from his father.

I became famous because I treated many sick people successfully. I work mostly on my own but I have a group I can call if we have to do something big, like a *tovil*. I call people from Galle and Akuressa. I started to do work like this in 1983. These days there is more work for me, since there are a lot of sick persons here and more people believe (in what he does). I don't think this practice will stop, because there are still people who know it and they will pass it on. There are young people learning now, even for the drums. They have to study through experience, nothing is written down. If I decide to take on a pupil I will find a *neakathe* time and start. For the most part I do *edure kam* (minor treatments), and only if it does not work I do something bigger, like a *tovil*. To establish a diagnosis for a patient I have to talk to the person and get know e.g. what he/she ate, where they went and many things about the life and the family of the patient. It is not often that a *tovil* is necessary, often lime cutting (*debi kapanawa*) is enough. There are people here doing *kodivine* (black magic) but

not me, even if I have the knowledge. I feel sad for the people who do it, it is not good to do bad things for other people. I only 'cut' *kodivine* (*kodivine kapanawa*) and help people (080816 no.52).

I ask him about the tsunami and if the deaths, health problems, new houses and people moving around have affected his work.

After the tsunami I have more work. Many want the *yantare* (protective amulet) and the *pideni* (small propitiatory offerings to ghosts/demons), but there are fewer *toivils* though. The *graba shanbi* (blessing of planetary deities) is also common, it is good for the nine stars. After the tsunami the people have more *tanhave* (greed/cravings).

At the time of the tsunami I could not go the temporary houses to do work. It was not good in the camps since there was no privacy. Still, some came to my house instead. There were many people from Lokuwatte and the Montana who came and took an *arakshave* (protective items), and they bought a *yantare* (amulet) to put in the house because they don't feel safe. For about 20 houses there I did the *Babirawa puja*, people in those houses now live happily (080816 no.52).

I asked what he thought of the increase in *sastere*'s and *māniyos*' who are practicing in the area. In his commentary he positions himself within the moral economy by claiming to want recompense for his services in the form only of morally pure merit, not money:

Some *sastere kattiye* (soothsayer people) are telling the truth by the help of the spirit they have but there are too many *sastere kattiye* here now. I have informed many people when a *sastere* has told lies and advised them not to go there. There are some people in the area that are crazy and have spoiled the name of the *sastere* (he mentions a particular woman). She claims to be able to cut *kodivine* (black magic) and she takes a lot of money. I don't want a lot of money, I only want pin (merit). Some person's charge 75,000 to cut a *kodivine*, I only take 10,000. But I understand that sometimes people pay this amount, because they feel it is urgent and they can't find another person to do it. Then they just have to pay what that person asks for (080816 no.52).

Sudha is sceptical towards some of the *māniyos* working at the *Gambara Bodhie*. I now and then heard objections and doubts about them by villagers, primarily because they are women and considered unclean and not suited for (benign) spiritual work. Several of the local *māniyos* had a

‘suspicious’ background, and there were rumours about theft, prostitution, rape, infertility, black magic powers and various norm breaking qualities and behaviour<sup>79</sup>. In other words, they were often persons at the margins of mainstream society, both respected and feared. Speculations about who did black magic, about the amount of money they earn, and the kind of services they provided flourished in local gossip. Some apparently earned a lot of money from their practice, being able to buy houses, three-wheelers, expensive clothes and so on, while others kept a low profile and continued to live a modest life in terms of material standard.

Hasini *māniyo* was the first to start to do work at the *Gambara Bodhie* in the early 1990s. Her profile does not fit the local stereotype image of a *māniyo* described above. She is of the high *goyigama* caste and 53 years old. She is married to a retired army officer and their children are well educated. They had hard times economically in the past, and about 20 years ago they lived in a mud house. After she started earning money, they have lived off her husband’s salary and built the house with her income. Although she has evidently benefited economically from her practice, she too claims a moral position in the community by stressing her desire for merit, not morally problematic wealth:

1991 my husband was working in the army in Vavunya (city bordering LTTE territory) in the north. At that time I used to go to the *Gambara Bodhie* all the time to pray for his safety. I chose *Gambara Bodhie* because people told me that there was a lot of power at this place. People then heard me praying in a nice way, they listened and said that I was telling the prayers in a good way. Then people started to ask if I could do the *Bodhi Puja* for them. -‘You do it for us in they way you do for yourself, then we will also have success in solving our problems’, they said. The first *Bodhi puja* I did at the *Bodhie* was for a woman that had tried to get pregnant for 12 years, and afterwards that she got a baby girl. The second one was for a person that was sick in the hospital. Her family thought that she was going to die. They were even preparing the house to receive the body. When I did the *Bodhi puja*, this women regained consciousness and started to eat, and after some time she fully recovered. While I was praying for the

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<sup>79</sup> I find these persons and their life histories interesting and deserving of further attention. However, it is not relevant for this study but is perhaps a topic for future work

women, I could see the reason why she had become sick. I felt that a *peretiya* (ancestral ghost) was in her body. I lit the same amount of *panhan* (oil lamps) as her age, I cut lime and put a *nule* (thread) on her wrist. Even today this woman lives in a strong way and she shows me great respect. The third person I helped was a girl that had a menstruation that did not stop for three months. When I was praying she could see that somebody had given her a *dila*. A *dila* means 'to take her heart'. She was a clever girl but somebody had given her that to put an end to her success in studies. This is black magic. She also had a problem in her horoscope, *grahayo* (the planets) were not good, so I did *graha pujane* (planetary offerings) for nine days and then I told prayers over a *tāmbili* (coconut), cut the *dehi* (lime) and put the *araksbe nule* (protection thread). After all this she was cured in one week. For all my work I get money but I never take big amounts. Sometimes I get one thousand or maybe two thousand (rupees). I don't like to take a lot of money; I only care to get *pin* (merit). If I manage to cure a person it produces a lot of *pin* for me. I do not do *mantaram* (like the edure) I do *Buddbugunna*, this comes from the Lord Buddha.

Everything I know I have learnt on my own. I spent a lot of time studying *pirith* books. There are different *piriths* and special directions you should face when you say them. It depends on the problem, for example if it is for a toothache or perhaps vomiting. I do not have an *aunrode* (possessed by a ghost/spirit) to see with like some other *mānijos*. I do not like that. I always remember lord Buddha and pray, and then I see like a picture what is going on with the person. I pray and ask for help to all the different gods but I don't have a special connection to a particular deity. I like *Gana deiyo* (*Ganesb*) though, because he gives you a good brain.

In the tsunami, a lot of bad people were destroyed, and that's why the tsunami came. The good people did not face the tsunami. I can see that in the future that there will come water again and a lot of people will die. This tsunami only came some hundred meters, but the next one will go almost to the centre of the island. That is why god tells me to do a lot of *pin*. I think this will happen around 2012. I can see it. At the time of the tsunami, I was at a house having prayers. At that moment, a kind of prayer came to me and I had to start to tell it. I told it over and over again and I could see a lot of water. Then a person called and said that a nearby city was full of water. I believe that people have changed a lot after the tsunami and that they have become greedy for money, *tanba*. The clever people who pray to the Buddha understand that they have to do good things. Some people just want everything and keep all the money to themselves. They try to become the richest people in the village. Many people only care about money and not the *pin* (080602 no.1.20).

Village rumours spread about the banishment of some *māñiyos* at the *Gambara Bodhie*. This, I was told, depended upon the use of black magic rituals at the *Gambara Bodhie*, which would spoil it, according to the same informants. To the majority, the *Gambara Bodhie* was to be kept as a place exclusively for benign activities, *set* (blessings/benign influence), not for *vas* (poison/evil influence). I ask Hasini about this and the persons involved.

That person is not doing work for *pin*, and she has a *peretiya* (ghost). The *peretiya* shows her how much money a client has and how much she can take from them. She never does small work. Some clients of this person have come to the *Bodhie* and cried because they spent so much money. She always tries to take all, and she does not feel sad. But now she cannot come to the *Bodhie* anymore. The other *māñiyos* have scolded her and said that since she has done bad things at the *Bodhie* she cannot come there anymore. For example, you should not cut *debi* (lime) at the *Bodhie*. If you cut *debi* for a person that has a *peretiya* near the *Bodhie*, the *peretiya* will stay close by the *Bodhie*. It will go from the body of the person to the surrounding environment and then the good power will diminish at this place. You cannot cut for *distiye* (gaze of the wild) at the *Bodhie*, because that is wrong (080602 no.1.20.).

Hasini, and others, have talked a lot about the *Gambara Bodhie*. The village Bo tree does not belong to any of the nearby temples but is a communal place that is managed by the villagers themselves. It is a place for worship and contemplation. It was pointed out to me on several occasions that it was not to be associated with temples and monks, that it was the place of people and the gods. People come here alone or with their family to contemplate and ask for divine support and help in times of need. This place is regarded as powerful and through going there and performing certain rituals you might tap into this power. It was often mentioned as one of the most important places in the village and the place people turned to get help when in trouble. To Hasini *māñiyo* it is definitely a precious place and she is familiar with its history and development.

I am the first person who started to pray a lot at the *Bodhie* and to do *pujaves*. At that time villagers passed the *Bodhie* without praying to it. I spent a lot of time there and cleaned the place, and the people who came got cured so the rumour spread and the villagers started to come. I remember one time when three boats had gone missing at sea. People were crying



and they thought they were dead, so I did the *Bodbi puja*, told *pirith* and did a lot of work for the *devales* (shrines for gods). Then they came back. One hundred persons came to the *Bodhie* to give thanks, with fruit *pujave* (offerings) and milk *pujave* and they thanked me. I will never forget this day. Today people come to the *Bodhie* all the way from Matara and villages all around. They do their work and go. But I was the first person who did it. After that Latta came. She brought her *archi* (grandmother) and I was the person who cut the lime and did the *pujave* for her. After that she also started to do work at the *Bodhie*. Then Sumana *akka* came, and then Chandra, and the last one was Kumani. That was about four years ago. Now all these five *mānijos* do regular work at the *Bodhie*. There is also a man, *kapuwa* (priest of the gods), who comes and does work there, for example *seth kavi* (blessing verses), and only a man can do this. He also does some *pujaves* (offerings) for example the *Sarasvathi puja* for the children to do well in school. More and more people come to the *Bodhie*, and I am happy for that. Even from Colombo sometimes people come (080602 no.1.20).

It is not only people like Hasini, who is working at the *Gambara Bodhie*, that regard it as a special and valuable place. Kasun, who talked about a changed community in Chapter Five, was sceptical towards the *mānijos* and many of the spirit religion practices but nevertheless he often went to the *Bodhie*.

I don't believe in *edure kam* and *tovil*, but many people say that it is good for curing sick children, so we have done it. Normally we go to see the doctor but if the doctors' medicine fails, we go to the *Gambara Bodhie*. We believe a lot in its power and we go there to pray. I believe that the *Gambara Bodhie* protect us from bad things. Once me and my family came close to a bomb blast, but we did not get hurt. Every time we go for a journey, we always go first to the *Bodhie* to tie a *panadura* (coin offering). Then our journey is protected. I think it is good to do it ourselves, it should come for our own heart and feelings. I don't like to use a *māniyo*. Only we know our sadness, not the *māniyo*.

Kasun continued, making an explicit link between the desire for money and moral degradation:

They only want money. But for people who don't know the prayers I understand that they take a *māniyo*. The temple and the monk want money, and they have changed after the tsunami so we like the *Bodhie* better. I think that Buddhism in this area is going down. The monk does not tell

*bana* (Buddhist sermon) in a good way. He always speaks about silly things like how women dress. People are fed up with this. The monk should always be peaceful and understanding and not talk about silly things as skirts. Before the monk was close to the people and Buddhism was important. If people had problems or if a baby was born, we used to go to the temple and speak with the monk for a long time. Now nobody goes to the temple because the monks are business people. When the monk sees me he always tells me to bring some foreigners that could give money to the temple. Everything is changed and people are far away from the temple (080717 no.1.26).

Although Kasun shows a common pragmatic attitude towards solving problems, in this case a sick child, he stresses the common equation of money with moral dubiousness. Monks with materialist inclinations will be deemed as morally flawed and poorly suited to the important task of generating and transferring merit to the lay community.

Dayasili is 33 years old and was displaced by the tsunami. She now lives in a new house at the Montana project. Like Kasun above, her trust and support for the local temples declined after the tsunami, and for the same reasons.

The temples have changed after the tsunami. They displayed the tsunami people to get money but it was the temples that received a lot of money not the tsunami people. This is why I go to the *Gambara Bodhie*. Only the *Gambara Bodhie* did not get rich; it is in the same way and it has a lot of power. I like it very much and I want to make it even better. All the village people respect this place so we have to come together and take care of it and make improvements. If we are hungry, and do not have work, or have sick children, we go there and we get help quickly. All the poor people go there, but the rich people have everything so they don't need to go. My husband dives for seashells on the east coast in an area where there is a lot of fighting between army and LTTE, and I often go to the *Bodhie* to pray for his safety (080523 no.2.8).

As indicated earlier it is not only the *Gambara Bodhie* that has become more popular after the tsunami. On the whole it is a broader development that includes a range of practices and specialists. In an insecure and unpredictable environment where people are constantly forced to deal with new and old difficulties, a possible strategy is to tap into and direct powers by ritual means, for protection and help. It seems like 'spirit re-

ligion' constitutes an attractive arena, more potent and relevant than what Buddhism, temples and monks offer. I do not claim that the tsunami and the interventions have caused this change but I suggest that it plays into and reinforces ongoing processes. The breakdown of local worlds induced by the tsunami opened up for intrusion of more powerful discourses both in opposition and in convergence with local discourses, norms and values. They furthermore, in some ways, laid bare a moral contradiction between 'traditional Buddhist values' of non-materialism and detachment and more individualistic and materialistic notions of being.

Figure 4) Signboard at the house of a local diviner (*sastere*)



No work on lost or stolen objects. Closed on *poya*, *mase poya* and Mondays. *Sastere* (soothsaying) 105,75 rupees, *Pujave* (offering ritual) 350 rupees, *Lime cutting* (*dehi kapima*) 250 rupees, *hitting coconut* (*pol gasima*) 20 rupees. Thank you!

### Suffering and Agency in the Wake of Disaster

During field my work in Tharugama, it became clear to me that here calamities are expected to happen, and suffering and unpredictability, rather than security and stability, regarded as the regular. Dilip is in his early thirties and married to Chandrani, who is pregnant with their second child, and they have a four-year-old boy. They were not affected in the tsunami and live in a half-finished wooden house not too far from the main road in an area with few houses. The house is sparsely furnished with a homemade table, a bed and a few plastic chairs. There is

only a dirt floor, and the windows have no glass or bars. There is no toilet so they have to use the forest. It is small but meticulously kept. It is clean and well organised and outside there are planted flowers in vivid hues and a well-swept yard. Dilip:

I am a carpenter, and I also do some electric work. I took a reading course in how to mend electric appliances. My wife is not working. We have been living in this house for 6 months but we came to the village about three years ago. Before, we lived in Anhuradapura (town bordering LTTE controlled territory), which is my village, but we came here and stayed in my wife's house because the LTTE came and killed people in several houses in our neighbourhood. We were afraid to stay there. When we came to my wife mother's house we were three families living there, my family, her brother's family and then her mother and father. There were a lot of trouble and fighting in that house. Finally we could not stay so we decided to buy this land and build a house.

Our life is much harder now compared to when we were younger. We have more problems and economic difficulties. Before, we used to go out to see and visit other people but now we don't because of all the problems we have. Before it was possible to go out and do something for about 100 rupees, but now you need 1,000 to be able to do anything at all. If I make a door I get the same amount of money as before, but the cost of living has gone up so it is hard to live. There are also too many carpenters in this village and the competition is fierce.

Before, we had a good life but now it is difficult because we have a lot of debts. To buy this land we had to pawn all our jewellery and it cost 2.5 lak (250,000 rupees). First, we wanted to take a loan at one place but it did not work out, so we have taken loans at many places and now we have to pay a lot of interest. Then we planned to take a big loan at one organisation to pay back all the small loans but then I cut my hand in the sawing machine and I can't work, so they will not give us the loan. All our debtors are screaming: Pay our money, pay our money! But since I cannot work I don't have any money, and I cannot pay them back.

We do not have any sources of happiness in our lives, only sad things have happened to us. When we lived in Anhuradhapura we had big hopes to build a big house here and get a good life, but everything has fallen apart. When we moved to the house of my wife's mother, we got more problems than with the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), and we bought this land and started to live here, and now our problems are even bigger. Then when we were going to pay the debts and solve our problems, I had the accident and cut my hand so we cannot get any loans.

Dilip shows me his right hand and explains how he cut his fingers badly a few weeks back. The hand is still swollen and there are deep cut marks in his fingers. He is wary about his hand and careful not to let it bump into something. It is obvious that he is worried about his abilities to work and support his growing family. He continues:

It is hard for us to be ‘good people’; it is hard to be ‘good’ in this society. Before it was not like this in our life, we have learned bad ways from our own house. When we stayed with our relatives, with my wife’s brother, nobody treated us in a good way.

When our bad luck started we went to a *yotishie* (astrologer) and got a horoscope. It said that now is a bad period for us, so the astrologer has given us a list of things to do. My wife was pregnant at that time so we could not do all the things requested, like go to the *Bodhia* and do a special pujawe. Now we believe that this is why all the bad things happened to us.

To try to turn the bad luck, we have been told to put on a *yantara* (protective amulet), and do *set kavi* (offerings to the gods), and to keep an offering plate. At night after nine o’clock, we have to go to the *Gambara Bodhi* and tell some special *gatha* (verses). The monk at the *kande Pansala* (mountain temple) is the one who has told us that this is what we have to do, and he gave us this special *gatha*. The problem is that we don’t have money to do all the things he told us to do. This was before I cut my hand and we did not do all the things he advised us to do right away. My wife was sick for three months because of the pregnancy, so we could not go and do everything. Then after I cut my hand, we went again to the monk and were told to do it again, but how can we do it without money? The most important thing now is that my hand gets good again so I can work.

Before we used to buy a lot of lotteries but now we cannot afford that either. We do not have any dreams or hopes about the future; it is better not to have any high hopes. Sometimes our relatives bring some food, but they do not have any money to help us more than that. My two brothers are also carpenters and they have also cut their fingers. Now they can only take small jobs, and our father is old and cannot help us. Nowadays carpentry is dangerous. Before, we used old traditional tools and everybody knew well how to handle them. Now we have new electric machines and people are not well experienced and easily hurt themselves. Today, the pressure for quick work is strong. All my brothers and also my father have lost one or more fingers. I did not lose any fingers yet but I don’t know what will happen. I cannot move them and feel anything.

The most important place to us in the community is the *Gambara Bodhie*. It is important because when we are sick or have problems we go there and tell the gods, and we get a feeling of relief and a good feeling in

the heart. We know somebody listens to our problems and that we will be helped. The only remedy for our problems now is to put flowers on the house altar and pray (080212 no.1.1).

Dilip says that “it is hard for us to be good people - it is hard to be good in this society”, bringing to mind the story of the murderer Angulimala, “the one who wears a necklace of fingers”, who was once Ahimsaka “the harmless one”, and the popular interpretation that fundamentally good people might be trapped in circumstances that make them ‘bad’. He describes a life world with small margins, a shrinking space for manoeuvre, pressure for fast work and escalating living costs. There is no hope for the future, he says, “the only thing we can do is to put flowers on the house altar and pray”. Here, at least, there is a promise of hope and a possibility to do something. Dilip draws attention to the moral dilemma of trying to be good in a society in which security increasingly relies upon morally problematic money rather than upon mutual help. His account also captures the way that ritual action and interaction with the non-human realm transforms powerlessness into hope and a sense of agency. Clearly, the way disaster aid fed into global discourses of change, greatly influenced village unity and reciprocal relations, thus presenting new challenges to individuals as the commodification and individuation of local exchange and networks and religious life were intensified.

### **Summary and Reflections**

The indiscriminate and deadly force of the tsunami disaggregated both social and physical order in Tharugama, and the magnitude of the suffering it caused put great strain on religious explanatory models. The social, moral and cosmological anchors according to which villagers had formerly orientated themselves were then further affected by the subsequent wave of values, people and goods. The many discrete but interconnected aspects of the second wave revolved around the huge inflow of foreign money and goods that had to be digested into local life. While these were delivered in the guise of humanitarianism, they also spoke of an affluent and powerful outside world of values whose influence stirred up antagonism and envy in the village. This chapter has shown how, in the realms of religion, the unsettling of social patterns and the rapid material changes gave rise to uncertainty about moral identity of both

individuals and the community, and shifted relationships of exchange between the laity and their monks.

Ironically, while the Buddhist monks and temples were selected for particular generosity by donors, partly because of their moral high standing in the community, it was this fact that threatened their moral credentials. Monks' relations with foreign NGO's and their new role as intermediaries of disaster aid brought them into a relationship with values not readily reconcilable with local religious ideals. The monks' sudden repositioning in relation to the community and, particularly, their relationship with the morally problematic phenomenon of money, sent ripples through numerous areas of local life. When they became recipients of foreign wealth this had a heavy impact on their status as givers of merit for the local laity, and thus upon the traditional relationship of exchange between temple and community; the more material support they received from wealthy foreign donors, the more hesitant the poorer local lay community became about giving *dana* in exchange for merit.

Furthermore, the post-tsunami context presented locals with pressing material and mundane problems for which Buddhism offers no practical solutions. One informant described Buddhism as being like half-boiled vegetables, i.e. as something not really useful but that you still cannot bring yourself to throw out.

By contrast, spirit religion involves many specialists and practices that are more readily suited to meet the demands of solving problems here and now. It can respond to specific individual requests and desires, promising more direct return and ways of creating control in a volatile situation. In times of such change, need and uncertainty in the mundane world, the voluntary giving up of precious resources to morally questionable monks in the hopes of receiving only a non-material return of religious merit (*pin*) seems to be less appealing than giving offerings (*pujave*) and making vows (*bara*) to various non-human beings in exchange for tangible, yet morally neutral returns.





## 7. Conclusions and Reflections

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When idealised, the “uncalculating” gift operates in the imaginary as the last refuge of solidarity, of an open-handedness which is supposed to have characterised other eras in the evolution of humankind. Gift-giving becomes the bearer of a utopia (a utopia which can be projected into the past as well as into the future).

Godelier (1999:208)

This thesis set out to explore *the Give and Take of Disaster Aid and Social and Moral Transformations in the Wake of the tsunami in Sri Lanka*. The idiom of ‘give-and-take’ refers to mutual concession, and synonyms listed in the thesaurus include adaptability, banter, collaboration, compromise, cooperation, deal making, exchange, reciprocity, settlement, swap, trade, trade-off, and wheeling and dealing (Roget's 21st Century Thesaurus). Taken together, these terms give a sense of the theme of this thesis. The front page also shows a photograph of a bare chest with a tattoo that reads *abinseka*. The concept of *abinseka* was used in the village to denote not only innocence, as it is commonly translated into in English, but also a sense of integrity, authenticity and purity. This concept is a core component of a widespread spatialisation of Sinhala-ness in terms of a rural/urban divide – it creates a conceptual link between village, discipline, morality and tradition (Winslow and Woost 2004:175). My intention with the photograph was to draw attention to the ideas of morality and integrity in Tharugama that influenced the way in which disaster gifts were received and valued.

The tsunami shattered the local physical world but the way in which the second wave - the inflow of disaster aid - disrupted deep-seated cultural ideas and ideals was less obvious. It was this complex process that inspired the present work. The primary objective has therefore been to explore the multifaceted impact of a large-scale natural disaster and the subsequent wave of aid upon a rural community, and my study has

shown that the second wave – the deluge of aid – set in motion and sometimes accelerated processes of change that benefited some people and relationships and marginalised others, provoking moral uncertainty and crises in the process.

This thesis aimed to explore the impact of disaster aid upon the local moral economy, by which is meant common notions of what is just and fair but also what is proper in relations of giving and exchange. The study has thus examined the interplay between moral and cultural norms and material conditions and economic activities.

I have been interested in the kind of obligations, expectations and relations that were embedded in the ‘second wave’ of giving and the receding ‘third wave’ of dwindling support. However, the thesis has explored not only the direct impact of the wave of gifts that entered the community from outside but also the knock-on effects that they had upon local social as well as cosmological relations. I asked how local practices and rationales of reciprocity and exchange had been affected by the flood of external aid, and I sought to identify and discuss the various perceptions of givers, receivers and brokers in the tsunami gift cycle. Broadly, I aimed to explore the extent to which these actors drew upon the logic of the free and pure gift or the logic of commodity exchange, and to examine the impact of this upon desires for immediate gains and upon the outcome for long-term relationships both between people but also between the human and non-human realms.

### **Gift or Poison - Free or Binding?**

The framework for this investigation was taken from classical anthropological theories of the gift and exchange relations. Insights about giving, receiving and reciprocity were taken from these theories to understand and analyse the process of recovery after the tsunami in the village of Tharugama on the Southern coast of Sri Lanka. Classical gift and exchange theory, particularly the seminal work of Marcel Mauss (1924), has made a distinction between the system of the gift and that of economic transaction. Broadly, the gift was seen as establishing sociality and a feeling-bond between the giver and the receiver, while commodity exchange did not necessarily create a relationship. Ideally, the gift was presumed to be personal but characterised by non-interestedness, whereas commodity

transaction was impersonal and characterised by interestedness; gift exchange was thus associated with safety and virtue, whereas commodity exchange was associated with risk and moral unreliability. Later theorists have presented a number of alternative positions. Although he recognises that forms of exchange are heterogeneous, Parry (1989), for instance, argues that it is not only commodity exchange that is associated with risk but gifts too may bring their own perils. Laidlaw (2000) also made the relevant observation that impersonality, rather than being a distinguishing feature of commodity exchange, may figure in both 'pure commodity' transactions and 'free gifts'. Using the example of *dan*, he argues that this is as close as one can get to a truly free gift and posits that its social importance lies in the fact that it does not create obligations or personal connections.

The material discussed in this thesis shows that the gift of post-disaster aid does not straightforwardly correspond to either the selfless gift or the self-interested commodity as outlined by Mauss. Nor does it properly correspond to the gift that Laidlaw describes. Disaster aid shows elements of both gift and commodity – it is given and received in the guise of selfless philanthropy, yet it is ostensibly not designed to establish long-term relationships and, rhetorically at least, it is free of the obligation to reciprocate. Most of those involved in Tharugama, whether giver, receiver or broker, tried to make these gifts appear to be 'pure' and 'free' and in this way minimise the moral pressures or perils. However, although the gifts were presented as disinterested and no explicit demands for return or obligations were made, they were in fact invested with a body of implicit values and expectations, and there was frustration when unspoken expectations of particular behaviour, compliance or gratitude resulted in disappointment. In this sense, disaster aid is anomalous, and it is therefore not surprising that local norms in villages such as Tharugama concerning the morality of exchange and gift relationships were stretched, tested and challenged by it.

Mary Douglas has argued that charitable giving is problematic because of the donor's refusal to reciprocate; this puts the act of giving outside of any mutual ties and for this reason, charity can wound (Douglas in Mauss 2002:[1954]). However, the notion of charity in Western thought and society and in the context of an egalitarian welfare state with strong ideals of social solidarity may work quite differently from that in the South Asian context. If the tsunami gifts inflicted a wound to Tharu-

gama, it was perhaps more of a collective than individual nature. These gifts came from donors who largely shared culturally shaped notions of recovery, security and development, but they were received by a community in which other norms and aspirations were prevalent. It was perhaps above all in the discrepancies between the expectations and values of givers and recipients that wounding could be found.

Although both the donors and the recipients described in this study preferred to frame the gift as 'free' and pure', both sides invested the relationship with particular hopes. However, the donors' 'interestedness' had more to do with the acquisition of symbolic capital, moral satisfaction and emotional fulfilment than with material gains or the establishment of social ties. The donors' ability to give rewarded them with credibility and this could be used to inspire more generosity from donors back home. For recipients, the aid gifts were viewed as free of moral imperatives to give in return, and relations between donors and recipients were marked by social distance, but the gifts were also seen as sources of both material and symbolic capital within the value system of their own community.

The second wave of aid engendered new patterns of exchange but perhaps, due to the morally anomalous nature of the new flood of gifts, the relations they fostered were coloured by contradictions, misunderstandings and justifications. The local economy of reciprocity and the relations between rich and poor, humans and spirits, laypeople and monks, high and low-caste were all influenced by the inflow of the 'second wave' of gifts and the 'third wave' of ebbing support.

The ethnography I have discussed illustrates a paradox of the tsunami gifts; they were both (re)constructive *and* destructive. They were productive in that they helped individuals to reconstruct their lives, and thereby helped a shattered community get back on its feet, but they also instigated transformation and fragmentation of relationships.

### Social Disorder: Reciprocity Disrupted and Reconfigured

The tsunami itself unravelled local relations and obligations, initially bringing people together, but subsequently revealing enduring power structures and, ultimately, paving the way for the creation of new power relations and competitiveness. Local hierarchies, exploitative relationships and moral obligations were first dissolved and then reshaped. As some informants put it, the world seemed to have been suddenly turned upside down and shaken to the core. This experience, I maintain, was partly due to the extensive material changes but perhaps more to do with the blurring of social and moral boundaries. In many ways the post-disaster scenario was one of *insecure sociality*, in Hylland Eriksen's (2010) terms, in which individuals were unsure about whom they were dealing with, and in which there were new opportunities but also new risks.

Behaviour that diverged from local norms was commonly seen as disturbing and potentially dangerous. When 'tsunami people' behaved as though they 'had come up in the world', 'were big people', or 'forgot where they came from', this was often perceived as offensive. This view links to the idea of being *abinseka* and the widespread local opinion that the tsunami people were not being *lejaji*, i.e. not showing any shame in accepting gifts. If they received the gifts of aid with humility and gratitude, this was less problematic, because it was in harmony with patrimonial ideals and notions that the generosity of 'rulers' should be reciprocated with loyalty and subordination. In other words, the way in which villagers behaved upon receiving the disaster gifts was evaluated in terms of the norms of the local moral community. It was correspondingly problematic if a wealthy and high-status foreigner tried to close the social distance and behave as if he were an equal to the poor villagers.

The wave of tsunami gifts not only introduced an anomalous form of gift relationship to the community, but it was also unparalleled in scale and was accompanied by the arrival of a temporary intervening community of foreign workers. The villagers therefore had to respond not only to a wave of material goods but also to a wave of social influences.

## Society, Cosmology and Morality - Contested Boundaries

The suffering caused by the tsunami was largely seen by the villagers to be one more event in a world of regular misfortune in which *karma* provided the overriding explanatory model. Suffering was not only an individual experience but was also collective, through disordered social and moral configurations. In Buddhist thought, the ultimate cause of suffering *dukkha* is *tanhava* (cravings/greed), and in the upside-down world that the disaster and subsequent aid had unleashed, greed was felt to be growing. This was not only seen to be fuelling suffering but also to be undermining trust between people in the community.

By and large, the way aid fell out locally was experienced as being driven by chance and the villagers were thus powerless to influence it. The experiences that this situation gave rise to in Tharugama are common to other scenarios in which sudden wealth arrives from outside:

On the one hand there is a perception, authenticated by glimpses of the vast wealth that passes through most postcolonial societies and into the hands of a few of their citizens, that the mysterious mechanisms of the market hold the key to hitherto unimaginable riches; to capital amassed by the ever more rapid, often immaterial flow of value across time and space, and into the intersecting sites where local meets the global. On the other hand it is the dawning sense of chill desperation attendant on being left out in the promise of prosperity, of the telos of liberation [...] everyone would be set free to speculate and accumulate, to consume, and to indulge repressed desires. But, for many, the millennial moment has passed without palpable payback (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999:284).

The imaginary that Comaroff and Comaroff describe in Africa is recognisable in Tharugama as well. However, the tsunami and the wave of aid did not cause but reinforce a pre-existing culture of mistrust rooted in historical and political factors.

The new uncertainties and changes created social and cosmological disorder, and this drove the villagers to (re)structure relations in new ways in an effort to restore an intelligible life world according to familiar ideals. As can be seen in the examples of the provision of boats and houses this complex process of realigning, the relationships between individuals, households, places, spirits and gods, local rationales and practices of reciprocity were instrumental. The new gifts exerted pressure upon old

relations, not only between humans but also between the human and non-human realms. The donors' notions of 'better' and 'safer' evidently did not take these factors into consideration. That was not on their agenda.

The ethnography discussed in this thesis depicts an individuation and commodification also of local religious life, and it shows how both the laity and their monks are being drawn into a new, more monetarized order. In Tharugama as elsewhere, the giving and receiving of gifts is associated with social status, and accepting charity is considered demeaning, while giving denotes respectability and status for the giver. The exception to this is the case of giving *dana* to Buddhist monks. Monks, in likeness to beggars and the poor, are dependent on the generosity of others and are supposed to receive material support without reciprocating materially. The lay donor benefits karmically by acquiring merit through the act of giving to the temple or monks. This particular system of giving was clearly deeply affected by the influx of tsunami gifts given to monks by outsiders. These gifts were highly morally problematic for monks and pulled them into a system of gift-giving relationships that jeopardised their religious legitimacy in the local community. Laypeople's reticence to support their temples with *dana* gifts because of the monks' close association with foreign donors is perhaps the most explicit example of the impact that disaster aid may have upon a local moral economy. Buddhist monks vow upon ordination not to touch money, and their ability to act as fields of merit and exemplars of local morality is therefore at risk when they become brokers for the wealth of outsiders. Conversely, monks sometimes concluded that their congregations are now more interested in worldly goals than in making merit at the temples.

New and old, threats and dangers were dealt with by a rich cultural repertoire of magical action, spiritual intervention and ritual remedies, in which relations and exchange with different levels of cosmos were a vital feature. The growing popularity of *gibi pirith*, i.e. to have a respected villager do the *pirith* ceremony instead of monks with dubious moral standards, and the references to religion being no longer *Buddagama* (religion of the Buddha) but rather *Sanghagama* (religion of the monks) also speak of the religious change. At a time of pressing material concerns, spirit religion seemed better suited than Buddhism in helping people realize their goals.

This, I suggest, has to do with how ritual helps control and modify experience (Douglas 2002 [1966]), and, in this case, with the extraordinary situation of uncertainty and disorder caused by the disaster and the interventions. Ritual not only helps control danger but also recognises the potency of disorder (Douglas 2002: 117-120). Ritual and magical action is connected to the individual pursuit of goals for protection, averting misfortune, creating meaning. It is also concerned with the social, political and economic patterning of reality - with what Comaroff and Comaroff (1999) coined occult economies: "in the deployment, real or imagined, of magical means for material ends" (1999:279). As disaster victims seek their own forms of intervention and solutions to counter insecurity and reduce anxiety, ritual action is not a substitute but a complement to more mundane practical action.

### **Unity and Moral order**

The importance of unity within an encompassing, hierarchical cosmological whole is frequently stressed in the ethnography of South Asia, and fragmentation and disorder are often associated with moral decay. Seneviratne (1999), for instance, noted that during British colonial rule in Sri Lanka, foreign domination and even intimate relations between locals and foreigners were associated with the threat of loss of unity and therefore with loss of purity and morality (Seneviratne 1999:32).

The tsunami broke apart many of the structures of previous unity and moral order. In the first months after the tsunami there was considerable solidarity, help from the surrounding society and empathy from those who were unaffected. Then, the massive global attention summoned vast amounts of aid and as these poured into the country they fuelled hopes, expectations and new forms of competition. As resource-strong people arrived in the area, and they brought with them the trappings of consumer culture: materialism, individualism and unlimited want. It gradually dawned on the villagers that this was not a 'win-win' situation, that help and gifts were not for all and not necessarily given to the most needy. The ethos became a 'grab what you can', and this contributed to divisions, envy, suspicion and fragmentation of the community. Many villagers testified that it became increasingly important to have what the neighbour had, to get what they got. This atmosphere of comparison and competition for goods was explained as a consequence of the tsu-



nami and the arbitrary way in which aid was distributed. In the fragmented community, smaller and smaller units stuck together, while the solidarity of larger groups and the village as a whole suffered. Frustration, suspicion and competition grew, putting pressure on structures of morality and trust. The macro-social process of disaster aid and, to borrow Tsing's notion, the awkward encounters across difference that arose brought empowerment for some but disempowerment for others.

In some cases, the recovery process opened up possibilities for exploitation, for disaster capitalism and for political stakeholders to gain ground, but this was not universally so. It also provided opportunities for the well-heeled to ease the burden of their privilege by expressing extraordinary compassion and solidarity, and also for extending heartfelt concern and bringing various actors into the orbit of global charity. Involvement with foreign influences was both dangerous and powerful.

### **Final Reflections**

For a moment I want to return to the event of the tsunami and recapture some of my early reflections that in many ways formed the starting point of the thesis. At that time I sat glued to the television screen in my home in southern Sweden, worrying about my friends in Sri Lanka. I was also concerned about Swedish friends who may be on vacation in one of the areas affected. Swedish media soon came to focus on missing citizens in Thailand, a major tourist destination for Swedish holidaymakers<sup>80</sup> and this aroused important questions about our global humanity and the shared predicament in the face of natural disaster. The tsunami disaster and its after-effects forced both my interlocutors and myself to reflect upon matters previously taken for granted. In this process questions concerning morality featured strongly and demanded attention. The disaster exposed what people perceive to be problematic in their society and forced them to confront moral contradictions of individuality and sociality and of tradition and modernity.

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<sup>80</sup> Altogether 543 Swedes died in the tsunami (542 in Thailand).

Sweden was in a state of shock about the fact that something like this could happen to us, that we were unsafe and unprotected. Criticism, and sometimes rage, was expressed about how the Swedish authorities handled the crisis. To taxpaying citizens of a welfare state, a swift and efficient response by the state was considered to be a right. However, it soon became painfully clear to many that, despite living in a developed nation in which the state was sometimes criticised for being over-protective and circumscribing individual freedom, our stable economy, modern technology and medical expertise were all powerless to protect us. Our confidence in the safety nets of our society was shaken, and we suddenly became aware of its shortcomings. There was an urgent need to find explanations and seek consolation. Our churches suddenly saw an inflow of people who would not ordinarily visit them. Swedes sought support, and community in national symbols such as the Swedish flag, which was wrapped around every returning coffin, and the king of Sweden were now bringing people together in shared grief and confusion.

The tsunami disaster rapidly generated a wave of global compassion that created a kind of global spirit of community. The fact that the disaster affected not only those far away but also people close to home spurred many to try to do something to help, and this translated into extraordinary levels of generosity, and to what some refer to as the ‘CNN effect’<sup>81</sup>. The special attention and emotional turmoil lasted for some time before the event faded out of focus to be replaced by new and more urgent disasters, wars and crises. Perhaps even a bit of a morning-after feeling set in, of having lashed out to give too much too fast, which in turn sometimes translated into ‘donor-fatigue’, as put in an NBC article, *‘Disaster-fatigue’ blamed for drop in giving*<sup>82</sup>, in which Americans’ dwindling generosity after the 2004 tsunami and hurricane Katrina is discussed. Along with receding support, reports and observations about misdirected relief, abuse of funds, and the like started to appear in the media, and disinterested philanthropic gifts started to be contaminated by the

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<sup>81</sup> This commonly refer to the impact of the media on politics during political crises, but also to the role of the media in natural disasters. The CNN effect may well have contributed to the high levels of charity in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami.

<sup>82</sup> An issue that came up after the 2004 Asian tsunami, an event that brought \$1.92 billion in charity from the United States (NBC News 2008).

world of economic and political interests, bringing out not only gratitude but also greed, at all levels and nodes in the aid chain.

Immediately after the disaster, people gave gladly, willingly sacrificing resources in an almost sacred act of empathy with no wish for return. “un-calculated” gifts of this kind seem, as Godelier points out, to be the bearers of utopian ideals - the imagined opposite of commercial profit and the quest for power and profit (Godelier 1999: 208). This utopian imaginary has an emotional and moral charge that is pertinent to humanitarian disaster aid and philanthropy, and we need to be aware that it may mask hierarchies and power differentials beneath idioms of compassion and solidarity.

What I have tried to understand and capture is a complex and multi-layered process. The main contribution of the thesis is perhaps the ‘thick’ empirical material it provides from a scene of natural disaster over a relatively long period of time. In general, ethnographic studies that contain material from before and after a disaster are scant. The analysis I have offered shows how central our understandings of the values associated with giving and receiving are. It also shows how far-reaching the knock-on effects of massive donation can be upon social relations as well as upon relations between humans and the non-human realm: the earth, sea, spirits and gods. I have discussed how people being affected work to understand and manage the disquieting experiences induced by the several waves of the disaster by calling upon cultural resources such as ritual and local beliefs. These local coping strategies are of relevance for those who wish to help. They should be taken into account by implementers of aid work, because they are important means by which people orientate themselves in a rapidly changing universe. In this sense, they are important resources for cultural as well as individual recovery from devastation.



## Sammanfattning

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Den 24 december 2004 drog gigantiska vågor fram över Indiska Oceanen, vållade av en underjordisk jordbävning utanför Sumatras kust. På några timmar hade hundratusentals människor omkommit och många flera skadats. På Sri Lanka drabbades 70 % av kustlinjen av tsunamin och katastrofen var extraordinär både i vågornas skala och skada och i det gensvar den genererade i det globala humanitära och civila samhället. Längs Sri Lankas kust hade de massiva vågorna förödande konsekvenser och förstörde inte bara den fysiska miljön och tvingade människor att ta itu med grundläggande behov som mat, vatten och skydd utan också att hantera sociala och existentiella dilemman. Avhandlingens syfte är att undersöka de olika sätt på vilka en extrem naturkatastrof och den efterföljande våg av 'gåvor' och humanitär hjälp som den sätter i rörelse påverkar ett lokalsamhälle. I detta fall handlar det om en by på södra Sri Lanka som drabbades av tsunamin 2004. Fältarbete genomfördes här under sammanlagt 12 månader under 2005 och 2008. Avhandlingen ställer kritiska frågor om hur 'katastrofens gåvor' togs emot och värderades av givare och mottagare och finner att den humanitära insatsen satte igång och ibland accelererade förändringsprocesser som var till fördel för vissa personer och relationer men som marginaliserade och splittrade andra vilket skapade social förändring och moralisk osäkerhet.

Även om återuppbyggnadsfasen ses som slutförd och den massiva uppmärksamheten dragit vidare fortsätter människor att leva med upplevelsen av katastrofen och dess kvardröjande effekter. Naturkatastrofen i sig var över på några minuter men katastrofer är processuella fenomen snarare än händelser som man tydligt kan isolera i tid. Katastrofer blottlägger inte bara fundamentala materiella, politiska och ekonomiska dynamiker utan exponerar också klasstratifiering, kasthierarkier, och etniska och religiösa strukturer.

Målsättningen att återskapa ett katastrofdrabbat samhälle till vad det en gång var har på senare år utvecklats till en ansats som kallas 'build-back-better' där man ser katastrofen som ett tillfälle att reducera risker och förbättra situationen och utvecklingen i det drabbade samhället. Denna

paroll gällde även efter tsunamin på Sri Lanka vilket ger upphov till kritiska frågor som: Möjlighet för vem? För drabbade individer och samhällen eller för vad Klein (2008) kallat 'katastrof kapitalism', d.v.s. exploatering utifrån vissa politiska och ekonomiska intressen? För välbärgade att lätta på sin moraliska börda av privilegium genom att uttrycka extraordinär välgärning och medkänsla?

Under fältarbetet för avhandlingen var uttryck som "den gyllene vågen", "den andra tsunamin" och "de fattiga har blivit rika och de rika har blivit fattiga" vanligt förekommande. Uttrycket "den andra vågen" anspelade på det massiva inflödet av katastrofbistånd och antyder att man upplevde den kraftiga tillströmningen av gåvor som problematisk. Den 'andra vågen' av medkänsla upplevdes ibland överväldigande till den grad att den associerades med själva tsunamins förödande vågor. En 'tredje våg' kan läggas därtill för att åskådliggöra katastrofen och omfattar det gradvisa tillbakadragandet av hjälpinsatserna.

Forskare (Oliver-Smith 1979) noterade i relation till den stora jordbävningen i Peru på 1970-talet att en ineffektiv och ojämlig distribution av hjälpinsatser under en period av flera år efter tragedin gav upphov till att man lokalt talade om att "först kom jordbävningen och sedan kom katastrofen". Detta antyder att 'lösningar' också kan skapa nya problem och förändringar som sträcker sig långt bortom den akuta fasen i en sådan utsträckning och omfattning att det slutligen överskuggar själva katastrofen.

*Att ge* speglar en grundläggande mänsklig etik och *vad givande gör* är ett klassiskt antropologiskt fält. Man kan då fråga sig vad som händer när en massiv våg av gåvor plötsligt strömmar in i ett samhälle? Hur påverkar detta den lokala moraliska ekonomin? Vilka skyldigheter, förväntningar och relationer skapas? Idén om att 'bygga-tillbaka-bättre' är laddad med normer och värderingar och existerande litteratur om givande påminner oss om den fundamentala betydelsen i att ge, ta emot och motprestera för skapande och konsoliderande av sociala relationer. Denna avhandling använder dessa insikter och undersöker de återverkningar inflödet av gåvor utifrån har på lokala sociala relationer – och inte bara sociala relationer utan också kosmologiska. Mauss (2002:80-81 [1954]) observerar en etymologisk ambivalens i ordet 'Gåva' i forntida germanska lagar och språk; att det betyder både gåva och gift. Denna inneboende ambivalens undersöks genom att studera hur katastrofens 'gåvor' togs emot och

påverkade ett tsunamidrabbat samhälle. Människor i byn var, som det uttrycktes av en bybo, ”utsatta för något nytt” vilket inte bara syftade på själva tsunamin utan också på det faktum att byn plötsligt fick ta emot en mängd utländska organisationer, individer och gåvor. Detta manifesterades inte bara i form av nya hus och båtar utan också i vanor, normer och värderingar vilket genererade konkurrens och begär. Avhandlingen undersöker vad som händer när människors livsvärldar, i alla dess dimensioner, slås i spillror och (åter)skapandet snärjs in i ett fält med flera, ibland motsägelsefulla, diskurser, till exempel mellan tradition/modernitet, individ/kollektiv och det lokala/globala. Studien påvisar att tsunamin och de efterföljande interventionerna bidrog till att accelerera vissa förändringsprocesser och förstärka en del inneboende motståndningar. Människor var tvungna att anpassa sig och en del, i verklig entreprenörsanda, gjorde det mesta av de nya möjligheterna medan andra kände sig demobiliserade och bortglömda i den nya ordningen. Människor blev indragna i nya nätverk, värderingar och normer och ställda inför både nya möjligheter och begränsningar. Den lokala utbytsekonomi och relationer mellan rika och fattiga, människor och andar, munkar och lekmän, hög och låg kast osv. blev alla påverkade av den andra vågens tillströmning av gåvor och den tredje vågen när stödet drogs tillbaka.

Det är uppenbart att naturkatastrofen, den första vågen, skapade förödelse och att den andra vågen gav men i själva verket skapade den också en viss typ av fragmentering och oordning. Vanligt förekommande kommentarer i byn om att tsunami gjort att ”fattiga blivit rika och rika blivit fattiga” vittnar om social oordning och transformation och ger bilden av en värld som i mångt och mycket upplevs som ’upp-och-ner’. Bybor angav att orsakerna bakom tsunamin skapades av en jordbävning men gjorde även kopplingar till moraliskt förfall och modernitetens prövningar och använde lokala föreställningar och kosmologi i sina förklaringsmodeller. Sammantaget gav dessa tendenser avhandlingen dess riktning och motiverade temat om dynamiken mellan extern katastrofhjälp och lokala sociala, moraliska och kosmologiska konfigurationer, där fokus då lades bortom den akuta fasen och dess återskapande av den fysiska miljön.

Diskurserna om internationell humanitär hjälp och populär välgörenhet är fyllda av stereotyper och ’myter’ om sådant som gott/ont, rätt/fel och altruism eller egoism. Vad denna avhandling avser är dock inte att expli-

cit fokusera på maktrelationer mellan Nord och Syd och moraliska värderingar och etiska dilemman i internationellt bistånd utan vill undersöka och beskriva de sociala och kulturella konsekvenserna av katastrofhjälpen - 'tsunami gåvorna'. Vad som framförallt studeras är således inte relationen mellan givare och mottagare utan vad dessa 'gåvor' gör med det lokala sociala och moraliska landskapet och hur detta kommer till uttryck i människors vardag. Gåvoutväxlingen och dess ekonomi av skyldigheter, förväntningar och reciprocitet är inte begränsade till relationerna mellan givare i Nord och mottagare i Syd utan utgörs av komplexa relationskedjor, praktiker och ritualer som påverkar lokala mönster och logiker. Här används begreppet 'friktion' för att illustrera möten mellan, givare, mottagare och förmedlare i olika positioner i katastrofens gåvocykel (Tsing 2005). Tsing menar att det är i friktionen, i möten mellan olikheter, som rörelse och förändring uppstår. Globalisering är inte bara en kollision mellan olika system utan en kreativ makrosocial process som både skapar möjligheter och makt där en del aktörer gynnas medan andra missgynnas. Det handlar i grund och botten om ett dynamiskt samspel mellan det globala/lokala och det partikulära/universella vilket blir tydligt i fallet tsunaminkatastrofen på Sri Lanka.

En slutsats som kan dras är att tsunamikatastrofen inte bara förstörde och förändrade fysiska habitat och levebröd utan också rubbade lokala sociala, moraliska och kosmologiska förhållanden vilket gav upphov till osäkerhet och situationer av moralisk kris. Avhandlingens etnografi påvisar en tsunamigåvornas inneboende paradox – att de var (re)konstruktiva och destruktiva. Men andra ord, de återuppbyggde ett trasigt samhälle men skapade också ett eget slags sönderfall. De flesta aktörer, givare såsom mottagare, agerade för att framställa gåvan som 'fri', utan egenintresse och moraliska skyldigheter att återgälda, men ofta innefattade den en rad implicita normer, värderingar och förväntningar, snarare än krav som påverkade lokala relationer på specifika sätt. Avhandlingen visar att specifika kulturella resurser såsom ritualer, religion och andra icke-världsliga idéer och praktiker var viktiga lokala redskap för att förstå och hantera katastrofen och för återhämtningen för både individ och samhälle.







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