Chapter 6

JUST AN ORDINARY PERSON: ISLAMIC SCRIPTURALISM, MORALITY
AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN A KAMPUNG TSUNAMI

‘Heaven lies under mother’s feet.’
– Meli (Blang Daruet, 2009).

This chapter deals with the relationship between Eri, a young Acehnese man living in a tsunami affected neighborhood in the city of Banda Aceh, and his parents. I came to know Eri’s family well during my field research in the Indonesian province of Aceh in 2009-2010. Eri was then 24 years old. Not long before that, he spent two years at an Islamic school in Jakarta. There he felt attracted to the Islamist ideology of the political party PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, or Justice and Prosperity Party). Back in Aceh, he adopted a strong ‘outwardly’ pious life-style, as well as a moralistic attitude toward the behavior of his family. In this chapter I will investigate how this influence was accommodated as part of his parents’ daily life. I choose the term ‘accommodation’ because Eri’s ideas about the observance of scriptural norms was neither rejected nor fully accepted by his family. At the same time, his parents’ reactions and explanations constitute a demonstration of the kind of ‘personal piety’ which, in the study of Aceh and Muslim Southeast Asia more generally, has been largely neglected.

Aceh is commonly seen as a place where, compared to other regions in Indonesia, the forces of the global Islamic revival have been less influential. To some extent this is true, at least in the sense that the conflict made it difficult for (trans)national, revivalist or radically Islamist groups to establish themselves here.1 At the same time, however, these comments often seem to reproduce, at least to an extent, older (colonial) stereotypical

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1 The revivalist Islamic Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (Justice and Prosperity Party, PKS), founded in 2002 as the successor of the ‘Justice Party’ (PK, 1998) has been inspired by the ideology of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and won 7.9 per cent of the votes in the 1999 parliamentary elections. Presently the party makes part of the government coalition of President Susilo Bambang Yudhuyono. In the Acehnese local elections the party has been less successful than at the national level, winning only 3.6 per cent (against 46.9 per cent for the winner, Partai Aceh) (Mawardi Ismail et. al. 2009). One of the most visible and vocal Islamic students movements in Aceh is Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Islam Indonesia (KAMMI), which established a branch in 1998. KAMMI activists have associated themselves with the global Islamist movement, and campaigned fiercely for a strict implementation of Shari'a law (Aspinall 2009:193-99). Although they have a very strong presence on the street and in the media, their support base appears to be relatively small, even among campus students. Radically Islamist movements, such as Hisbut Tahrir Indonesia (HMI) and the Front Pembelaan Islam (FPI), also have had difficulties establishing themselves. HMI, a transnational organisation which strives for the restoration of the Caliphate, claims to have been in Aceh for many years. However, friends at the campus told me that they have only seen people wave the Hizbut Tahrir flag since the 2004 tsunami. FPI, an Indonesian paramilitary group infamous for its violent ‘sweepings’ of bars and brothels in big cities, attacks on religious and gender minority groups, and ties to the Indonesian police force and military, established a branch in Aceh in 2008, but so far its actions have been much less extensive and disruptive than in other parts of Indonesia. One of the reasons for this may be the movement’s ties to the military, which are of course highly sensitive in Aceh. While there are some signs of sympathy shown by young religious leaders (related to the view that the GAM-dominated provincial government has not done enough to enforce Shari’a law), support for the FPI seems to be marginal (Marziko Afriko 2010). Finally, a brief note here about the networks related to Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a violent Jihadist fringe group tied to Al Qaida. In 2010 people in Aceh were startled by the surprise discovery of a JI training camp near Jantho, Aceh Besar. The camp was led by Dulmatin, one of Southeast Asia’s most wanted terrorists, and rounded up by the military police. Almost all of the mujahidin encountered here came from outside Aceh (International Crisis Group 2006, 2010).
discourses of Acehnese exceptionalism, either hinting or stating explicitly that Acehnese are inherently conservative, inward-looking, hostile to outside influence, and attached to the embeddedness of Islam in their particularistic cultural practices. Contrary to what is often suggested, Aceh has never been an isolated place, and globalised expressions of Islam have affected everyday life for a very long time, and in a variety of aspects, whether in relation to the 'outward' forms of religiosity typically associated with the Islamic revival, or in terms of the more personal concerns central to what Francis Robinson has termed the 'inward turn'.

As I have explained already in the introduction, although there are some general historical and sociological studies about the Islamic revivalist movement in Southeast Asia, and many more detailed studies of its political expressions, few scholars have studied the effects of Islamisation in the everyday lives of ordinary Muslims. Those who do, have directed themselves mostly to the aspirations and anxieties associated with the 'new' urban middle class. Thus, scholars have asked how increasing wealth, social mobility and consumerism are related to the concerns of spiritual emptiness, or 'moral panic', and how pious middle class lifestyles are, in turn, 'gendered' or 'classed'. One of the most conspicuous exceptions in this body of literature is the intriguing anthropological memoir A shadow falls: in the heart of Java (2009), in which Andrew Beatty narrated his experience of living in a rural village in East Java in the 1990s, and his confrontation with the radical social changes taking place under the influence of a small group of Islamic hardliners aggressively imposing their orthodox approach to Islam on the rest of the villagers. Beatty developed a personal and emotional argument in order to convince his readers that the 'heart' of Java, characterised by its age-old syncretistic and tolerant religion, is on the verge of being suffocated by the inflexible and fanatical side of the modern Islamic resurgence. While the book has been rightly praised for its empirical richness and empathy with the varying ways in which ordinary villagers have tried to deal with the transformations taking place within their society, it has also been criticized for reifying the image of a mythical, 'time-less' Javanese identity, thus missing the opportunity to give a thorough analysis of what was really going on (see Pujo Semedi et al. 2010).

In recent years some persuasive anthropological arguments have been advanced against the wide-spread view of the 'Islamic revival' as a pervasive, uniform, and progressive force. Samuli Schielke has described some of the subversive attitudes to Islamist reformism as well as the ambiguity of religious morality amongst Egyptian youth (Schielke 2009, 2008). Magnus Marsden demonstrated how dynamic 'local forms' of Islamic faith and self-understanding are still very much at the centre of everyday village life in the Pakistan North-West Frontier, interacting in complex but flexible ways with the normative forms of sociality embodied by Islamist reformers (the Pakistani 'Taliban') (Marsden 2005). A decade earlier, Michael Peletz responded to the overwhelming focus on political Islam and the Islamic revival in Malaysia, arguing that, outside the urban circles of Islamist pressure, a great deal of ambivalence, if not plain hostility, existed with ordinary Muslims vis-à-vis state-sponsored Islamisation (Peletz 1997; cf. Kahn 2006). By asking how normative styles have been experienced, embodied, negotiated, incorporated, and resisted by ordinary Muslims in everyday situations, these and other authors demonstrated that for many Muslims moral ideas and practices are characterized not by a simple choice between 'scripturalist piety' and 'local tradition', but by ambiguity, changeable and flexible patterns of behavior, and deeply-felt ambivalence with regard to the perception, performance and social practice of Islamically defined moral behavior.2

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2 Compare also Hefner 2010; Simon 2009; Soares 2005; Torab 2007.
this chapter, I would like to add one more dimension to this body of critical literature, namely the dimension of a personalised 'religious agency' as a historically contingent process.

I will begin the chapter by introducing the family, the neighborhood, and some of the religious debates raised after Eri’s return to Banda Aceh. I then centre on two ‘stories’, one focused mainly on the life and experiences of Eri’s father, Ikhsan, the other on those of his mother, Meli, to demonstrate some of the ambiguities involved in the impact of such debates on everyday religious practice. In the third section I expand the discussion to a broader, and also more abstract level of analysis, looking at the role of Eri’s scripturalist repertoire in his parents’ perceptions of ‘community’, and using money (or economic behaviour) as a prism for making sense of the tangle of everyday concerns. The chapter ends with a discussion of personal piety and the ‘inward turn’, and the implication of these concepts for the study of the global Islamic revival more broadly.

**Islam and the life of a family: routines and debates**

Desa Blang Daruet is close to the seashore and stood no chance when the Indian Ocean tsunami smashed into the city on 26 December 2004. The neighborhood was completely destroyed, Apart from a few larger buildings, everything (mainly houses and shops, but also warehouses) was razed to the ground. A staggering 75 per cent of the circa 3000 inhabitants died. In the following years Blang Daruet was physically reconstructed with the help of two international NGO’s. When I came there, almost all survivors had been given a house to live in. In 2009 the neighborhood counted a total of 1325 inhabitants, including many newcomers.

Once Blang Daruet was part of a collection of rural *kampung* situated between Banda Aceh (centred on the *kraton* and the Great Baiturrahman Mosque) and the coast on the West side of the Aceh River mouth. Today it is fully integrated in the urban agglomeration making up the provincial capital. It is not a wealthy community. According to the calculations of Andri, the village secretary, it had a poverty rate of around 50 percent. The bulk of economic activity took place on a reconstructed main road cross-cutting the neighborhood. On one side of this road was the neighbourhood mosque, the geographical centre of the original settlement. Before the tsunami, this area was very populous. Today, it is still more densely built than the area on the other side of the road, which, not so long ago, was all rice fields (*sawahl*). One of the things I learnt quickly when I lived in Blang Daruet, was that there existed a distinct social difference between both these ‘sides’. The people in the area around the mosque considered themselves as ‘Daruet-born’ (*asli Daruet*), with descent usually traced through the line of the mother. On the other side of the road lived many ‘newcomers’ (*pendatang*). In general, the *pendatang* were better educated and wealthier than the *asli Daruet*. Many of them had government jobs. Many of them also rented, rather than owned their house, planning not to live in Blang Daruet for the rest of their lives. In daily conversation, the distinction between both areas was presented matter-of-factly, with apparent meanings and opinions attached to ‘this side’ (*sebelah sini*) and ‘that side’ (*sebelah sana*). Ikhsan and Meli were *pendatang*, and they lived in the ‘new’ part of the neighborhood. Having said this, we will see that they fitted neither one of these two categories perfectly.

I came to know Eri’s family in October 2009, when I moved into my house opposite theirs. During one of our first conversations, Meli pointed out to me where their old house used to be. It was built when they moved to Blang Daruet in 1997. The old house was made of wood and brick, and had five rooms. Before that, they rented a house in Ikhsan’s
place of birth, another urban *kampung* called Lam Pasai, about fifteen minutes away on a
motorcycle. The tsunami annihilated the old house. The only thing that reminded of it was
a small patch of grubby, overgrown tiles, which used to be the floor of the bathroom. On
this spot there was now a small improvised hen house, and some washing lines. Next to it
was an open, grassy patch, across which stood their new house, built in 2006 by World
Vision (a foreign NGO). This small, concrete house had three rooms: a sitting room, two
bedrooms, a miniature bathroom, and a kitchenette (most ‘tsunami-houses’ in Banda Aceh
look roughly like this). In fact, they had been granted three such houses, because they had
six children, four of whom were already young adults. When the houses were finished,
they decided to sublet two of them, which meant they had some extra income, but also that
their house was a crowded place. Four children shared one bedroom. Eri, the oldest, slept
in the sitting room.

Meli and Ikhsan were usually at home. They did not have paid jobs elsewhere.
Their main income came from the property they sublet: the two ‘tsunami-houses’ and one
shop house located in town, which Ikhsan owned. He also had some *sawah* land outside
the city, worked by local people. Twice a year he received a share of the yield, so they
rarely needed to buy rice. Then there was the *kiosk*: a small, new roadside shop built just
before I arrived. Here, they sold daily fare to their fellow *kampung* dwellers: rice, noodles,
vegetables, eggs, coconut, and petrol. Every morning Ikhsan and Meli went to the market
on a motorcycle to buy new stock. In the morning the children were at school or on
campus, except for the youngest, Zakhi, who was only four. In the early afternoon Ikhsan
often slept, while Meli stayed in the kiosk. Late at night it was the other way around. The
kiosk stayed open until around eleven o'clock at night. During the year I lived in Daruet,
the kiosk became a meeting place. Across the grassy patch, in the houses sublet by Meli
and Ikhsan, two young families lived, both a combination of a male civil servant, house
wife (*ibu rumah tangga*), and one small child. While the men were at office, the women did
their house work, and gathered at the kiosk in between chores, circled by the chickens and
ducks trying to get hold on scraps of food. Other people from the neighbourhood
occasionally hung around. I often sat there, smoking my *kretek* cigarettes, and chatting
along. A small TV was usually turned on, showing soap operas, sports, or the news.

There is another daily routine I would like to mention here: Eri’s walk to the
mosque. Eri was Ikhsan and Meli’s oldest son. After finishing high school in 2005, he was
given a chance, together with two friends, to go and live in a religious boarding school near
Jakarta. This was not a typical ‘traditional’ boarding school (*pesantren*), of which there are
so many in the Javanese countryside, but a *Pondok Pesantren Hafal al-Quran*, a place for
memorizing the Quran. Eri spent two years in this school, and managed to memorize about
one third of the Quran. He then returned to Banda Aceh, and started an undergraduate
program at the Ethics department (Fakultas Adab) of the State Islamic University, the IAIN
Ar-Raniry. From the Jakarta period onwards, Eri never missed a single prayer. He also
decided to perform each prayer in the mosque (which is considered most rewarding for
individual believers), going there on foot (a typical *salafi* practice: the Prophet Muhammad
and his contemporaries did not have motorcycles). I soon got used to this ritual, Eri
appearing from their house, just before the afternoon or evening *azan*, in his proper
‘Muslim shirt’ (*baju Muslim*), clean and smart trousers, smiling, and on his way to the
Blang Daruet mosque. His brothers and sisters were less particular about religion. Santi
studied at Serambi, one of Banda Aceh’s smaller universities, and hoped on day to become
a teacher. Taufik took his undergraduate studies in chemistry at Universitas Syiah Kuala
(Unsyiah), Aceh’s most prestigious secular university. Anril had dropped out and did odd
jobs. He was rarely at home. Imran was still in primary school and Zakhi was still at home. His parents, Ilhsan and Meli, had never attended secondary school.

Eri described himself as a thinker, and although he was a friendly, easygoing and attentive young man, he did not consider himself to be very socially skilled. He found it difficult to express himself in front of strangers, especially groups. He dreamed about writing books one day, and become a ‘modern Islamic scholar’ (ulama moderen). His favorite author was the Egyptian teacher and scholar Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. Eri was not the ‘typical’ revivalist proselytizer (orang dakwah). He was not a talented preacher, and liked to stay at home to study rather than discuss religion with friends in small study circles (usrah), the characteristic feature of the revivalist movement. In Jakarta, he had been jealous of students with a ready tongue. Although he did some volunteer work for the PKS, he perceived political activism as a kind of dilemma. Politics was mostly ‘dirty’, but he acknowledged that one should be prepared to compromise in order to change the ‘system’. If a lot of people change little things, he thought, the system might also change. According to Hasan Al-Banna, he explained, activists should not try to ‘topple’ the system (and cause havoc and chaos) but focus instead on the smallest organizational level, one’s own family. Here, the rules of Islam should be re-instituted. That, he said, was the basis of society.

If I focus in this chapter primarily on the concerns of his parents, this does not mean that the aspirations of Eri were straightforward, clear-cut or coherent. Eri’s ideas and wishes for the future were equally full of doubts and insecurities. Although it was his ideal to become a scholar, he said that he often found it difficult to really understand and explain the ideas of the thinkers he read. When I asked him what would be the most realistic prospect for him after his studies, he answered that he might well end up, like so many of his predecessors at the IAIN, somewhere in the vast bureaucracy of the Department of Religion. As for his proselytizing activities in the family, he realized that he needed to be careful, since his behaviour may be judged easily as haughty or inappropriate. Thus he confided to me that he should try to take it easy, and not take the risk of alienating his family.

Some of Eri’s messages fitted relatively easily in his environment. During one of my first conversations with him, we were sitting in front of the kiosk, talking about politics, corruption, and Islam. Eri was talking, I was listening, and Meli happily shouted from somewhere inside (apparently overhearing us): ‘Pencuri semua!’ (‘They’re all just thieves!’). Other issues were more contentious. Shari’a law makes it obligatory for women to wear a headscarf in public. Meli, who seldom wore a headscarf before, said that it did not bother her too much keeping to the new law when going out. Still, like many women she cared less when she was around the house, or in the small streets of the kampung. A scarf usually lay within reach inside the kiosk, but I had the impression that it served her as a kind of dust cloth more than a head covering. Eri had a problem with this. He often told her that she was thoughtless not wearing a headscarf outside the house, even if she was still on their own premises or in the kiosk. This irritated her. She agreed with Eri that it was better for women to cover their heads, but she did not believe one could change overnight. Like many other women, she argued that the decision to cover your head should be taken within the heart (dalam hati), and not simply because someone else tells you so. Sincerity, she explained, should precede outer appearance, otherwise it was meaningless.3

3 This is a common argument, both in Aceh and elsewhere in Indonesia (cf. Jones 2009). Meli illustrated this with a personal experience. Once, when visiting the hospital, she sat next to a women with a folded up headscarf in her hand. Obviously, Meli said, this lady planned to put on the scarf the moment she was
Another contentious topic in the household was that of ritual meals (kenduri). In Aceh, kenduri are the most common way to celebrate or commemorate events, whether marked by happiness or by grief. Kenduri are held when children are born, when boys are circumcised, or when a new religious school is opened. The type of kenduri that are the most controversial among scripturalist activists are those that follow funerals (kenduri kematian). Usually, these consist of seven-, or even ten-day long communal meals that accompany the mourning process. As we have seen in Chapters 1 and 4, the reformist critique stems from a conviction that, in the world of the living, nothing will 'help' the dead in the afterlife, while the practice of kenduri may imply otherwise. Another argument, which Eri used against the practice, was that the 'extravagance' of a kenduri weighed heavily on the financial situation of the bereaved family. A situation in which the deceased was also the breadwinner would be especially burdensome. Eating in such circumstances he considered sinful. The problem for Eri was that, in Aceh, not going to a kenduri is considered extremely impolite. So Eri did not object completely to going there, as long as the goal was to pray, not to eat. His stance led to a permanent debate, however, since not eating often is considered equally impolite. Thus, Eri was forced to come up with all kinds of far-fetched 'solutions', such as bringing your own water-in-plastic-cup to drink on the spot, instead of taking it from the kenduri itself.

For Meli, Eri's comments were often difficult to accept. She argued that these were 'his beliefs' while she still had 'her beliefs'. Ikhsan was more susceptible to Eri's interventions. When a person died, he said, Acehnese should organize a kenduri, regardless whether they are rich or poor. But the people who know about Islam, who have studied it, they will not eat. They pray, but they do not eat. (...) The Quran (ayat itu, lit. 'the verses') says it is forbidden (haram) to eat the food in the house of an orphan (memang haram kalau makan anak yatim punya). When stating so, he referred to Eri's explanations. When I asked Ikhsan whether he agreed with Eri on all points, he answered: if you ask me if I agree, then I agree. The point is that [unlike Eri] we did not learn deeply about it (lamparan kita tidak mendalami).’ Ikhsan considered Eri to be far more knowledgeable, so he saw no use in contradicting his son. This did not mean, however, that there was no room for interpretation or selection. With regard to the kenduri, Ikhsan avoided some of the sharp edges by taking Eri's arguments utterly literally, concluding it was only sinful to eat at a place where the breadwinner died and where the children were still small. ‘If it is children who die, small children, or when the people are rich, that is something different, then it is no problem [in eating there].’

Eri's knowledge was literally 'unquestioned', in the sense that his parents would never ask him directly about the authority of sources, the content of written commentaries, or the exact meaning of analogies. There were frictions and debates, sometimes under the surface, or hidden behind the facade of everyday quarrels and collisions, sometimes more manifest. But they would never ask Eri to teach them a 'lesson', as this would be perceived as shameful (buat malu) for parents to do. Eri never commented directly on his father's behavior. Indeed, this would be very unusual in the Acehnese context. As noted already in Chapter 1, in Aceh fathers and sons develop
avoidance relationships. While I found this pattern to be less obvious and on the forefront in the urban setting of Banda Aceh as compared to the rural setting of Juroung, it was clear to me that Eri never took up these matters directly with his father. Ikhsan did, however, generally listen to what Eri said. As we shall see, Eri was much less reluctant to comment on the behaviour of his mother.

Two stories, many concerns

In her approach of the 'self', Unni Wikan distinguished between 'narrative' and 'acts' as different 'sources of analysis', strongly warning against an overemphasis on the former. This section uses narratives, or 'stories' as I prefer to call them (which can be told, retold, and adapted according to circumstances and as part of a conversation) in order to focus on two sets of concerns. The first centres on Ikhsan, and particularly on his past, his current mental 'condition' and the meaning of worship. The second centres on Meli, the challenges of motherhood, and the generational transmission of religious norms and values. Both stories, which are relatively coherent but also multifaceted, emphasize the ambiguous, unfixed, and context-bound nature of everyday thoughts, worries and dilemmas. Eri and his ideas about Islam are an important register, even if this did not always show itself at the forefront of daily trials and tribulations. While I take these stories seriously as representations of Meli and Ikhsan's 'states of being' at that time, I also try to interpret them, as Wikan suggests, in the context of 'other actions', and in relationship to each other, considering that, ultimately 'it is through acts, primarily, rather than narrative that people fashion themselves' (Ibid.:266).

A 'zeal for business' gone

For many years, Ikhsan had been a trader, in office equipment, furniture, cloth, and many other things. But now, in late 2009, he did not want to do it anymore. Somehow, he had lost his zeal for doing business (hilang semangat bisnis). He no longer had the desire to 'go out there'. When I asked him how this happened, he said: 'There is no use. I do not have the daring anymore. The blood has become cold' (masalahnya kurang berani, darah aku dingin). 'Was this before or after the tsunami?' I asked. He answered: 'Before the tsunami I still had a business, I sold motor-taxi's. I bought those for three million rupiah, I improved them, and then I sold them again for four. But now I have just become lazy'. The first time Ikhsan told me this was when we had just met. Because of the way he explained this, I long thought that the loss of Ikhsan's 'business spirit' was connected to the horror of the

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5 'A feature of narrative is the narrator’s freedom to construct a plot, to control fully in what order the reader or listener becomes aware of what happens (...). Action in and on the world, on the other hand, is constrained by causality and less manipulable with regard to making information available to others. A person’s work in crafting a self must take place on many fronts, only one of which is that of presenting the self, or repairing the public image, by narrative. The person must also respond to the flow of events, create and consume resources, and influence the events and course of social interaction. And surely for anthropologists to use people’s own narratives as their source for data on these latter processes is a very poor method. The context of other actions, options, and circumstances, ascertained from other sources than the partisans’ own accounts of them, provides the necessary background for our understanding of the purposes, indeed the meaning, of narrative' (Wikan 1995:265)

6 In English, the Indonesian word semangat is often translated as 'spirit'. I have chosen here not to use this term because of the possible confusion with spirit-beings. There is a range of other possible translations, including 'passion', 'zeal', 'vigour', or 'vitality.'
tsunami. Actually, for me the problem seemed quite clear at the time: depression caused by shock. Thus, in my early fieldwork notes there are several remarks like this:

Today in the afternoon [I had] a long talk with Ikhsan. First [before elaborating] some [notes] about his common attitude, [and] way of acting. I have noticed this before, but I find it difficult to interpret, and I get avoiding answers even if I ask cautiously about it. I think he makes a weary impression. Almost apathetic. Capai cari rezeki [= tired of looking for money], is what he says about it. [He says that] he doesn’t have the energy like in the past. He used to have multiple usaha [= businesses], no job 'too heavy or too odd'. [There] would always be little businesses, here and there. If there was money to earn with something, he would earn money with it. Now it does not happen anymore, he cannot do it anymore. [So] the question now [is]: is this just because he has become a couple of years older, is that all? Or is it related to the tsunami? I guess that the latter plays its part. That he has lost his semangat [= spirit] because of this. He frequently hints at this, in various ways, but he never says so explicitly.

Although Ikhsan and Meli had been incredibly lucky that all of their children had survived, the shock was still horrifying. Ikhsan lost his mother, and 125 people on that side of his family. The house, including most of what they owned and collected for twenty years, was gone in one moment. Neighbourhoods – the one in which Ikhsan was born and the one in which he had lived for decades – were swept away. Many months later, I still thought that, if ever Ikhsan would go to a psychiatrist – in Aceh or anywhere else – he would probably be diagnosed with one or other emotional problem or ‘mood disorder’. However, I also learnt that the situation was more complex.

Ikhsan and Meli were not from wealthy families. Meli was originally from Sibreh, a market town roughly 30 minutes from Banda Aceh. Her father died when she was only seven years old, which meant that her mother – who never remarried – was forced to earn cash at a time when her children were still small. Ikhsan also lost his father at an early age. He was a bus driver, and worked for several small companies. When he died, Ikhsan went to live with his pak chik, the younger brother of his mother, who owned a shop selling office utensils. Ikhsan worked in the shop – he had already helped out there occasionally before his father’s death – and soon showed a mercantile talent: ‘I wrote down everything on little pieces of paper. I wrote down the prices; I wrote down when something was sold; when something was sold out. My uncle was happy, because he never did this.’ When he was old enough, Ikhsan set out for himself, looking for his own merchandise. The first real ‘hit’ was embroidery, used for the decoration of head scarves. ‘We had this in Banda Aceh, of course, but everything was from Medan, and it was very coarse, not good quality. So I went to Bukittinggi, in West Sumatra, where the embroidery was very fine, and I sold it here’. When he was in his mid-twenties (he and Meli were not yet married) he opened a billiard hall. ‘That was a real good business. I made a lot of money then’. When they married, he was trading furniture, buying in Medan, and selling again in Banda Aceh.

One day I was sitting in the kiosk with Ikhsan, when he told me a story. He was still a young man, unmarried, and already quite successful in the furniture business. At a certain point – this must have been in the 1980s – he agreed to let his sister’s husband manage one of the two shops he owned. He was jobless at the time, so to make him responsible for one of his shops seemed to be good for both. For a while, everything went all right, but then Ikhsan discovered that his in-law had darker motives. First, he persuaded Ikhsan to invest in a shop-construction project, in which he had ‘good connections’. Ikhsan sold some gold, and gave him the money. The shops were never built, and his in-law made up excuses. Ikhsan never saw his money again. His sister’s husband
claimed he did not know either where it was, the money being ‘out of his hands’ (*lepas tangan*).

As the conflict about this money dragged on, something peculiar happened. One day Ikhsan came to the shop unannounced. His brother-in-law was not there. He had left for Medan to buy furniture. Ikhsan opened the shop and found that one of the drawers in the office was locked. Curious, he opened the drawer with a screwdriver. Inside he found a small, cylinder-formed cigarette tin. When he looked inside he noticed that the tin contained strange objects: a couple of teeth, some hairs, and a little package (which he did not dare open, because he suspected that inside may be wrapped a dead child’s tongue). When his brother-in-law returned, Ikhsan confronted him and his sister with the discovery, and demanded an explanation. His sister started to cry. Her husband pretended not to know about it. Ikhsan put him under pressure, after which he admitted that it was him who put the tin there. He claimed that he did not mean to hex anyone, but Ikhsan did not believe him. He thought they were using black magic (*ilmu gaib*) in order to ‘silence’ him (*buat aku nggak bisa ngomong*). Their plan, he thought, was to rob him of his business and money, making sure he could not talk back. Ikhsan expelled both of them from his shop.

I probed Ikhsan for more details, curious to know whether he had tried to do something about the spell, but he refused to say more. ‘We should not keep talking about it’ (*dosa bilang lagi*). ‘They died, both of them, they died in the tsunami’ (*kena tsunami*). It would be a sin to say bad things about the dead. Besides, he thought afterlife would be hard enough on them anyway, because of what they did. Ikhsan did not want to make this worse. He said he forgave them both.

I wrote down these notes, and did not think about the story for a while, only to be reminded about it later by Meli. We were talking about the past. Meli remembered how Ikhsan was once a smart and energetic businessman. When I asked how this changed, she said that the main problem lay with his family. When Ikhsan became successful, some people in his family became jealous. According to Meli, they had tried to make him ‘stupid’ (*membodohin*) so he might forfeit his business and allow them to take advantage. They did not succeed, but what happened was that Ikhsan lost his *semangat*. The way in which Meli told the story, Ikhsan’s lost *semangat* was not so much an event. It was a process. This was just as difficult for Meli as it was for Ikhsan himself. Her husband used to be away often, and he was always full of ideas and plans. Now he just wanted to stay at home. Meli was worried, because they needed to live from the property they had accumulated over many years, and which she was anxious to save. The tsunami took most of her personal possessions, notably her gold, which she was forced to leave in the house when they fled the water. She thus became more dependent on Ikhsan. But the problem was not just money. Meli said she liked her husband more when he still had *semangat*. In this context, Meli wanted to build the *kiosk*. This was her idea. She wanted to become more independent. Persuading Ikhsan proved to be frustrating. At first he did not like the idea. Meli could not force him: it was not she who decided over his savings (as invested in the *sawah* and the shop house). After a while he gave in, and the kiosk was built. For Meli, this was a sign of hope, that there was a possibility that things might change.

After this conversation I decided that there may be more to the witchcraft-story as well, and I decided to try and find out. As it turned out, the bitterness Ikhsan felt about (a part of) his family was indeed greater than I had previously thought. The drift of his

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7 In the Acehnese context, this was not an outrageous thought. Body parts of dead babies are commonly thought to be an object of witchcraft. Thus, when babies die, their graves are guarded for at least ten days, to make sure that they cannot be opened.
argument was that ‘success causes trouble’. As soon as Ikhsan’s earnings increased, he became morally responsible for things like sending his younger brothers and sisters to school, and helping out others with starting capital (modal) for all kinds of money-making activities. Personally he considered this an ‘obligation’, but at the same time he experienced the risk of being abused. ‘The bugs crawl into your sleeve’, he said (A: limpeun dalam sapa baje, lit. the ‘centipedes’). ‘They will surely bite, but they cannot be easily removed’. About his brother-in-law (who abused Ikhsan’s help by trying to hex him), Ikhsan said that he had behaved ‘like a buffalo lifted from the mud’ (lagee kabeue geupeuteungh lamon), implying that, when one tries to lift a buffalo from his pool (to be fed, or guided into its shelter), instead of being grateful he will try to kick you. Reflecting on the episode, Ikhsan bitterly recalled his brother-in-law as a bad person (orang jahat), who did not pray, and who thought only about money. I asked him again whether he had tried to do something about the spell. Was there a possibility to perform a counter-hex?8 His answer was a clear ‘no’. According to Ikhsan, it would have been very difficult to find a religious specialist with sufficient skills. The hex was probably complicated (he speculated that there might also have been things in his drinks, or his food), and he did not trust anybody to interfere, for this may be even riskier than the spell itself.

This judgement resonated with earlier discussions I had with Ikhsan and Meli. Both of them believed that the ulama in Aceh were no longer as powerful as they had once been. We had some lively conversations about the supernatural powers of the Acehnese’ religious scholars during the wars with the Dutch (up to a point that I realised I was not so much listening to their experiences and opinions, as it was them being curious to know the stories ‘authorised’ by my research; in other words, they wanted to know what I read about these things in books and archives). They thought that, in the days of the war with the Dutch, almost everyone in Aceh must have been alim, with many people possessing keramat, or miraculous power. But that time was gone. Ikhsan was more explicit about this than Meli, who was perhaps more ambiguous in her judgment because of the skills of her own mother as a healer (which I will discuss in more detail in the next section). According to Ikhsan, the disappearance of keramat in Aceh was caused by the hypocrisy and insincerity of the ulama. In the past, he said, someone looking for knowledge would go to the ulama, and be taught. Today, it was imperative to bring sugar, coffee, and, especially, money. According to Ikhsan, in Aceh there were still places infused with keramat (such as the graves of famous ulama) but not anymore ‘holy people’ (orang keramat). So, he implied, like all others he was left alone with his problems. ‘It is difficult to find a specialist, what remains is to stay at home and pray’ (payah dapat ahli, tinggal do’a di rumah).

At this point, connections became more evident between his past, the scripturalism of Eri, and Ikhsan’s own religiosity. In earlier conversations, I asked Ikhsan whether he felt encumbered (literally ‘heavy’, berat) or sad about the fact that today he was less wealthy than before. In such discussions, he seldom answered directly, arguing that it was important to shut oneself off from such emotions. The most important thing, he said, was that his children were able to go to school, and that his family was not hungry. He tried to avoid stress (stres, or pikiran). To worry or to brood makes people sick. Ikhsan’s remarks demonstrated that there was a particular religious charge to this way of thinking. ‘Everything is the hands of God’ (semua punya Tuhan), he said, after which he explained it

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8 In first instance I used the term berobat here. This means going to the doctor, but in this context I trusted that he interpreted this as going to a religious specialist, or at least to someone with the right religious or mystical knowledge to neutralise the spell. At a later point we talked more explicitly about the use of ‘white magic’ (ilmu putih).
was important not to worry about the past, but to think about the future. For Ikhsan, this meant that earning lots of money was no longer important. 'I still have the pickup-truck. I can use this to go to the market and help people with their cargoes. It is easy to earn money like that'. He just could not see the benefit anymore. 'The important thing is that we pray' (yang penting kita sembahyang).

In such expressions of piety, Eri was a constant point of reference. According to Ikhsan, Eri was 'pious' (salah) and 'obedient' (patuh). When Eri first suggested that he study in a pesantren and memorise the Quran, Ikhsan was against it. It took a while for Eri to convince his parents. Now Ikhsan applauded his son's choice. People who know the Quran are able to pray and recite perfectly, said Ikhsan, and they will be protected by God. Personally he was no alim. Perhaps he could have become one if his own father have lived longer. His father, Eri's grandfather, was more knowledgeable. He would have passed this knowledge on to his children, were it not for his early death. The latter meant that Ikhsan was given little time to study. 'I am not knowledgeable about Islam, I never had the opportunity to learn in-depth knowledge (nggak ada kesempatan untuk mendalami). (...) I know how to pray. Everyone in Aceh knows how to pray. I know the shorter verses (ayat-pendek) (...), but I did not go to the lessons of the teachers (pengajian teungku-teungku). I pray, I give zakat, I give sedekah to orphans, but I do not tell anyone about it. In Islam it should be like that, only arrogant people tell about the zakat they give. My wife knows, but that is not a problem. In Islam, husband and wife should agree (kompak, sama-sama tahu).'

With little knowledge, and having admitted to many (unholy) temptations in the past, Ikhsan concluded he was probably 'far from heaven' (jauh dari surga). Eri, in contrast, was already on his way to become an expert. He had the right character, was interested in learning instead of money, and not greedy (seraka). Ikhsan recounted how, after the tsunami, Eri went around the barracks to teach children how to recite the Quran. A foreign NGO wanted to pay him for this, but Eri said he did not need it. He gave these earnings to the leaders of the local mosque, trusting they would use it well. I asked Ikhsan: 'Is Eri very different from your other children?' He answered, laughing: 'Yes, the others certainly would not have a problem accepting the money!' Ikhsan was glad that Eri was there, reading his books, and reminding the others to pray. Like many others, Ikhsan saw the tsunami as warning from God. He called it a test (percobaan) and even an 'exam' (ujian). When I asked him whether he would like to build back his old house, he said: 'I am almost 60 years old. I could build everything back. A storied house, and filled with beautiful things. But I do not know whether God will take it all back (dibimbul lagi Tuhan). The tsunami was like an exam (ujian). God wants to see how people deal with it. Now I simply pray.'

Heaven lies under mother's feet

For Meli, the situation was different. She was a decade younger than Ikhsan, and she did not share his passiveness. She worried how long their resources would last. Although they earned some money with the kiosk, it was clear to her that this would not cover their long term expenses. So Meli gradually took control over her family's wellbeing. She managed the shop and the household. She took care of food, clothes and medicines. And she urged her husband to somehow 'find back' his motivation.

At the same time, Meli had her own personal concerns, one of them being Eri. However, my reconstruction of this should begin not with him, but with her youngest son, Zakhi, and her mother, Hamdiah. When I got to know the family, Zakhi was four years old,
and a real handful. He was born prematurely, after seven months pregnancy. In general he seemed to function well: he went to school, his motor abilities were fine, he was curious and probably smart. But he found it difficult to play with other children. His parents and other adults found it hard to get in touch with him. His parents worried about this. Meli regularly asked for my advice, inquiring how children with behavioral difficulties were treated where I came from. In such instances I felt ill at ease. I did not have children myself, and I did not feel qualified to advise an experienced mother on any such matter. Usually I mumbled something about my nephews and nieces, and then changed the topic. I never made much of it. But again, things would prove to be more complex.

Hamdiah, Meli’s mother, never remarried after the death of her husband. She worked the sawah, as well as on the Sibreh market, where she sold vegetables, and later clothes. She was a pious woman, strict in observance, who sent her children (including Meli) to a religious primary school (a Madrasah Ibtdaiyah Negeri, or MIN). She was also a healer, who controlled the power of summoning the spirits of deceased ulama into her body, in order to help her cure certain illnesses. She learned how to do this at an early age. After her husband died, and she had to take care of her children alone, the spirits stayed away for a long time, according to Meli because she was too busy with other things. At a later age they came back. I learnt about this when we were talking about my visit to another female healer in a place close to Juroung. I asked Meli then whether she ever visited a dukun (a traditional healer). She said ‘No. That is dangerous’. I asked: ‘How is that dangerous?’ ‘Because it is similar to splitting God’ (memperduakan Tuhan, i.e. polytheism). She said that, if she visited a dukun, Eri would become very angry. She made the distinction between dukun and orang berobat (the latter term being less associated with magic or shirk).9 This did not mean that her mother’s gift was not connected to some kind of ‘supernatural’ power. Rather, she thought the term dukun to be too much connected to black magic. So she would never call her mother a dukun.

Eri, in his scripturalist rejection of most ‘supernatural’ phenomena, disapproved of his grandmother’s practices, but he would never confront her directly with his opinions. Meli told Hamdiah once about Eri’s thoughts, spurring little reaction except from a remark that she did use Quranic verses. According to Meli’s personal opinion, this was not even all that relevant. She said that there were ‘many things’ Eri did not believe (banyak dia tidak percaya) or accept (menerima), but which were simply a part of the faith and customs of the Acehnese (kepercayaan dan adat). He reluctantly visited ritual meals and never graves. Meli kept on doing these things, notwithstanding her son’s disapproval. If he commented on her behaviour, she would listen to him and leave it at that. She said she had seen people being cured by her mother. About the details of the rituals she did not argue with her son. Thus, it appeared that she did not consider it a problem that there were different opinions about religion in the house. It was a case of her own ‘old beliefs’ (kepercayaan dulu) versus Eri’s ‘modern beliefs’ (kepercayaan modern). She considered herself too old to change these things, neither did she really want to.

Eri never tried to ‘force’ anything on his family (memaksakan). What he did do was ‘accuse’ his mother (menyalahkan), for example of not observing the rules of Islam. Her reactions to this varied. If Eri said she should cover her head more often, she took note, and relied on the arguments mentioned above. What made her more hesitant – and this is the point I want to make in this section – were his comments about the way she raised her (other) children. According to Eri, his mother was much too lenient with regard to morality and rules. So he reprimanded her when she was insufficiently strict about her

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9 Just like in other parts of Indonesia, in Aceh there are many kinds of dukun, or healers, ranging from specialists in bone fractures, to libido enhancement, to more esoteric matters.
other children not praying, not wearing decent clothes, keeping bad company, coming home too late, being lazy with homework, being naughty, being disobedient, and so on. For all this misbehaviour, he blamed Meli personally, his reasoning amounting to the belief that children are born blank slates (bersih, or putih, 'clean', 'white'). In Eri’s view, sins accumulated as people grew up and discovered the temptations of life (nafsu). Thus, he thought it was the parents’ task to minimise this, to a certain extent inevitable, development by continuous disciplining and suitable punishment.

Meli did not completely disagree with this line of reasoning. Obviously, she also thought that parents had a crucial responsibility for their children’s learnt behaviour (‘children do not ask to be born’, she used to say, anak tidak minta dilahirkan), and that it was the role of the parents to teach what is good and what is bad. But for her there was still reason within this responsibility. In Aceh, the usual contention is that children should know the common rules of morality when they reach puberty. This still allows for ample flexibility. According to Meli, the moment could not be entirely predicted when someone became entirely responsible for his or her actions, because every person is different. But she also held a more sophisticated argument against Eri. If what he said were really true, namely that it was Meli’s fault if her children made mistakes or committed sins, this would mean that she did ‘wrong’ (bersalah). Logically, this would mean her parents had also done ‘wrong’, and their parents, and their parents, and so on. But surely, this was impossible!

After Meli and I had this conversation, I viewed very differently her concerns about Zakhi. In many ways, Zakhi behaved in a ‘bad way’. If he wanted attention he shouted and made scenes, and sometimes he became aggressive (he once stabbed Meli quite seriously with a sharp pencil). He wanted to play with other children, but he could scare them with his rough games (main kasar). Although his family dealt with him patiently and without making much fuss, I suddenly realised that Meli’s insecurity about how to treat him was very much connected to the silent battle she was fighting out with her oldest son. Although Meli was an experienced mother of six, Eri’s criticism contributed to her daily doubts and worries. She asked herself whether she was doing the right thing, whether she was raising her children in the right way. She argued that she always sent her children to school, and to their recitation lessons (suruh ngaji, a prerequisite for a good upbringing for most Acehnese Muslims), and she helped them to do their homework, teaching them how to write. So what more could she do? If they did not pray, how was that her fault? Eri told her to be more severe, but did this also mean she could force Anril, her unpredictable 22-old son, to pray five times a day? In a later, more defiant moment, she told me that ‘ultimately, everyone is different’. Eri was always at home, studying. Anril left early and came home late, if he came home at all. She knew little about what he did all day, but she felt that, as long as nothing bad happened, there was little she could do about it. With Zakhi, it was different again. He seemed not to listen to anything they said. So what could she do? Was she to let Eri’s pressing comments about raising her children affect this? There was no straightforward answer to this question. She simply did not know.

At the basis of Meli’s conflict with her son, then, lay a fundamentally different conception of human life. For Meli, the meaning of sinning, and immoral behaviour, depended for a large part on the person beneath it. Difference in ‘character’ mattered to her in the sense of how people should be treated and judged. For parents, providing a moral framework was an obligation, but this did not mean that there was a single possible model for raising all her children. In Aceh, a phrase commonly included by ulama in their sermons is that children are ‘entrusted’, temporarily, in the hands of their parents by God (anak adalah titipan Tuhan). Both Meli and Eri separately referred to this phrase in
conversations with me, but they clearly explained it differently. Meli said: ‘We all have sins (dosa), and all of us have to repent (minta ampun).’ Look at Ikhsan, she said. ‘In the past he often did not pray, but now he changed. Now he often prays, now he often repents. This is a big change.’ I interpreted these words as a claim that moral improvement was a continuous, but also unpredictable process, of which it was not very clear when it began, or when it ended. For Eri, the view that people were born ‘clean’, and without sins, meant that life was primarily a matter of restricting the ‘inevitable’ damage, which could only be done through strict discipline and punishment.

Still, Meli did not simply undergo, or resign herself to accept Eri’s comments. In her view, there was one more important moral principle which Eri overlooked, namely that a child should respect – and obey – his or her parents. Like Ikhsan, Meli admired Eri for the knowledge he obtained. Both of them regularly called themselves ‘ignorant’ (bodoh) in this context. According to Meli there was no fundamental objection to the knowledge on which Eri based his opinions. But she also made clear that he should ventilate these opinions tactfully, without hurting people’s feelings (lembut, jangan dengan cara keras... jangan sampai sakit hati). Eri did not take into account this principle sufficiently, according to his mother. For Meli, there was no excuse whatsoever for treating one’s family disrespectfully, even if they did not observe certain religious obligations. Parents, she said, have the right to be esteemed (dihargai), respected (dihormati) and obeyed (dipatuhi). Meli made a distinction, in this respect, between fathers and mothers. Respect and obeisance for one’s mothers was more important than that for one’s father. Throughout my fieldwork I recognized this as a well-established judgement in Aceh. The gendered connotation is ambiguous, however. Typically, the ulama say that every single person needs to deal with his or her mother in three worlds: the womb (kandungan), this world of the living (alam dunia) and in the afterlife (akhirat). Thus mothers have greater responsibility and care over their children than fathers do. Analogously, all people carry a greater debt towards their mother than to their father. ‘Heaven, Meli quoted the Hadith, ‘lies under mother’s feet (surga dibawa telapa kaki ibu).’

Like Ikhsan, Meli saw herself as far from perfect. She could be harsh and disobedient towards her own mother, for which she asked God’s forgiveness. She was a pious person. She performed her prayers, and on Thursday night she recited the Quran. When I asked her once how she was able to do this: combining the care for her household, the kiosk, and her own religious duties, she answered with an ambiguous sedang-sedang, which may be interpreted both as ‘sufficient’ and as ‘insufficient’. For her, it was a balancing act. She said: ‘There is this world to think about and there is the next’ (ada dunia ini dan ada dunia akhirat). She compared it to a more general obligation to steer a middle course, and try to avoid extreme positions. ‘It is not necessary to be rich, and it is not necessary to be poor’, and ‘One should not eat too much, and not too little’. I think she thought her son to be too extreme. Personally, she thought of herself as ‘just an ordinary person’ (aku seorang biasa aja).

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10 Meli told me two stories to explain this better to me. The first was the famous West-Sumatran story of Amad Ramayong (more widely known in Indonesia as the story of Maling Kundang), a tale about a rebellious son who turns to stone after denying his own mother, thereby renouncing his origins as well as the existence of God. The second story I did not know: it was about a man, who lived in the time of the Prophet Muhammad, and who could not die. Although he wanted to die, his spirit would not leave his body (tidak mau keluarkan nyawanya). When the people noticed this, they called the Prophet, who said the man had disobeyed his mother. The man then visited her (apparently she was still alive) to ask for her forgiveness. Only after this, the man was able to depart from the world.
Money, piety, and perceptions of community

I would like to start my discussion in this section with some remarks about the cultural construction of ‘fate’. The Islamic concept of fate – takdir – permeates everyday language in Aceh. When asked about the meaning of takdir, many Acehnese explained to me that certain crucial events in life, such as birth, marriage, and death are predestined by God. For example, when confronted with small and great disasters (the tsunami, obviously, but also minor accidents and cases of what one would be tempted to describe as ‘bad luck’) people often speak in terms of takdiran. A related concept is rezeki. Not easily translated, this concept may refer, in alternate contexts, to one’s means of support, livelihood, gift, or, indeed but not often, ‘luck’. If people talk about rezeki, they could refer to material proceeds, income and earning, but also, for example, to the ‘gift’ of children. Either way, rezeki is always a gift of God to individual Muslims. It is never received ‘automatically’. Muslims need to act in order to receive rezeki (such as working, praying, or doing good deeds), a reality expressed by the common phrase mencari rezeki, which is translated literally as ‘looking for rezeki’, but which could mean ‘earning money’ as well as ‘hoping for (divine) rewards’.

Rezeki, as a gift blessed by God, is always ‘good’. But if there are ‘good rewards’, there are also ‘bad rewards’. According to Ikhsan, many people were involved in collecting ‘bad money’. Corruption was the primary example. In late 2010 the media started to report about a big corruption case (centred around the alleged tax embezzler Gayus Tambunan) which would dominate the Indonesian news for months to come. Like everyone else, Ikhsan and his family complained about this. But they also laughed about it, and sometimes watched in sheer amazement rather than fury (similarly, I heard some people express their admiration of Gayus, a reaction from which spoke a kind of awe for an ordinary civil servant apparently smart enough ‘trick’ the government and lay his hand on such infinite riches). Real disgust was directed at more visible, local figures. A popular target for many people in Daruet, including Ikhsan, was the keuchik, Syahrul, who was chosen a few years earlier with overwhelming support, but not much later was accused of using community funds for himself. Another predictable source of contempt was the slush money and bribes (uang gosok) demanded on a regular basis by government officials and the police.

Ikhsan occasionally talked about the ‘bad money’ he had earned himself in the past. One of his most lucrative initiatives had been a billiard hall he once owned. He closed this business only two years after its opening, because his mother kept complaining to him about the sinfulness it invited (such as drinking alcohol and gambling). ‘Even if I would not

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11 In fact this was a complicated matter. Keuchik Syahrul had been accused on different occasions of ‘borrowing’ small amounts of money from the village treasury because his wife was ill and had to be treated in the hospital. According to Syahrul, he would then return this money in due course (which apparently he did, at least in some instances). People often complained about this, but a real crisis occurred only when a considerable amount of money was allocated to all the villages in the sub-district, with the explicit purpose of constructing shop buildings. The Camat had originally tried to turn these shops into one big complex (hoping, according to many people, to profit from this personally). Daruet was the village that most fiercely resisted this plan, and insisted that the shops were built in the village itself, and exploited on the basis of a rotation system. Cutting a long and complicated story short, the keuchik was not trusted with this project, and a conflict about this evolved into an unclear situation in which both the keuchik and the head of the village council (teuha peut), Hussein AS, claimed that they managed the project, even as construction had already started. Eventually, Hussein AS threatened to resign (mundur), which nobody wanted, and a reconciliation meeting was planned, in which the keuchik was forced to apologise for past wrongdoings.
do those things myself,' Ikhsan explained, 'the money I got from it was bad, so it was also my sin (dosa aku).’ Interestingly, Ikhsan connected his inertia to this idea of 'bad money'. Each time he explained to me how he 'lost his zeal', he would say that 'actually it is easy to make a lot of money'. The main point, he implied, was that it lost its meaning. What worried him in this phase of his life, was how to improve, morally rather than materially. ‘We have to think about how we can become a better person. We have to choose the right path, which is consistent with our religion' (pilih jalur yang baik, yang sesuai agama). In part, this meant earning 'good', or 'clean' money. So Ikhsan said: ‘With the billiard hall I made a lot of money, but it was not good money’.

Unsurprisingly, the tsunami was an important marker for many discussions of morality, including those about material possessions. For Ikhsan, the disaster made it shockingly visible how wealth – money, clothes, cars, houses – could be taken away from people in a flash. ‘When the tsunami happened, money did not even matter at all. God does not look at our feathers' (Tuhan tidak melihat bulu). It was, in every facet, a manifestation of God's power (kekuatan Tuhan). Afterwards he was more concerned about his daily religious duties. Thus, an invigorated religious diligence was born from the ‘warning’ (peringatan) instilled in the disaster, as well as from his gratitude for the lives not lost. Everything could be taken away suddenly, Ikhsan said, but this is because everything was given to us by God in the first place. People work and make money, but ultimately, it is about ‘what God grants us’. At the same time, talking about the tsunami also held the temptation of ascribing changes exclusively to it. The reason was of course the sheer magnitude of the disaster, making it to some extent a pervasive ‘container’ discourse, a convenient tool for people to explain and define opinions, events, and phenomena as an episode of fate, which in lived reality were changeable or ambiguous.

The fact that the tsunami offered a relatively clear-cut religious ‘repertoire’ for dealing with questions about material wealth and abstract religious morals meant that sometimes it obscured more than it revealed. This becomes clear from a more careful analysis of Ikhsan’s interpretations of his ‘lost zeal’. According to my notes, the first time he told me the story of his bewitchment, he cut short our conversation immediately the moment when I became more inquisitive about the relationship between him and his family. He then continued with an abstract discussion of the relationship in Aceh between rich and poor. The problem, he said, was that many people had become arrogant (sombong). This is an important register, since in Aceh, arrogance is seen as a primary vice. For example, in Garuet a common local story was available, told on the street, in people’s houses, or in kedai, whenever people wanted to explain how arrogance would always ‘come and get you’. In very brief summary, the story went like this: Once, in a time not too long ago, a respected, locally-born resident of Garuet gathered a large amount of wealth as the result of some fortunate developments in his life. He built a large house and he bought a car. He was very rich. But then he became sombong and started to neglect the other, less fortunate people in the kampung. Confronted about his behaviour by the kampung elders, he acted haughtily, and he showed no concern whatsoever. Ultimately, the people turned against him by overtly ignoring him in every single aspect of social interaction. After a while, he realized he could not handle this silent, collective punishment. Thus he was forced to sell his house and leave the kampung in which he was born.

In Aceh, moralising stories about pride and arrogance are always framed in religious discourse, implying explicit and concrete warnings. This works in two ways. For example, in order to be considered alim (knowledgeable in Islam), one cannot show signs of arrogance. Religious knowledge (ilmu) implies an understanding of the world in which
people are ‘visitors’, their worldly possessions seen as worthless in the context of eternity. To explain this, Ikhsan used the following analogy: When the sawah is watered (wealth), the stalks shoot up (arrogance). But as soon as these stalks develop fruit (knowledge), their heads will hang down, looking back to the ground (modesty). Sometimes, said Ikhsan, it happens that the stalks do not carry fruit and remain empty. They will stand upright proudly, but they are of no use for anybody. This analogy is common, and encountered in numerous forms. The question is, why did Ikhsan connect, in this first cautious exchange about his past, the story of his ‘lost zeal’ and his ‘bewitchment’ to a moral lesson about arrogance? Was there something behind this?

It was not until much later, when I realised that, in these stories about his past behaviour and his current ‘condition’, Ikhsan was reflecting and commenting, though perhaps not very explicitly, on his social position within the local community, first in Lam Pasai, later in Daruet. In order to make this more clear, it is important to acknowledge that, for me, it was actually quite difficult to find out to what extent Ikhsan still felt ‘connected’ to the community in which he was born. He described himself as an orang Lam Pasai, but it is very common for Acehnese to define themselves in first instance in relation to their place of birth. In fact, Ikhsan seldom went back. One of the more immediate reasons for this was the tsunami. Like Blang Daruet, Lam Pasai was completely demolished, and a large part of Ikhsan’s family had not survived. But there was another problem, which I already referred to in the previous section, namely the tensions between Ikhsan and (a part of) his family. When I asked Ikhsan why they moved out of Lam Pasai in 1997, he told me that, in his kampung of birth, ‘the atmosphere had become a bit too hot’ (suasananya agak hangat sedikit). Each time I asked him to explain this further, he talked rather vaguely about drunk youth, causing a bad influence for his children. However, when I asked Meli the same question, she simply said there were ‘problems’ with his family.

As I mentioned earlier, the fact that neither Ikhsan nor Meli were originally from Daruet, meant that they would be considered ‘newcomers’ for as long as they lived there. In Daruet (as in other tsunami-affected areas in Aceh; cf. Samuels 2012a:745-46) there was a sharp social and discursive distinction between ‘newcomers’ and ‘original inhabitants’. However, Ikhsan and Meli fitted neither one of these categories well. They had lived in Daruet for so long, that Ikhsan was now formally recognized as one of the (male) kampung elders. Unlike many newcomers, they participated in gotong royong (communal work), and Ikhsan was invited to kampung meetings. I also frequented these meetings, and I noticed that his visits were formalities, as he never said anything. Thus, his inclusion was probably a matter of courtesy rather than anything else. Once, when I asked him if he also felt like a ‘newcomer’, he answered: ‘In the proper sense we are all brothers

12 To mention a different context, I was once caught up (very much against my wish) in an argument between two people about the permissibility of a non-Muslim (me) entering a mosque. In an attempt to defuse the discussion, which was becoming tense, I asked a third person who was following the conversation to give his opinion. Reluctant to get mixed up as well, he answered that he was too young, and not sufficiently knowledgeable, to give a judgment. Thus, he said: ‘I am like a young vegetable. I have just been planted so I do not carry the fruit (of knowledge). I have not studied enough (belum mendalami), so I follow the opinions of those who are knowledgeable (yang alim).

13 The reasons for this are partly practical. For example, Ikhsan said he could never become a member of the teuha peut in Daruet, because he did not have the right knowledge, as transferred from one generation to the next through lived practices such as the nature of local kinship relations, land ownership and endowments, as well as simmering cases of bad blood and the histories of conflicts. Would he go back to Lam Pasai, however, even though he had not lived there for many years, it would be ‘no problem’ whatsoever to become a member of the teuha peut, because in his kampung of birth he ‘knew all those things’.
(saudara), but in terms of kampung progress (kalau maju kampung), they (i.e. the ones at 'that side') all regard us as different (kita dibilain). One example he gave was how, each time cheap government-sponsored rice (raskin) was distributed by the government in the first months after the tsunami, he was not informed about this. This was typical, he argued. 'At this side of the kampung, we are like the stepchildren (anak tiri) (...) At that side they are the real children (anak kandung). So if there are benefits, we get nothing, or at least we are not told. Over there they are all the keuchik's family. This is how it is (seperti itu).'

Apart from his ceremonious role at meetings, Ikhsan did not intermingle much with the asli Daruet. He prayed at the neighborhood mosque on Friday, but this was a very mixed environment. In fact, most people at Friday prayer in Daruet seemed to be pendatang. The main meeting place for asli Daruet men was the kedai kampung, the neighborhood coffee shop. For many pendatang the kedai was a no-go place, full of 'course' (kasar), 'lazy' (malas) or 'careless' (lalai) people. In the kedai, the 'jobless men' came to drink coffee, smoke, play games and 'escape' from the mosque, their wives, and their relatively dead-end situations. The people who gathered in the kedai, so the stereotype went, neither worked nor prayed. Ikhsan had no salaried job. He was not a civil servant, he did not have a high education, and he was not rich. Still, he would never go to the kedai. He was not asli Daruet, had some property, and he sent his children to university – the definite marker of social mobility. All of this set him apart from the Daruet community of men.

Still, this did not yet make him part of 'another' community. The pendatang were hardly a 'community', and even if they were, Ikhsan would probably not feel he belonged there. This was an issue of class, of course, for he did not have the education to become a civil servant. But it was not just about class. According to Ikhsan, all orang PNS (Pegawai Negeri Sipil, or civil servants) were essentially 'corrupt', making advantage of the 'bad money' (uang haram) at the basis of the administrative system. The orang PNS, he thought, were guilty as charged because of their position within this system, and thus 'material for hell' (isi neraka). Although Ikhsan said this in calm consideration, and not in some kind of angry 'outburst', this was of course an emotional argument, in the sense that he referred to social justice as the central moral category of society. For him, the relative wealth of the orang PNS symbolised a fundamental injustice in society. Everyone is able to cheat other people, he explained. As a shopholder he could manipulate quantities and prices. He could lie to his customers. But God is just, he said (Tuhan adil), and people who make money by lying will be punished. They will be hit with disasters, small or big. 'People who lie will feel heavy (berat). It was people's own personal responsibility to think about the consequences of dishonesty. For orang PNS, however, this could be hard, because it was not entirely within their own control.

When I asked him, in this context, who in his opinion should be held responsible for making society more just (di dunia ini siapa harus jaga masalah keadilan, lit. 'In this world, who should take care of the problem of justice?'). He answered: 'in the case of social justice, we have to take care of it ourselves' (kalau soal keadilan kita jaga kita diri sendiri). And what about the leaders (bagaimana dengan pengurus)? I asked. 'The leaders should be honest (jujur)', he replied. 'If they are not honest, they should not become leaders.'

I think it is in this particular emotional segment, in which perceptions of community and belonging, shifting religiosity, and socio-economic position and status intersect, that Ikhsan framed – and explained – his attraction to the 'abstract' conception of community proposed by the modernist, globalised Islamism advocated by Eri. His son emphasized clear-cut distinctions between good and bad, as well as the individuals responsibility to take account of this. Eri's pious industriousness fitted the emotional
trouble Ikhsan found himself in at this point of his life. The story about his ‘lost spirit’ and the ‘bewitchment’ is revealing, in this respect. Born and raised in an urban milieu, by an uncle who cared little about the lessons of the ulama and instilled a solid mercantile spirit in him, Ikhsan, even when convinced of being hexed by the forces of black magic, felt no inclination whatsoever to ask for the help of a religious specialist, of whom in Aceh there are plenty. Thus, for all his problems, the solution to most things was, simply, to stay at home and pray. For Meli, personal responsibility was also important, but she framed it differently. I can best illustrate this by discussing how Meli talked about her own family, particularly her mother Hamdiah.

Hamdiah was known as a healer from an early age by some people in her area. It started when Meli was still small – and her father still alive – when she experienced a spirit possession (in the words of Meli: ulama-ulama zaman masuk; ‘holy men from the old age entered her body’). When people learnt about this, they came to ask her for help, which she was willing to give as well as she could. After her husband’s death, however, she became too busy taking care of her family alone, and could no longer open herself to the spirits (which she did by long, regular night-time prayers and recitation). Thus, the spirits often stayed away. They came back much later, when her children had become adults. This happened suddenly and unexpectedly, at a time when Meli already had four children, and lived with her family in Lam Pasai. Meli was at home when a family member showed up, telling her that something strange had happened to Hamdiah. Meli immediately took off to Sibreh, and found her mother in a confused state. She was brought home by people from the market, where she had suddenly started to behave strangely. People from the village assembled and said she was possessed (dimasukkin). Others said she had become crazy (gila, sakit jiwa) and should be taken to a mental hospital. In the meantime, Hamdiah had escaped this discussion by climbing on the roof. Later, she was examined in the hospital, but not diagnosed, so after spending two nights she was sent home again. She recovered slowly, and maintained that she was not crazy, but had been possessed by seven auliya (saints).14 She started helping people with small illnesses again, first in the family, later outside.

When Meli told me this, I was curious about her thoughts about how and why this happened the way it did. She said that she did not know exactly, except that her mother must have had a ‘pure heart’ (hati suci). According to Meli, her mother had devoted her life to the purpose of earning a living (cari rezeki) and praying (do’a). She was not distracted by temptations (nafsu). The work she did (selling vegetables) was clean (bersih). All this must have made her mother into a ‘suitable’ person for powerful spirits to enter her body again. She also gave me another reason for her mother’s purity of heart, namely the fact that in 2007, Hamdiah had been able to performed the haj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. Since she was just an ordinary saleswoman on the market, she had to abstain for many years from all luxuries, literally saving the rice from her mouth to save enough money. I asked Meli whether she thought she would ever be able to do the same. She answered that, as a Muslim, she had a very strong wish to do the pilgrimage. However, there was never enough money, nor a real possibility of saving. This was a case of priorities: they had to pay for their children’s expensive university education. This costly affair was the returning feature in all the explanations

14 According to Meli, her mother suddenly ‘knew’ all kinds of things for mysterious reasons. If people walked by, she knew what they were up to. Also she could tell the character of people she had never met. When Meli’s brother had visited a dukun, and gave her blessed water to drink without saying where he got it, she knew it was air rajah (water from an amulet) and refused to drink it.
about their financial situation. ‘Our children are still studying’, Meli said, ‘so there’s no money left for anything else’.\(^{15}\)

In the prime of her life, Meli was in the midst of raising a large family. Confronted with a situation in which her husband, who was considerably older, had declared himself subjected to a paralyzing inertia, she increasingly took control over all facets of her family’s daily life. It needs little explanation that this took its toll. She was permanently tired, and often ill. She worried about their financial situation, the dubious friends’ her son Anril hung out with, as well as the development of her youngest child Zakhi. She had choices to make, and interests to balance. On top of all this, she felt fundamentally insecure about her personal obligations to her family and to God. In this phase of her life, one could safely argue, Eri’s comments were not particularly helpful. Instead of carrying resonance, the abstract nature and inflexibility of Eri’s reproaches formed yet another balancing act.

Both for Meli and for Ikhsan, then, money and material wealth formed a religious category, connected to a moral and cultural vocabulary of cleanliness, purity, and sacrifice. For Ikhsan, this vocabulary related rather well to the abstract scripturalist repertoire introduced in the family by Eri, a susceptibility closely tied to the ways in which he interpreted the course of his own life. As Ikhsan explained it to me (though not in the same terms), he felt gradually detached from various parallel communities (his family and his neighborhood, as well as the professional community of trade and traders in Banda Aceh and elsewhere). Meli did not experience this estrangement. Her sense of community seemed much more solidly built around her family (in Blang Daruet and in Sibreh) as well as the hyper-locality of ‘their side’ of the kampung. For her, scripturalist morality served much less as an attractive ‘alternative’ to the interpretation of daily routines and conceptions of ritual and sacred knowledge.

**Religious agency and the inward turn**

In the course of the 1980s scholars of Islam in Southeast Asia began to take note of the normative, ‘outward’ signs of the global Islamic revival. As Robert Hefner neatly summarized it for the case of Indonesia:

> Mosques have proliferated in towns in villages; religious schools and devotional programs have expanded; a vast market in Islamic books, magazines, and newspapers has developed; and, very important, a well-educated Muslim middle class has begun to raise questions about characteristically modern concerns, including the role and rights of women, the challenge of pluralism, the merits of market economies, and, most generally, the proper relationship of religion to state (Hefner 1997: 5).

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\(^{15}\) When I asked her about the possibility of borrowing the money to do the Pilgrimage, Meli answered resolutely that this was not the right way to prepare for the Haj. This resonated with other conceptions. For many people, the meaning of the Pilgrimage lay not only in the ritual itself, but equally in the process leading up to it, with the act of saving money being connected to the hardships constituting life and the sacrifices made. This idea is considered ‘valid’ even when the Haj is paid with money from, for example, inherited property (in which case it is the ancestors’ hardships which is referred to). On the background, however, there is also another reason why going on Haj with borrowed money would produce an uncomfortable feeling with many Acehnese. This has to do with the possibility of sudden death during the Pilgrimage. Dying while performing the Haj is thought to take one straight to Heaven. Just like most other Acehnese, however, Meli believed that it was impossible to go to Heaven while leaving behind unpaid debts. This is also the reason that, in Aceh, it is customary at funerals that family members (usually children or siblings) ask the people present whether the deceased still has an outstanding debt.
Scholars have long attempted to explain this new visibility of Islam in Indonesian society by focusing on the urban middle class and on distinctly political settings (see, e.g., Hefner 1997; 2000; Liddle 1996). Some observers showed that this new piety had also become distinctly visible in Javanese rural life (e.g. Beatty 1999), as well as a source of contention and dynamic doctrinal debates in further flung villages and provincial towns (Bowen 1993). In recent years, this focus has been expanded by connecting the outward signs of piety to changes in ‘inner’ spiritual expressions and forms of faith. Julia Day Howell has provided us with a number of fascinating essays about the contribution of urban Sufism (Islamic mysticism) to the Islamic revival, which, through its search for ‘inner’ meaning and experience, complicated the dominant characterisation of the resurgence as a purely scripturalist trend.\textsuperscript{16} From a different angle, Julian Millie focused on the social and cultural construction of ideas of Islamic sanctity through ‘inner’ practices such as supplication rituals in West Java (2009) as well as the meaning of ‘outer’ expressions, like \textit{dakwah} oratory, for people’s inner wellbeing (2008, 2012). Clearly, practices of ‘inner investigation’ have been increasingly important for political activists and Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia.

For some years now, subjectivity and conceptions of the self have functioned as a central framework for innovative ethnographic research about the practice and experience of Muslim worship and discipline. Scholars like Lara Deeb (2006), Charles Hirschkind (2006), Michael Lambek (1993), Saba Mahmood (2005), and, with regard to Muslim religiosity in the West, Martijn de Koning (2009) have criticized the western, liberal-secular tendency to view pious morality as either ‘obedience’ or ‘resistance’. Instead, they have brought back into the debate other ‘types’ of behaviour, such as ‘moral judgment’, ‘ethical reasoning’ and ‘bodily discipline’, which, although appearing to exist outside the above-mentioned frameworks, act as important categories of deliberate ethical action and choice, thus implying agency. While these approaches offer useful, necessary critiques on artificial and inflexible binary models such as submission-resistance, orthodoxy-secularism, indoctrination-assertion, many of them focus primarily on the pietistic behavior of (a small minority of) ‘revivalist’ Muslims, as performed, moreover, in the public sphere. Equally problematic is what Samuli Schielke has dubbed the ‘central blind spot’ of (the use of) Aristotelian ethics:

\begin{quote}
While it included the possibility (and likelihood) of conflicts when lack of discipline stands in the way of the habituation of virtues, when circumstances make it difficult to live according to one’s disposition or when two practices serving the same ethical end turn out to require opposite action (…), \textit{it nevertheless presumes a fairly unified and clear disposition of the subject. Essentially, people are supposed to know what they want and to want a more or less coherent set of things. And even when they want different things, they are assumed to have a clear hierarchy of aims and ideals} (Schielke 2009:163-64; emphasis added).
\end{quote}

This, Schielke argued, is seldom the case, and thus, a ‘unified concept of subjectivity’ will never really be able to explain how and why people make moral choices. Instead, in his recent work on Islam and ambivalence in rural Egypt, he has asked \textit{how religious discipline and revivalist discourse becomes an attractive trajectory in everyday life, and how people ‘live’ the ambiguities which inevitably are the result of adopting such a trajectory as a guide for everyday life.}

While it is self-evident that the Islamic revival, like all major social transformations, is ‘classed’, there is an implicit suggestion in much of the literature that

the normative forms of piety expressed by urban middle classes are somehow different than the religiosity of the 'mass' of ordinary, traditional, moderate, or 'syncretistic' Indonesian Muslims. While it has been argued that the whole of (Muslim) Indonesian society became 'more Islamic', at least in outward aspects of religiosity, during the past decades, the distinction itself – which is rooted, in turn, in a long tradition of Weberian anthropology concerned with the relation between Islamic scripturalist reformism and modernity (Soares and Osella 2009: 2-5) – is seldom questioned. I thus agree with Michael Peletz, who stated that the focus on the interlinkages of globalization, class mobility, and 'objectifying' Islam has led to theories of Islamisation that are way too sweeping and totalizing in character (Peletz 2011).

It is equally insufficient, and for a similar reason, to place reactions to scripturalist repertoires squarely in the domain of gender constructions, even if these constructions are crucial to understand everyday concerns and their formulations. Clearly, Eri's abstracted mode of scripturalist piety connected better to the emotional troubles of his father Ikhsan than to the concerns of his mother, Meli. This did not mean, however, that Ikhsan agreed with everything his son said, or that he followed him in every practice (he did not, for example, suddenly think that he should go to the mosque on foot five times a day). It also did not mean that Meli explained her reaction to Eri's moral admonitions solely in a context of her role as mother, wife, or 'one of the neighborhood women'. In sum, it is my contention that a strict foregrounding of class- or gender-based analyses comes down to a denial of the interactions between (gender and class based) social, political and ideological circumstances and the personalised religious agencies that drive the process of adaptation to, and incorporation of, global currents and ideas.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked at the everyday interactions between Eri, a young man who was heavily influenced by the scripturalist-inspired activism commonly associated with the global Islamic revival, and his parents Ikhsan and Meli. Together with Eri's siblings, this family lives in the rebuilt, but still deeply uprooted, tsunami-affected neighbourhood of Blang Daruet in Banda Aceh.

I have used this case to demonstrate that the idea of living strictly according to Islamic rules is not a coherent theological or epistemological 'package' to be either accepted or rejected. By this I do not mean that theological arguments are unimportant, but rather that they exert a different appeal to different people in alternate situations. An exclusive focus on revivalist groups or politics may suggest that people either 'join in' with the global, progressive mode of reform, or 'stay behind' in their traditionalist and 'flexible' model of localized practice, but seldom both. To suggest that the global Islamic revival has resulted in the inevitable confrontation between moderate 'ordinary' people and Islamist 'hardliners' is to deny the fact that, often, people are not quite certain what they should and should not believe, how to live their lives in a 'good' way, or how to change their moral selves for the better.

In my elaboration of this case, I have attempted to look beyond class- and gender-based models while deconstructing the process that has been dubbed conveniently, but also quite imprecisely, 'Islamisation'. The starting point for my analysis was the idea that the choices, debates, worries and dilemmas underlying the confrontations which 'revivalist' modes of certainty contain information about the divergent ways in which such ideas become entrenched within society. By this I mean that, indeed, an 'objectified' conceptualization of normative Islam has taken root among most ordinary Muslims, in
Aceh and presumably also in other places in Indonesia. However – and this is a crucial adjustment to conventional analyses of the Islamic ‘revival’ – this ‘objectified’ Islam is placed by many people, implicitly or explicitly, in a subsidiary relation to a personalized, life-long and ideally progressive, process of moral improvement. I regard this development, the formation of a personalised religious agency, as one of the main historical trends undergirding religiosity in Aceh.

The acts and stories through which Meli and Ikhsan reflected on their lives were informed by a wide variety of immediate concerns, or as Wikan (1995:266) termed it in the spirit of Bourdieu, by having to live in a ‘world of urgency and necessity’. One of the ‘shared compelling concerns’ (Barth 1993:342-43) I encountered was age, and the need of satisfying the demands and expectations associated with a particular phase in life. Of course, if the process of building an ‘ethical’ life is deeply personal, this does not mean that it is necessarily pleasant, or ‘liberating’. In fact, the confrontations between Eri and his parents reflected a fundamental discomfort, related to the fact that a scripturalist approach to everyday morality, as based on a fixed ‘standard’ that is transferrable but also inflexible, seems to neglect, or misread, the different ways in which individuals of different ages interpret the qualities of a ‘good life’. Very few people in Aceh question the authority of the Quran and the Hadith, or the words, examples and comments of those who are knowledgeable in interpreting these texts. But this is not the issue at stake here. Rather, the point is that a certain kind of agency is vested in the connection between moral judgment and an individual life that is seen as an unpredictable, often hard, and sometimes quite disappointing, endeavour. The process of living ethically can be perceived simultaneously as conscious, responsible, and reflexive, and as a source of doubt and uncertainty and ‘failure’ connected to a particular phase of life.

Religious agency, and the idea of a personalised process of ethical improvement, functions as a practical alternative to the contestations over power defining the struggle for the definition of orthodoxy and ‘correct’, ‘incorrect’, and ‘punishable’ behaviour. It is this crucial tension, between the contested spheres of morality and power, to which I will now turn.