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The role of religion in local perceptions of disasters: the case of post-tsunami religious and social change in Samoa

Sanne Bech Holmgaard

Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research, Tromsø, Norway

ABSTRACT

This paper explores religious perceptions of disasters and their implications for post-disaster processes of religious and cultural change. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in post-tsunami Samoa, this study investigates how people in two tsunami-affected villages make sense of the tsunami, its causes and impact based on different Christian understandings: the tsunami as divine punishment or as a sign of the Second Coming. I argue that these different perceptions of the tsunami are used in bringing about or opposing religious and cultural change based on different ideals of continuity and change.

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Introduction

This paper explores how local perceptions of a tsunami influences post-disaster processes of change and continuity based on ethnographic fieldwork in a tsunami affected area in Samoa. Disasters potentially pose a challenge to people's world-view, creating a need to reconstruct a sense of meaning and order in the disruption and destruction of the disaster aftermath (Hoffman, 1999; Oliver-Smith, 2002). Disaster researchers are increasingly addressing how people make sense of disasters and how such sense-making informs and influences peoples' actions in post-disaster recovery (e.g. Azim & Islam, 2016; Sørensen & Albris, 2016). Religious beliefs can shape how people perceive disaster risk, how they respond to disasters and recover from their impact. From being a field of relatively limited scholarly interest, recent years have seen an increase in studies on the role of religiosity in disasters. Studies on religion and disaster have offered insights into the ways in which religious understandings can influence how people respond to disasters, how they experience and perceive risk and how religious beliefs influence vulnerability and resilience when facing hazards and experiencing disasters (see for example Chester & Duncan, 2009, 2010; Gaillard & Texier, 2010; Gianisa & Le De, 2018). Existing studies have, to mention some, focused on the role of religion in coping with the mental trauma of disaster (e.g. Fletcher et al., 2013), how religious beliefs can support or counteract disaster preparedness and risk reduction (e.g. McGeehan & Baker, 2017; Sherry & Curtis, 2017), the role of religious attribution in understandings of disaster risk (e.g. Merli, 2010)

CONTACT Sanne Bech Holmgaard  sanne.holmgaard@niku.no

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and the role of religious organizations and relief agencies in disaster recovery (e.g. Wisner, 2010). Studies of religion and disasters have also shown how religious understandings of disasters are closely interwoven with social organization, culture, values, economies and politics (e.g. Richman, 2012; Schlehe, 2010; Sørensen & Albris, 2016). Though a few studies have addressed the role of missionaries and the impact of proselytizing in disaster recovery (Ensor, 2003; Hertzberg, 2015), the wider impact of religious perceptions and how these are acted upon and used by variously positioned groups and individuals after a disaster has so far not received sufficient attention. This paper addresses this gap by examining how religious perceptions of a disaster are articulated and used in bringing about or opposing processes of social and religious change taking place in a tsunami-affected area in Samoa.

Humans make sense of the world through a continuous production of meaning, taking the form of ideas, experiences, myths and beliefs which are both internalities, as they exist and are rendered meaningful in individual human minds and cognition, and external as they are manifested in socially meaningful forms (Hannerz, 1992). Perception refers to the way people observe, understand, interpret, and evaluate an object, event or experience. These subjective interpretations of reality are socially constructed and products of one's history and surroundings (Bennett, 2016). In this study, I thus analyze perceptions of the tsunami as active, interpretative processes of making sense of the disaster within frameworks considered meaningful by my informants.

Social and religious organization in Samoa

To discuss the role of religious perceptions in post-tsunami processes of change in Samoa, a brief account of some key features of social, religious and economic organization is needed. Samoan villages are bounded by land and population as geographical and political units as well as important sources of (self)identification. As in many other Pacific nations, kinship and family relations are cornerstones of social organization, culture and economy. In Samoa, kinship groups hold customary land tenure and village governance is based on kinship groups, each family being represented by one or more chiefs in the village council (Fuata'i, 2007). At the village level, the council constitutes both the legislative, judiciary and executing power in political, economic as well as moral matters (Macpherson & Macpherson, 2009).

Almost all Samoans report adherence to a Christian denomination (Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The Christian churches and pastors play a central role in the social, political and economic life of Samoa at a national as well as village level and the churches are closely integrated in Samoan culture and village life (Evile, 2007; Latai, 2015; Macpherson & Macpherson, 2011). The relationship between a village and its pastor is likened to the relationship between a brother and sister: a relationship of mutual respect and carefully balanced power (Macpherson & Macpherson, 2009). The church and the chiefly system are closely interconnected, and according to Macpherson and Macpherson (2011) this close alliance of church and village leadership ensures that church interests are also reflected in village politics.

A range of different Christian churches are present in Samoa, most commonly categorized as either 'mainline' or 'new'; the former referring to The Congregational Christian Church of Samoa, The Methodist Church and The Catholic Church and the latter referring

to all other churches, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, The Seventh Day Adventists and several Pentecostal churches such as the The Assemblies of God (Thornton, Kerslake, & Binns, 2010). Despite significant differences in religious doctrines and practices between churches within the categories of 'new' and 'mainline', this classification is commonly used in Samoa as well as other Pacific islands (Ernst, 2006) and was also the main categories used by people in the study area.¹ With the three mainline churches being the first to be established in Samoa, these categories have to do with time and history (Latai, 2015), but what mainly sets new and mainline churches apart is their different approaches and ideals of the relationship between the church and cultural practices. Mainline churches are closely interconnected with Samoan culture and the social organization and hierarchies of the chiefly system, whereas new churches are more detached from the rules and expectations of traditional village life (Macpherson & Macpherson, 2011). This is also true for the financial organization of new and mainline churches. Whereas the mainline churches rely mostly on donations from their members to cover salaries and household expenses for pastors, maintenance and construction of church buildings as well as costs of operating the central administration of the church in Samoa, the new churches generally rely less on financial contributions from members and more on financial support from overseas branches and main organization of their churches (Thornton, Binns, & Kerslake, 2013).

The importance of exchange-based economies and relationships in Samoa has been well documented (see for example Fuata'i, 2007; Macpherson & Macpherson, 2009; Shore, 1982). Kinship and social networks involve a reciprocal system of ceremonial exchanges and gift-giving in which goods and values are shared and re-distributed among the extended family, referred to as *fa'alavelave* (for a detailed account, see e.g. Mageo, 1991). In recent decades, an increased monetarization of exchanges and gift-giving has taken place, to a large degree replacing cultural wealth, such as food or weaved fine mats, with cash donations (Tuimaleali'ifano, 2006). In the mainline churches, the size of cash donations from members has also increased (Macpherson & Macpherson, 2009; Thornton et al., 2010, 2013). Donations generally take place during Sunday services and in the mainline churches, donations are for the most part publicly announced, which can add a competitive element and create a pressure to donate more. Studies have demonstrated that church donations can pose significant strains on households, especially for low-income families (Macpherson & Macpherson, 2011; Samoan Bureau of Statistics, 2011; So'o, Va'a, & Boon, 2006, pp. 149–172; Thornton et al., 2013).

The last decades have seen an increase in membership in new Christian churches in Samoa, and a corresponding decrease in membership of the mainline churches (Ernst, 2006; Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2011). New churches are reportedly attracting a high proportion of low-income families. Lower costs for church donations, which are given anonymously, as well as a more liberal style of worship and less hierarchical organization has been described as the main reasons for the rise in membership (Macpherson & Macpherson, 2011; Morris, 2015; Thornton et al., 2013). The Samoan constitution officially ensures religious freedom but at the village level, the village council decides which churches are allowed and many villages have a one-church policy. This has caused tensions and conflicts between members of new churches wanting to establish churches in villages in which the village council will not permit it. In this way, new churches have been challenging the authority of the village councils, going against the wishes of the chiefs (Human

Rights Council, 2011). Individuals or families from one village are, however, free to join the churches of other villages.

Data and methods

The findings discussed in this paper are based on a five-month long ethnographic fieldwork in Samoa which took place in 2010, five months after a tsunami struck the islands (Earthquake Engineering Research Institute, 2010). With a reported 189 casualties, 146 of these in Samoa, this was the deadliest tsunami ever documented in the region. The highest number of fatalities and the largest extend of material damage occurred on southern and eastern parts of Upolu island (Okal, Fritz, Synolakis, Borrero, & Chan, 2010). (Figure 1).

Research was carried out in two neighboring villages, Fa'atoa and Vaimatu,² in the area most affected by the tsunami on the south coast of Upolu. Both villages were hit by the tsunami, with severe material damage and human casualties. The two villages were geographically and socially close. However, Fa'atoa and Vaimatu were also markedly different and responded differently to the tsunami. Fa'atoa was considered a powerful and traditional village, with a reportedly strong Samoan culture according to both the villagers themselves and inhabitants from other nearby villages. Materially, Fa'atoa was severely damaged by the tsunami with many houses either destroyed or severely damaged. With regards to casualties, however, Fa'atoa was more fortunate than its neighboring villages.

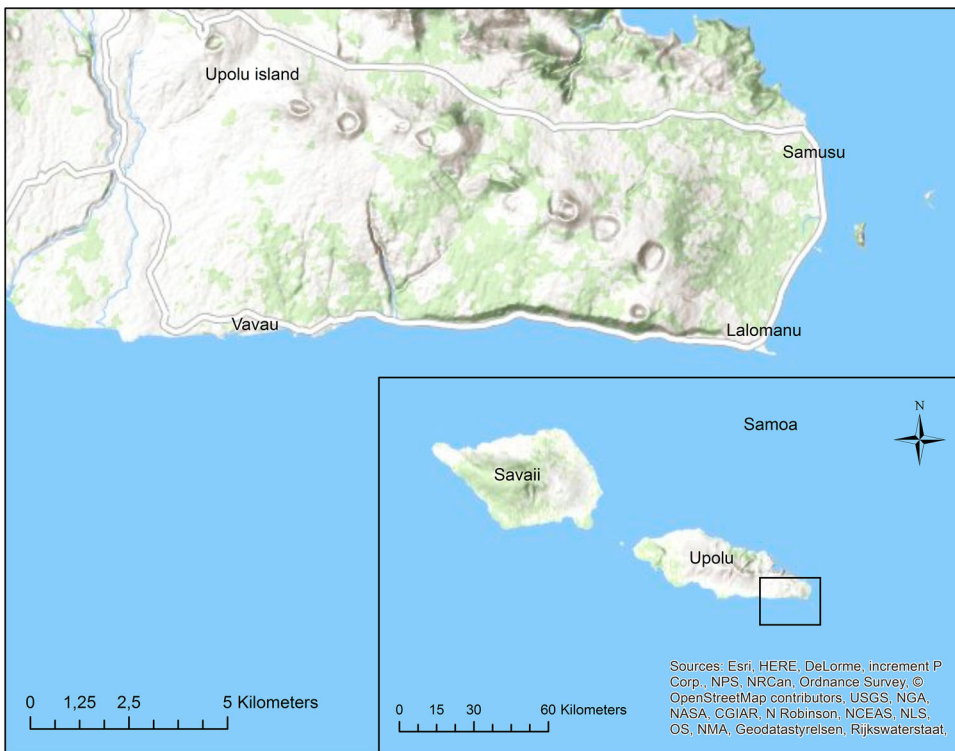


Figure 1. Fieldwork area on the south-east coast of Upolu island.

Unlike Fa'atoa, Vaimatu was located along a stretch of white sandy beaches and was an attractive tourist destination for foreigners and a popular weekend stopover for Samoans from the capital Apia and elsewhere. Before the tsunami, there were locally operated small-scale tourist accommodations with simple open houses on the beach which created some cash income and employment. These were destroyed by the tsunami but were later rebuilt. In Vaimatu, the material damages were severe as most houses were located on a flat stretch along the beach with no natural protection from the waves. Vaimatu was also among the villages in Samoa with the highest number of human casualties.

Data was generated through interviews and participant observation as well as secondary data material such as newspaper coverage, reports and other documentation from relief agencies, government bodies, churches and NGOs. The main part of the fieldwork was spent living with a family in the tsunami affected area on the south coast of Upolu island. Living closely with a family and participating in a variety of everyday activities gave insights into the daily life, routines and living conditions of the population in the affected area. The methodological approach was thus to study perceptions of the tsunami and post tsunami change through a holistic understanding of social, religious and economic life. Participant observation was carried out in a variety of activities and contexts, including performing everyday chores, participating in meetings in the village council as well as church services and Sunday schools, leisure activities and ceremonial events. Conducting ethnographic interviews was a key methodological tool to generate data on local perceptions of the tsunami and experiences of post-tsunami change. In total, 28 formal interviews were conducted in addition to countless more informal conversations. Typical questions as well as grand and mini tour questions were used to initiate formal interview (Spradley, 1979), thus starting out with open and descriptive inquiries before asking more probing questions. The aim of this approach was to allow informants' perceptions of the tsunami to emerge naturally through our conversations. Informants were between the ages of 17 and 65 with the majority in their 30s and 40s, approximately equally divided in terms of gender, and represented different Christian affiliations and different social and demographic groups, including chiefs, pastors and missionaries, low-income and relatively well-off families. All pastors and missionaries in the study area were men, following cultural norms.

Results

Post-tsunami processes of religious change

Before the tsunami, only the already established mainline churches were allowed in the two villages of this study. There was one mainline church in Fa'atoa and two mainline churches in Vaimatu, but some inhabitants from both villages attended new churches in nearby villages. In Vaimatu, several churches had wanted to establish themselves for some time before the tsunami, but they had not been allowed to do so by the village council. After the tsunami, the village council in Vaimatu decided to allow all new churches and a few months later, three new churches had been established. In Fa'atoa, the rules were unchanged and only the original mainline church was allowed, but individuals and families from Fa'atoa had also joined the new churches in Vaimatu and other

nearby villages. Pastors, missionaries and leading members of the new churches referred to the specific date of the tsunami when asked when their church was established in the village. By referring to the actual date of the disaster, members of the new churches ascribed the establishment to the tsunami not only in temporal, but also in causal terms. The actual timeline for church establishment was one of several meetings and negotiations between the village council in Vaimatu and church representatives in the months following the tsunami. Several of the new churches had also carried out aid and recovery programs in the area, mainly in Vaimatu.

Perceptions of the tsunami

People in the affected area actively sought to make sense of the tsunami and to place it within meaningful categories of cause and impact, mainly through religious attributions and understandings of the tsunami. Explanations of the tsunami were naturally varied and influenced by individual circumstances and life-experiences. However, two distinctive expressions of religious attributions to the tsunami recurred; one that emphasized the punitive aspects of the tsunami and one which saw the tsunami as a sign of the Second Coming. These different religious explanations followed largely a divide between members of new and mainline churches. Results show no significant differences in age and gender of informants in terms of how the tsunami was perceived.

Punitive attributions were mainly expressed by members of mainline churches, stating that the tsunami had been sent by God to wash away sin and those who committed it. The most common view was that God had sent the tsunami to punish those who did not keep the Sabbath holy at the beach accommodations along the coast. Many of my informants pointed out that the area hit by the tsunami was not coincidental, but that God had targeted the tsunami to the popular tourist- and recreational area because owners of bars and accommodations arranged or allowed for activities such as music, games, swimming and barbecues on Sundays. As explained by an elderly female member of a mainline church in Vaimatu:

Only the tourist places, they were all washed away. With people! That's a punishment for them. Other families from Apia, they come over here on Sunday and have an entertainment, a barbecue, a band making lots of noises without singing a hymn from God. But they are Samoans! They know God, they know Sunday, this is the one day for them to go to church, but they take Sundays to entertain themselves over here. That's why I say, it's a punishment for those people.

In a similar way, a young male chief from Vaimatu and member of a mainline church voiced a clear view of the tsunami as a punishment for not properly observing the Sabbath and for not focusing on God:

The tsunami gives all people a lesson in terms of rethinking. To rethink that whatever we are doing in life, that's my own lesson, whatever we have in life, we're rich or whatever, be sure we prioritize God. 'Cos I believe, the tsunami hit all the tourist development out here. So that's why it is a lesson for them, ei? On Sunday they must keep to God, not for this.

The cultural as well as religious significance of Sundays has been well documented in the ethnographic literature (e.g. Grattan, 1948; Macpherson & Macpherson, 2009) and during

my fieldwork, the importance of keeping the Sabbath holy was emphasized in words as well as in actions. According to my informants, the main problem was not foreign tourists acting inappropriately on Sundays. The problem was that *Samoans* were engaging in this kind of behavior as they ought to know better and not act like foreigners. For my informants from the mainline churches, the significance of the Sabbath was far reaching, not only as a religious practice and rule, but as an important means to upholding Samoan culture and respect for what was considered a traditional way of life. As one elderly female informant from the mainline church in Fa'atoa stated:

That's how I look at it: the village life should be revived and should signify the Sunday and making sure to stay with the past. [...]. We must say that Sunday is a holy day, we need to do this to our children, bring them here. It's also a way of controlling them and keeping them from being violent. And if we are not careful with that, we old people, they won't live into that kind of culture, but if we keep saying this, they too will grow up with the respect and the understanding that this is traditional! To respect!

Amongst my informants from the new churches, the tsunami was only very rarely explained as a form of divine punishment. Instead, the tsunami was frequently referred to as a sign of the Second Coming of Christ and a warning to turn to God now before it would be too late. The Second Coming was brought up by my informants in both interviews and regular conversations as a rapidly approaching and much anticipated event, something that everyone who had read the Bible would know and look forward to. A young Samoan missionary from one of the new churches described his reaction to the tsunami in this way: 'I saw everything shaking, it was so powerful, and I raised my hands and yelled "praise God! The Lord is coming and I'm ready to be united!".' The missionary went on to explain how he could be so sure that the Second Coming was near:

The tsunami is how we know that God is near. The tsunami is already in the Bible. All the signs. Earthquakes, poor people, you see at the overseas television people shooting each other, families fighting each other. This is all God saying: be prepared.

In this way, the tsunami was placed within a larger context of signs that the Second Coming was near which included geology, climate change and political issues, thus connecting earthquakes, global warming and pollution to biblical forebodings. As a young female member of one of the new churches explained: 'We already see the signs. The earthquakes – so many now! Wars, families fighting, discriminations. We know that this is the Second Coming.' In this way, members of the new churches actively used a combination of religious and secular explanations when arguing that the tsunami was a sign of the Second Coming of Christ.

The tsunami was mainly explained through religious doctrines and cosmologies and only very few of my informants did not articulate some form of religious explanation of the tsunami and its impact. In addition to religious understandings of the causes of the tsunami, many informants from both mainline and new churches shared experiences of being saved from the tsunami due to divine protection and intervention. A middle-aged female member of a new church thus explained how her house had been spared by the tsunami while those around it had been destroyed: 'God protects us because he knows his own people. So, his hand was on the tsunami, slowing it down on our house. Because he knows us!' Narratives of divine protection were often

combined with natural scientific understandings of the tsunami. Many of my informants thus expressed natural scientific explanations of the tsunami, attributing the cause of the tsunami to seismic activity and the movements of tectonic plates, in addition to religious explanations. Thus, geological explanations of the tsunami did not exclude religious understanding and vice versa. Religious and non-religious explanations appeared to be complimentary and coexist in making sense of the disaster for members of mainline as well as new churches.

Making use of religious perceptions

All newly established churches were evangelical with missionary objectives and according to pastors and missionaries from the new churches, providing material assistance in the disaster aftermath had been an important strategy for proselytizing. Several informants stated that the tsunami had provided highly favorable opportunities for missionary work, enabling them to show love and friendship to people in difficult emotional and material situations as a 'harvesting tool.' Missionaries from the new churches often described the time after the tsunami as 'a good time', arguing that fear and religious explanations of the disaster had made proselytizing easier. A pastor from one of the new churches in Vaimatu thus explained how they had benefitted from the distress and uncertainties experienced after the tsunami because: 'people were afraid and had so much remorse and they were ready to listen and accept everything we said.' By referring to the remorse people felt, the pastor explicitly linked their success to the religious perceptions of the tsunami. In a similar way, a middle-aged missionary from one of the new churches described the time after the tsunami: 'oh, it was so great, they all repent. They just say 'yes pastor'. It was too easy!'. Local members of the new churches also referred to the tsunami as a sign from God to the village council to allow new churches and thereby give more people the opportunity to convert before the Second Coming. Religious interpretations of the tsunami as well as the distress and uncertainty following the disaster were thus actively used in missionary work.

For members of the mainline churches, punitive explanations of the tsunami were reflected in what was considered right courses of action in preparing for – or preventing – future disasters. As expressed by a middle-aged female member of a mainline church in Vaimatu when talking about the rebuilding of the tourism accommodations: 'And I think it will happen again. They didn't repent what God did! If they act like this every time, I think God will make another punishment for them. More tsunamis or some other disaster will happen'. According to members of the mainline churches, what was needed was a return to more traditional ways with a focus on Samoan culture. In Fa'atoa, upholding the one church policy was considered an important element in 'keeping with the past' by respecting the foundation of the village and its traditions. A middle-aged male chief from Fa'atoa phrased this as showing respect for the ancestors: 'Because there is only one church in Fa'atoa. So, it's out of respect for our ancestor's decision that everybody has to do their responsibilities to this church, to honor our ancestors.' This was the kind of argument used when chiefs of the village council in Fa'atoa firmly rejected the possibility of following the example of Vaimatu. According to my informants, there had also been a considerable opposition to allowing new churches in Vaimatu, following the same line of reasoning.

Religious change, cultural change

In the mainline churches of the two villages, pastors were figures of authority and respect and the hierarchical structures of village life were also manifested in the church. A middle-aged female member of the mainline church in Fa'atoa stated, when discussing her position in the church:

The structure in the village is also used as the structure in the church. So, he is a matai [chief], he is a respected person in the village structure and also respected in the church structure, because he is a matai. I am not a matai, my husband is not a matai, so I'm out, I'm the lowest stage of the structure in the village and also the lowest in the church.

In the new churches, this hierarchy was much less marked and church services had a more informal and unrestrained style. Compared to the mainline churches, pastors of the new churches generally engaged with their congregations in a much more egalitarian and informal way and with a seeming disregard for chiefly status and for the social hierarchies of the village. Members of the new churches often emphasized this closer and less hierarchical relationship with the pastor and with members of the congregation as one of the things they appreciated most compared to the mainline churches.

Missionaries, pastors and leading members of the new churches were openly criticizing practices and structures of the mainline churches. A common view expressed was that members and pastors of mainline churches were too preoccupied with material concerns, such as constructing and maintaining impressive church buildings or showing off their donations during Sunday service, and that pastors did not provide any real spiritual religiousness in the lives of their congregations. A leading male member of one of the new churches thus described the mainline churches as being all about 'competition and flashing donations' when people ought to have been focusing on creating deep personal relationships with God. Members of the new churches were particularly critical of the financial arrangements of the mainline churches, arguing that many pastors were exploiting their congregations by pressuring poor families into financing their own relatively luxurious households. Pastors of the new churches were also encouraging their members not to donate more to the church than they could afford and to make their donations anonymously to avoid competition. As mentioned, new churches in Samoa attract a high proportion of low-income families, which was also the case in the area of my study, and those who had converted to the new churches after the tsunami were for the most part low-income and low-status families. Leading members of the new churches, who had converted before the tsunami were, however, relatively wealthy and several of them were well-educated.

Pastors, missionaries and members of the new churches openly criticized cultural practices of ceremonial exchange and family obligations (*fa'alavelave*). When discussing his rejection of cultural exchange practices, a pastor from one of the new churches thus stated that he considered it his duty to 'help people not to burden themselves, trying to do more to be recognized'. Pastors and missionaries of the new churches were advising members of their congregations to limit costs and expectations for the ceremonial exchanges or to not participate in them at all, thus excluding themselves from key practices of Samoan culture and social organization. A young missionary from one of the new churches underlined that now was the time to focus on God, not on culture: 'I like my

culture, you know? But culture can't save the people, only Jesus can.' A pastor from one of the new churches referred to culture as 'an institution drafted by God to keep people together until the Second Coming.' Culture was thus not articulated as something bad or problematic as such, but the rapidly approaching Second Coming had made culture unimportant and potentially counterproductive to the all-important goal of conversion and individual salvation.

Both members of new and mainline churches expressed frustration at the high costs of church expenditure and ceremonial exchange. However, informants from mainline churches mostly underlined the importance of donations and exchanges as something which kept people together. A young female member of the mainline church in Fa'atoa told me that she was proud of the Samoan practices of ceremonial exchange of goods and money:

even though it makes people suffer. It makes people suffer to find something to give. And then it makes people suffer to find something to give back. But you know, I think it keeps people more together. Let's see, for example if I didn't want to give something to the fa'alavelave, it's like saying I don't want anything to do with that family any more.

Members of mainline churches generally emphasized the positive qualities of the close interconnection between cultural and religious organization and between pastors and chiefs, and they expressed a fear the new churches could potentially undermine the social cohesion of the villages. As an elderly female member of a mainline church in Fa'atoa expressed it: 'I don't know why those stupid people from Vaimatu want to abandon their roots and go to all those new churches'. She was worried that the increased number of churches would threaten the unity and harmony of the village and that in the future, the village would 'no longer be together'.

Discussion

The interpretation of the tsunami as a sign of the Second Coming introduced a sense of urgency in proselytizing for pastors, missionaries and core members of the new churches. Establishing new churches and converting people were considered important ways in preparing for the Second Coming. For members and missionaries of the new churches, salvation was articulated as a highly individual endeavor, turning away from worldly concerns including cultural practices and kinship obligations and focusing instead on developing and strengthening a personal relationship with God. According to members of the new churches, the tsunami was a sign from God to intensify proselytizing, establish more churches and focus on individual salvation, to the detriment of other concerns.

For members of the mainline churches, perceptions of the tsunami as a punishment from God were used to stake out a rather different course of action in the tsunami aftermath. Seeing the tsunami as a consequence of failing to comply with the strict observance of Sundays and for not 'keeping with the past', change was articulated as the problem and cause of the tsunami. A return to a more traditional way of life and strengthening Samoan culture was subsequently seen as the appropriate solution and risk reduction measure. Many members of the mainline churches were thus connecting the tsunami to recent changes in the area, i.e. tourism developments and imitation of Western ways which

were considered a threat to core Samoan values of respect, hierarchical social structures and adherence to traditional rules of behavior. In this understanding of the tsunami, a failure to change this behavior would consequently put people at risk of new punishments and disasters.

Studies of evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity have demonstrated how an ideal of radical change is actively promoted through doctrines of salvation, conversion, spiritual rebirth and eschatology (e.g. Meyer, 1998; Robbins, 2007). In a similar way, this study has argued that new churches in the tsunami affected area promoted ideals of discontinuity by encouraging people to turn away from key cultural practices, including ceremonial exchanges and kinship obligations. While new churches encouraged change and individual salvation, members of mainline churches argued for a return to more traditional ways, emphasizing a strong interconnection between Christianity and traditional village life. Members of mainline and new churches thus expressed radically different ideals of change and continuity in their understandings of the tsunami, its causes and significance. These different ideals impacted what were considered and promoted as right courses of action in the disaster aftermath. In this way, religious explanations of the tsunami were actively used by members of mainline and new churches, in opposing or bringing about religious change, respectively.

Given the close relationship between Christianity and Samoan culture, the establishment of new churches changed not only religious life and church organization. The new diversification of religious life in the study area also challenged and impacted cultural practices. The criticism expressed by members of the new churches and their rejection of traditional practices and obligations could potentially change village life and cause a disruption of kinships and social relationships. In a study of conversions among Samoans in New Zealand, Ilana Gershon (2006) argues that changing church affiliation from a mainline to a new church is articulated as a radical break with the old life, even though conversion mainly takes place from one form of Protestant Christianity to another. Gershon argues that when converting from mainline to new churches, Samoans are leaving congregations deeply involved with ceremonial exchange and moral economy in favor of churches with strong objections against these practices. Whereas practices of ceremonial exchange and publicly announced church donations place great emphasis on public display of moral conduct, such as showing love and solidarity with family through ceremonial exchange and displaying piousness through large church donations, new churches represent an internalization of morality as something taking place between the individual and God and separated from the public gaze (Gershon, 2006). In a similar way, this paper has demonstrated that changing church affiliation offers an alternative to the pressure, competition and economic hardships experienced by many families due to kinship and church obligations. Through their criticism of cultural practices, the new churches thus gave members a place from where to express social critique and an opportunity to opt out of what was experienced as costly and oppressive traditions and obligations. The new churches were in many ways challenging core elements of Samoan culture: the close interconnection between the village and its church through social organization and shared hierarchical structures, the strong financial ties between church and congregation and the practices of ceremonial exchange and obligations in kinship groups.

The approach to culture and tradition by members, pastors and missionaries of the new churches was, however, not one of complete rejection. Rather, the Second Coming and

urgency of salvation, as signified by the tsunami, meant that cultural concerns, including practices of exchange, social hierarchies and kinship relationships, had lost importance and that all energy should now be put into individual salvation. In this understanding, culture and tradition were turning into a potential burden as it was preventing people from focusing on their personal relationship with God. The criticism of cultural practices was thereby closely connected to the tsunami and understandings of the disaster as a sign of the rapidly approaching Second Coming.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that an attentiveness to religious perceptions of the tsunami are key to understanding processes of religious and cultural change in the time after the disaster. People in the study area made sense of the tsunami, its causes and impact, based on different Christian interpretations. These different Christian understandings of the tsunami were used actively to facilitate – or to counteract – social and religious change. Through these understandings, the tsunami was incorporated into two main, and markedly different, ideals of change and continuity and of what the relationship between religious life, cultural practices, social relationships and kinship obligation ought to be. This study thus shows the importance of attentiveness to the diversity of religious understandings of disasters, not just between different religions, but expressed within the same religion, and even within the same denomination. In this study, members of different Christian churches, new and mainline, thus expressed different ideals and opinions on the relationship between church and culture, and between religious life and social organization, financial matters and traditions.

This study has argued that religious understandings of a disaster influence and are actively used in post-disaster processes of change, in this case promoting or opposing religious as well as social and cultural change. Based on their perception of the tsunami, people actively sought to promote the most suitable courses of action. These processes did neither begin nor end with the tsunami. Membership of the new churches was already increasing in Samoa and the burden of church donations and ceremonial exchange had been felt and articulated by members of new as well as mainline churches for some time. Pastors and missionaries were not so much introducing new ideas as they were providing people with opportunities and a language for expressing discontent and voicing social critique. The tsunami, through the religious perceptions and post-disaster distress and recovery needs, thus became an opportunity for change through the alteration of village rules on church establishment in Vaimatu and post-disaster evangelism in the tsunami affected area. This paper demonstrates the importance of analyzing disaster as a process deeply interconnected with and inseparable from everyday concerns and ongoing processes of change and continuity. Post-disaster processes of change and continuity cannot be separated from everyday lives and wider social, economic and cultural processes. Perceptions of the tsunami brought to light what people saw as pressing or problematic in their everyday lives and provided them with opportunities to promote appropriate courses of action according to these explanations. If we are to make sense of how people respond to disasters and act, or fail to act, following a disaster, we must pay attention to local perceptions of the disaster and explanations of its causes and significance.

Notes

1. It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a full account of the differences and similarities between the churches present in the area and I will refer to them using the categories most meaningful in a Samoan context and to my informants as either new or mainline churches.
2. The actual village names have been changed to protect the anonymity and interests of my informants.

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