‘Reconciliation came rather naturally (secara alami), when we became aware of the disastrous effects of the conflict and the need to restrengthen our culture, our adat, and our identity (budaya, adat, dan jati diri).’ This was the tenor of the many Moluccan villagers I spoke to during fieldwork in post-conflict Maluku. At the same time, the quotation expresses a broader trend in a much broader field: the emerging cultural turn in peace research. The cultural turn implies the increasing importance peace studies as well as national and international peace organizations attribute to ‘culture’, ‘the local’, and ‘local ownership’ for peacebuilding – the cultural dimension of reconciliation. To elucidate why this paradigm shift did (and had to) come about, this chapter first introduces two concepts closely related to current international discourses on peacebuilding: reconciliation and transitional justice. Transitional justice mechanisms are intended to be a means to build (sustainable) peace, which is a prerequisite for long-term reconciliation. Throwing a critical light on key terms in those debates such as justice, truth, and liberalism – concepts that are greatly determined by Western political sciences jargon – helps to explain the so-called rise of the local and the increasing integration of traditional justice into transitional justice packages. The cultural turn in peace research is part of a much larger (intrinsically and extrinsically motivated) trend worldwide to revive local traditions and re-empower local traditional structures. I argue that anthropological research, methodology, and theories are predestined and called upon to contribute and reveal prospects and problems of traditional justice, flawed concepts of culture and tradition, and misconceptions based on a superficial (ac)knowledge(ment) of the local – something that is so far largely missing in peace studies and interventions. The chapter concludes with a comprehensive section on anthropological notions.
of conflict, peace, and the local and what contributions ethnographic research can make to peace research that has so far been dominated by political sciences, international relations, or law.

Transitional justice and reconciliation or the fallacy of justice and truth?

By imposing a ‘legal order’ on what is often the irrational (power-driven though it may be), the international community seeks to use criminal trials to contain and to deter violence, and to discover the truth about specific events and to punish those responsible. Yet truth, in the eyes of those most affected by collective violence, often lies not in the facts themselves but in their moral interpretation, and how facts are interpreted is often manipulated and distorted by the very people who initiated the violence.

Justice, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder and can be interpreted in a variety of ways. (Weinstein & Stover 2004: 4)

Transitional justice

Transitional justice is generally understood to mean the efforts to cope with the aftermath of (in most cases intra-state) mass violence, authoritarian regimes or despotisms, and thus foster the transition to security and peace in divided societies (Buckley-Zistel 2008: 3). The term ‘transitional justice’ became popular in the 1990s, but the concept as such goes back to the First and Second World Wars as outlined in Ruti Teitel’s ‘Transitional Justice Genealogy’ (2003). The first phase in the genealogy classified by Teitel was clearly focused on coming to terms with the extraordinary dimensions of the wars and is thus associated with interstate cooperation, the implementation of international law, war crimes trials such as the prominent Nuremberg Trials, sanctions and internationally justified punishment of crimes against humanity; it ended soon after the Second World War.

The second phase, according to Teitel, was determined by the post-Cold War that began in 1989 and was characterized by a wave of democratic transitions and modernization, with the nation state and nation-building again becoming the center of focus. In this phase, transitional justice ‘moved beyond retributive justice ... [and] included questions about how to heal an entire society and incorporate diverse rule-of-law values, such as peace and reconciliation, that had previously been treated as largely external to the transitional justice project’ (77).