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# **The ‘ethnic’ in Indonesia’s communal conflicts: Violence in Ambon, Poso and Sambas**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article looks at the communal violence in Ambon, Poso and Sambas in post-Suharto Indonesia from a comparative perspective. It explores why Ambon and Poso were seen as religious while Sambas was seen as ethnic despite the fact that in all three conflicts different religions and ethnicities fought each other. Examining the ‘ethnic’ elements, this article advances three arguments: First, that the Poso and Ambon conflicts were no less ethnic than the Sambas conflict as they had similar ‘ethnic causes’. Second, that the religious narrative dominated in Ambon and Poso because it reflected the Islamic resurgence in Indonesia since the 1990s while the narrative in Sambas reflected that it was the latest round of a pre-existing anti-Madurese conflict which had already been ‘defined’ as ‘ethnic’. Third, that the narratives were framed strategically, thus influencing the trajectory of the conflict but also responding to it.

**KEYWORDS** Indonesia, Ambon, Poso, Sambas, ethnic conflict, religious conflict

After the fall of Suharto in May 1998, Indonesia experienced an upsurge in Islamist, separatist and communal violence. This violence erupted in the context of the transition from authoritarianism to democracy which saw a drawn-out struggle in Jakarta between the ‘old’ elites associated with the New Order regime and the reformist challengers (Crouch 2010). This political transition provided an opportunity for separatists to push for independence as seen in East Timor (Kingsbury 2000, Martinkus 2001, Greenlees and Garran 2002) and Aceh (Schulze 2004, Davies 2006, Aspinall 2009), for radical Islamists to challenge the nature of the state (Conboy 2005, Sidel 2006; Solahudin 2013), for communities to reshape local socio-political and economic constellations (Van Klinken 2007, Davidson 2008, McRae 2013), and

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for politicians, military officers, and businessmen to stir up and manipulate these conflicts for their own ends (Tomagola 2001, Aditjondro 2004). While the fall of Suharto set the ball rolling, the roots of violence in Indonesia lay far deeper, in the narrow conception of the Indonesian nation and the way in which this was institutionalised (Bertrand 2004, Tajima 2014). New Order policies of development, transmigration and ‘uniformisation’ resulted in resource exploitation and cultural marginalisation outside Java and were perceived as ‘Javanese colonialism’.

This article is a comparative study of three of Indonesia’s communal conflicts – Ambon (in Maluku province), Poso (in Central Sulawesi province) and Sambas (in West Kalimantan province) - which the literature on post-Suharto violence has either looked at separately or referred to only in passing in the analysis of the broader transition dynamics. These three conflicts erupted within weeks of each other late 1998/early 1999. They erupted in the urban centres and spread from there to neighbouring villages, and in the case of the Ambon conflict to neighbouring islands. All three conflicts had multiple causes - ethnic, religious, political, social, and economic. In all three conflicts there were clear links between the violence and local politics both in terms of timing and mobilisation (Van Klinken 2007, Aragon 2007, Davidson 2008, McRae 2013). All three saw clashes between locals and migrants as well as between Muslims and non-Muslims. Yet the Indonesian newspapers such as *Kompas*, *Merdeka*, *Media Indonesia*, *Republika* or *Suara Pembaruan* described the violence in Ambon and Poso as ‘*konflik antaragama*’ (religious conflict), identifying the actors as Muslims and Christians while the Sambas conflict was described as ‘*perang antaretnis*’ (ethnic warfare) and the actors were identified as Dayak, Malays, and Madurese. This categorisation is also present in other observer narratives such as reports by human rights organisations as well as in the academic literature. The Sambas conflict, which lasted from 19 February until May 1999, is seen as having started with a Malay offensive followed by a joint Malay-Dayak offensive. The Poso conflict, which lasted from 24 December 1998 until 2007, is described as having had two phases of urban Christian-Muslim clashes, followed by a short Christian offensive, a lengthy Muslim offensive, and post-agreement terrorism. The Ambon conflict, which lasted from 19 February 1999 until 2003, is depicted as comprising three phases of Christian-Muslim violence in 1999, followed by a Muslim offensive in 2000, and post-agreement terrorism. Moreover, analyses of the Ambon conflict have often focused on the role of religion (Bartels 2003, Gaspersz 2005, al-Qurtuby 2015), the role of the Protestant church (Hehanussa 2013), and the role of Laskar Jihad (Schulze

2002, Bräuchler 2005, Hasan 2006). Jihadist violence has also been the focus of analyses of the Poso conflict (McRae 2013; Karnavian 2008).

This article does not discuss the general causes of these conflicts, their timing, or the role of religion as these have already been addressed in the existing literature. Instead it examines the ‘ethnic’ dimension from a comparative perspective, starting with the question of whether the Ambon and Poso conflicts were indeed less ethnic than Sambas. ‘Ethnic’ refers to the identity markers of a particular *suku* (ethnic group) such as *adat* (customs) as well as common ancestry, culture, history, and beliefs. The analysis of the ethnic dimension focuses on ‘ethnic’ causes, ‘ethnic’ narratives, and ‘ethnic’ violence. Here it is argued that the Ambon and Poso conflicts were no less ethnic than the Sambas conflict as they shared many of the same ethnic causes and, the ethnic narratives that were advanced, were similar. This article then looks at the conflict narratives, exploring why the religious narrative dominated in Ambon and Poso despite the involvement of different ethnic groups and why the ethnic narrative dominated in Sambas despite the involvement of different religions. It also reflects on why the ethnic conflict narrative was advanced mainly by non-Muslims, and whether the narrative framing had direct implications for the trajectory of the conflicts. Here two arguments are advanced: First, that the conflict narrative in Ambon and Poso was religious because it reflected the broader national religious tensions resulting from the resurgence of Islam in Indonesia since the 1990s while the ethnic narrative dominated in Sambas because it was the latest round of periodic anti-Madurese violence since the 1960s. The latter was ‘defined’ as ‘ethnic’ at a time when Islam was in a weakened position in Indonesia with the defeat of the Darul Islam rebellions in 1962. Second, that the narratives were also framed and re-framed strategically, the latter accounting for the shift from an ethnic narrative to a religious one among Christians in Ambon and Poso. They thus influenced the trajectory of the conflict and were influenced by it.

### **Ethnic causes**

When looking at the causes of the Ambon, Poso and Sambas conflicts it is impossible to overlook the changes in the ethnic composition of these three areas in the decades preceding the eruption of the violence. The in-migration of other ethnic groups changed the demographic balance leading to the marginalisation of the indigenous, resulted in the loss of ancestral land, and eroded local customary *adat* structures. All of these thus became ‘ethnic’ causes of conflict.

### *In-migration and the marginalisation of the indigenous*

Driven by the need to address overpopulation on Java, Bali and Lombok the central government pursued a transmigration policy to redistribute people from high population density areas to those with smaller populations (Hardjono 1977; Fasbender and Erbe 1990). The resettlement of transmigrants on the outer islands, however, was problematic as both the colonial and post-colonial government had fostered the sense that people of different regions were of different ethnicity. Indeed, ethnicity and locality overlapped to such an extent that they were assumed to be a single concept, what Tom Boellstorff refers to as ethnolocality (Boellstorff 2002, 25). Transmigrants were thus not seen by locals as fellow Indonesians but as ‘others’ and as their numbers grew, so did the competition and fears that locals were losing out.

Between 1975 and 1990 Central Sulawesi saw the influx of 181,696 transmigrants, Maluku the influx of 139,465 transmigrants, and West Kalimantan the influx of 102,520 transmigrants (Bertrand 2004, 93). This transmigration was perceived by locals as a fundamentally unequal process in which local land was appropriated by the state and given to migrants along with government assistance in the form of tools and seed. In Maluku, this resulted in the transmigrant farmers being seen as more competitive than locals who were not familiar with ‘modern’ agriculture.<sup>1</sup> In West Kalimantan, it was believed to have led to the loss of land as well as jobs and when the local Dayak complained, they were ignored or simply labelled as ‘lazy’.<sup>2</sup>

The transmigrants, who were mainly Javanese farmers, were followed by significant numbers of ‘spontaneous’ migrants of other ethnicities. The latter were not organised by the state but went on their own buoyed by the general pro-migration mood as well as the increased access to remote areas as new roads were constructed in accordance with the New Order’s developmentalist policies. The construction projects themselves attracted large numbers of spontaneous migrants who worked on the sites. The completed roads brought further migrants, small traders lured by the possibility of new markets.

In Central Sulawesi the migrants flocked to the extractive industries such as ebony as well as cash crops, soon dominating the clove, cacao, coffee and copra trade. They also owned the majority of small shops (HRW 2002, 6). Even the market in the Protestant highland stronghold of Tentena became dominated by Bugis, Gorontalo and Arab descent migrants with the effect that pork could no longer be purchased as the traders were Muslim (Damanik 2003, 44). By the 1990s the key sectors of the economy were dominated by migrants because

local Christians were more interested in civil service positions while the migrants were able to tap into existing ethnic trade networks.

In West Kalimantan the spontaneous migrants were Bugis and Madurese. The latter became a particular thorn in the eyes of local Dayaks and Malays as they had followed Madurese transmigrants (*DR*, 29 March – 3 April 1999). This made them the largest migrant community. Moreover, according to locals, the Madurese, unlike the Bugis, did not integrate with society.<sup>3</sup> And in terms of employment they seemed to be everywhere. They worked as port labourers, on construction sites, on plantations, in coffee shops, and commerce. Their employment by logging companies and illegal loggers as well as construction companies that ‘opened the jungle’ by building roads put them on a collision course with the rural Dayaks who sought to protect their resources. In the cities the Madurese were particularly numerous in the transport sector. In Pontianak they took over the *becaks* (pedicabs) from the Chinese<sup>4</sup> while in Sambas they pushed out the Malays. They also competed with Malay small traders and peddlers.

In Maluku the majority of spontaneous migrants were Bugis, Butonese and Makassar – referred to as BBM. The BBM initially filled the emerging gaps in the economy as Ambonese Muslims climbed up the educational ladder. Butonese migrants in the 1960s worked as labourers in the harbour.<sup>5</sup> By the 1980s, they had also moved into fishing. Bugis migrants worked as *becak* drivers and soon dominated local transport. By 1996, locals found that they were losing in the competition with the outsiders and started blaming the migrants for problems ranging from the pollution of Ambon’s harbor,<sup>6</sup> to rising Muslim Ambonese unemployment, and declining economic opportunities for Christian Ambonese (Bertrand 2002, 73).

### ***The loss of ancestral lands***

In-migration also resulted in the loss of *tanah adat* (customary/ancestral lands) in West Kalimantan and Central Sulawesi. The encroachment by the state on ancestral lands began with the Basic Agrarian Law 5/1960 which stated that customary land tenure only applied to the extent that it did not conflict with ‘national interests’ (ICG 2001, 15). Under Suharto further legislation was introduced with the specific purpose of appropriating the land for development. Basic Forestry Law 5/1967 claimed the country’s forests as state property. Basic Mining Law 11/1967 enabled the state to become the ultimate judge on land use. And in 1973 presidential instruction number 2 designated 10 outer island provinces as new

transmigration sites. For this, too, land was set aside. Thus the New Order systematically appropriated *adat* land.

In Central Sulawesi it was primarily Pamona *adat* land that was used for transmigration sites while hundreds of hectares of Mori *adat* land were taken for palm oil plantations (Damanik 2003, 44). Government officials sold land and exploited the resources, including areas of *hutan lindung* (protected forest) resulting in repeated protests by the indigenous populations (Forum Cheq Recheq, n.d., 2). Not surprisingly, during the last decade of the New Order there were intermittent outbreaks of violence between the indigenous population and transmigrants which were put down by the military.

From the 1990s onwards, spontaneous migrants also started to push into the interior of Poso district searching for land especially for cacao plantations (Damanik 2003, 44). This rose dramatically after the 1997 Asian financial crisis when cacao became the “hot” export crop because it was pegged to the US dollar’ (Aragon 2001, 56). Some migrants did not even bother to purchase land but simply entered Pamona ancestral forests with chainsaws and cut down the trees to clear fields for cacao and other cash crops (HRW 2002, 6).

In West Kalimantan it was Dayak *adat* land that was appropriated by Jakarta for transmigration, the logging industry, and plantations. Most Dayak land was communally owned but this was not recognised by the central government as ‘there are no formal land titles’.<sup>7</sup> In many cases this meant the eviction and destruction of whole villages without compensation by the state (Dove 1997, 1). They were then relocated to new ‘modern’ villages with ‘modern’ houses, often forcibly by the army and police.<sup>8</sup> It is estimated that as many as 2.5 million Dayaks were displaced throughout Kalimantan.

The land taken by the state was then given as concessions to logging and plantation companies. Between 1968 and 1973 timber production in West Kalimantan increased 25-fold from 127,894 to 3.3 million cubic meters (Davidson, n.d., 4). In the 1980s around 3 million hectares were given for large-scale, mainly palm oil plantations (Bappeda 1993, 11, table 1.5). This land, too, was taken with little or no compensation or consultation.<sup>9</sup> The destruction of the forest by logging and plantation companies was further compounded by illegal logging, usually facilitated by corrupt local officials and protected by elements in the security forces.

Like the Pamona, Mori and Lore in Central Sulawesi, the Dayak protested their dispossession only to be accused of ‘obstructing national development’ (ICG 2001, 20) and to be labelled as ‘primitives’ (Djuweng 1997, 25-26). At the same time, whenever a Dayak felled a tree to meet household needs, he was treated like a criminal (*The Jakarta Post*, April

20, 1999). Not surprisingly ‘the frustration of the Dayaks seeing the greedy exploitation of Kalimantan, the felling of trees and damage to the environment and all the wealth that was enjoyed in Jakarta’<sup>10</sup> became one of the key reasons for the periodic Dayak violence.

Conflict erupted with those migrants who were seen as collaborators in this process of dispossession: the Madurese. They were seen as being at ‘the forefront of the land grab’ from 1967 onwards.<sup>11</sup> They were also working for the construction companies that were clearing the land and building roads into West Kalimantan’s interior. And when the logging companies arrived, it was the Madurese who cut down the trees the Dayaks saw as theirs.

The loss of *adat* land had a traumatic impact on the indigenous communities in both Central Sulawesi and West Kalimantan as land was intrinsically connected to the ancestral religions. In these animistic belief systems soil, trees, plants, stones, and rivers were imbued with spirits living in harmony with man, constituting a ‘greater whole.’ Nature and resources were not economic assets and not subordinate to man but existed in harmony with him (Djuweng 1997, 12-14). This interconnectedness with the land had not changed when the Pamona, Lore, and Mori had become Protestants or when the Dayak had become Catholics. The land was still considered sacral. It was the ‘proof of the existence of their ancestors before them, a base on which to continue life at present, a future heirloom to be handed down to the next generation’ (Djuweng 1998, 6).

### ***Undermining and violating local adat***

While the loss of ancestral lands was central only to the growing ethnic tensions in West Kalimantan and Central Sulawesi, the ‘loss’ of *adat* or violation of *adat* played a key role in the eruption of violence in all three conflicts. During the New Order local *adat* was systematically undermined by the state’s nation-building efforts through centralisation, ‘uniformisation’, and bringing all constituent elements of the Indonesian nation in line with the New Order’s national imaginary, which had a Javanese and ‘modern’ face. The policy which had the greatest impact on local *adat* was Law 5/1979 on Village Governance. Its purpose was to standardise village government across the archipelago as well as to replace ‘outdated’ traditional village systems with a ‘modern’ one. This was detrimental for the vast majority of communities in Indonesia as this legislation was not ethnically neutral; it imposed the Javanese system, as the chosen model, on non-Javanese areas.

The Law on Village Governance removed power from customary leaders as well as customary councils of elders and placed it in the hands of the national civil service, increasing political control by outsiders and engineering new socio-political hierarchies. In



West Kalimantan the communally elected Dayak *kepala adat* (customary leader) was replaced by a politically elected *kepala desa* (village head). The requirement of a high school degree for candidates for village head, excluded most customary leaders from running (ICG 2001, 18-19). However, it was not just village governance that was standardised but also village size. This led to the merger of distinct communities with ‘the component parts of the new villages ... sometimes as much as eight or ten kilometres apart with the result that some villagers did not even know the village head’ (Ibid).

In Ambon, the impact of these administrative reforms was fourfold: First, the traditional *raja negeri* (village head) had to change his title to *kepala desa*, trading a title legitimated by *adat* for a purely administrative one. Second, under the new system, all adults living in a village had the same right to become *kepala desa* unlike the *raja* which had been an ‘ascribed status’ (Pariella 1996, 116). Third, the assault on *adat* weakened Ambon’s *pela* alliance system which tied together two or three different villages, irrespective of religion, into a brotherhood (Bartels 2010, 219). *Pela* relations created ‘cultural harmony’ which counter-balanced what one Ambonese referred to as ‘the silent religious conflict since the arrival of Christianity during the colonial era.’<sup>12</sup> And fourth, the introduction of the elected *kepala desa* resulted in the loss of moral authority as most *kepala desa* were associated with the increasingly corrupt governing Golkar party. This, in turn, meant that when the conflict erupted in January 1999, local leaders had no capacity to calm the situation.

The systematic erosion of local *adat* by the New Order regime was exacerbated by the in-migration into Ambon, Poso and West Kalimantan of other ethnic groups with their own, different customs. This caused tensions when local *adat* was disrespected. As Albert Tumimor, the grandson of the *raja* of Poso, recalled his grandfather saying: ‘I did not invite you [the migrants]. But if you want to stay here, respect our traditions.’ Tumimor then remarked that the migrants ‘did not behave like guests or what you would expect from newcomers. When they were here for a while and had become rich, they started to suppress the indigenous’.<sup>13</sup> Many locals also felt that there was a tendency for migrants to feel more cultured than the locals and to behave arrogantly (Damanik 2003, 43).

While disputes over land in the rural areas gave rise to ‘chronic’ conflict dynamics between locals and both transmigrants and spontaneous migrants, it was in the urban areas like Ambon city, Poso city and Sambas town where the incendiary mix of a high concentration of spontaneous migrants, high population density, high unemployment, and a high proportion of male youths created the ‘acute’ conflict that erupted in December 1998 and January 1999. Here customs from the various migrant communities collided with local

*adat* structures and the close proximity of indigenous and migrants combined with the political, economic and social competition heightened ethnic identity and ‘sharpened’ indigenous responses to transgressions of local *adat* by outsiders. At the same time traditional structures as a whole, both migrant and indigenous, were challenged by modernity and youthful rebellion which resulted in the disrespect of any *adat* or indeed authority.

As can be seen from this discussion, the Ambon, Poso and Sambas conflicts clearly drew upon ‘ethnic’ grievances resulting from in-migration, the loss of ancestral land, and the erosion or violation of local *adat* in the years preceding the violence. The cumulative effect was a direct cultural or ‘ethnic’ threat which was a key cause of all three conflicts.

### **Ethnic Violence**

To assess the extent to which the violence in Ambon, Poso, and Sambas was ‘ethnic’ it is useful to look at the targets, the motivation, and the *modus operandi*. In all three conflicts there was ethnic targeting. In the Ambon conflict this was most visible during the first few days when, in the context of the broader conflict in which violence was perpetrated against both Christians and Muslims, Christian Ambonese systematically attacked the BBM. On 19 January 1999, they burnt the kiosks and then the *becak* owned by the Bugis and Butonese. On 20 January, Ambonese Christians burnt the overwhelmingly Bugis owned stalls in Ambon city’s markets while taking care not to attack the shops of the Chinese (Rahawarin 2000, 3-4). They also burned a Butonese settlement and stopped public busses and *becak* as symbols of the BBM. There were calls for the BBM to leave Maluku<sup>14</sup> as well as anti-BBM banners and slogans (*Ummat*, February 15, 1999). Former Ambon mayor Dicky Wattimena, who was known for his anti-BBM politics, was seen giving orders during the violence and telling the BBM to go home (Ibid). By the end of the first phase of the conflict in May 1999, the overwhelming majority of BBM had fled to Sulawesi.

The BBM were targeted because they had demographically increased the Muslim share of the population in a precariously balanced Muslim-Christian society. They were blamed for the consequent decrease in the Christian share of the local resources in the decade preceding the conflict and, with the impending June 1999 elections, it was feared that the BBM would increase the vote for the Muslim parties (Van Klinken 2001, 22). They were also seen as a cultural threat,<sup>15</sup> diluting and undermining Ambonese *adat*. Ambonese Christians further believed that Ambon’s Muslims would like to see them leave to reduce the economic competition, but were too polite to say so.

Ethnic targeting also occurred in the Poso conflict, in this case by both indigenous and migrants. In the first two phases – 24-29 December 1998 and 15-20 April 2000 - street battles were fought between the migrant Bugis residents of Kayamanya and the Pamona and Mori residents of the Sayo and Lombogia neighbourhoods of Poso city (Aragon 2001, 60). In both phases most of those injured, most of the houses destroyed, and most of the displaced were Pamona and Mori. The third phase in May-June 2000, was an organised and planned attack by the Pamona. One of the areas targeted was the village of Sintuwulemba where prospering migrant cacao farmers were ‘the focus of jealousy’ by their indigenous Pamona neighbours ‘who had watched their ancestral holdings shrink as the migrants continued to purchase more land’ (Aragon 2001, 68). On 28 May, Sintuwulemba was attacked, 200 houses burnt down, and those migrants who did not manage to flee were hacked to death.<sup>16</sup> Over the next couple of days the Pamona fighters proceeded to round up those who had fled into the nearby forest. One Pamona youth, who had participated in the attack ‘returned to Tentena with 50 identity cards which he had taken off the people he had killed’<sup>17</sup> – they were all migrants.

The motivations for targeting the migrants in the Poso conflict were similar to those in the Ambon conflict. ‘They targeted the Bugis, Gorontalo and Javanese because they were an economic threat ... and because they were aggressive.’<sup>18</sup> The Pamona retribution in the third phase of the conflict, moreover, was explained as a response to the fact that virtually all of the destruction in the first and second phases was of Pamona property. It was also a response to the role played by the migrants in that violence, the cultural marginalisation and dislocation of locals (Aditjondro 2004).

The Sambas conflict, too, saw ethnic targeting. The conflict erupted when some 200 Madurese attacked the Malay village of Paretsetia over the detention of a Madurese who had been caught burgling a house the previous day. The lack of capacity of the police to deal with the Madurese attackers (*Kompas*, January 22, 1999) gave rise to the mobilisation of Malays throughout Sambas district. On 21 February 1999, armed with traditional weapons such as spears and swords they went in search of Madurese. They burnt down 20 houses in the villages of Sebangkau Semparuk and Tebas Sungai (*Suara Karya*, February 24, 1999). Later they killed two Madurese in Sungai Kelambu. On the night of 23 February, a crowd of Malays attacked the local police station (*Merdeka*, February 25, 1999) where Madurese had taken shelter. When this round of violence subsided 16 people had been killed and 81 houses and two trucks burnt (*Kompas*, February 23, 1999). It had also triggered a Madurese exodus from Sambas district.

The second phase of the Sambas conflict started on 15 March and the Malays were now joined by the Dayaks in targeting the Madurese. The Dayaks attacked the Madurese who lived in the villages of Pantai, Semparuk, Harapan, Lonam, and Serapan. They then joined the Malays and headed for Madurese settlements with jerry cans filled with petrol (*GAMMA*, March 28, 1999). Throughout Sambas roadblocks were set up and every car was stopped and searched for Madurese (*Tempo*, March 28, 1999), who were then beheaded. Open trucks carried triumphant men holding up heads as crowds cheered and shouted ‘Long live the Malays’ while brandishing spears and long knives (*The Sunday Times*, March 21, 1999). By early May, with the Madurese expelled from Sambas district, Dayak and Malay combatants ran out of targets and the mobilisations ceased (Davidson 2008, 134). According to official statistics at the end of the conflict 35,000 Madurese had been displaced and more than 2,500 houses burnt (*The Jakarta Post*, July 20, 1999).

The reasons for targeting the Madurese in Sambas shared many similarities with reasons for targeting migrants in Poso and Ambon: economic competition, disrespect of local *adat*, usurpation of indigenous land. The *modus operandi* of Malays and Dayaks, however, appeared to be more distinctly ethnic, and, interestingly, tied only to Dayak customs. Indeed Dayaks held *adat*-based war ceremonies before they attacked. They also explained the beheadings and triumphant display of heads by pointing to their ‘headhunting’ heritage. This was echoed by much of the contemporaneous media. Academic analyses in comparison see the Dayak violence as drawing upon a ‘reimagined’ headhunting past.

The divergence between the participant narratives and observer narratives on the Malays is even greater. Malay explanations for adopting ‘headhunting’ practices revolved around the Madurese being aggressive, rude, dishonest, hot tempered, individualistic, and lacking respect for other people’s traditions and property.<sup>19</sup> The ‘brutality’ of the violence was thus the result of extreme anger. Dayaks explained the Malay behaviour as the result of Dayak traditions having been introduced into the Malay community by the ‘large number of Dayaks who converted to Islam and thus became Malay’.<sup>20</sup> These Malays were of Dayak origin, shared the Dayak ancestors and were tied to Dayak *adat* which ‘explains why the Malay-Madurese conflict followed a similar pattern including the eating of human flesh and the drinking of blood.’<sup>21</sup> Scholars such as Davidson and Van Klinken argue that the appropriation of Dayak war practices was a reaction to earlier Dayak ethnic mobilization in 1997, with the aim of asserting equality in indigeneity (Davidson 2008) and reclaiming lost positions in local government (Van Klinken 2008, 1). What ties participant and observer narratives together is indeed indigeneity. This is conferred either through genealogy or

through emulation and, arguably, the Dayak narrative portraying the Malays as being of Dayak origin is recognition of the indigenous status of the Malays.

### **Conflict narratives: ethnic vs religious**

The violence which erupted in Poso, Ambon and Sambas in 1998/1999 clearly had an ethnic dimension as the above discussion demonstrates. It also, however, had a religious dimension which was not about religion *per se* but about what Lorraine Aragon in her analysis of the Poso conflict termed ‘the political economy of being Protestant or Muslim’ (Aragon 2001, 47). The in-migration into all three areas was overwhelmingly Muslim which changed the local religious balance and led non-Muslims in Maluku, Central Sulawesi, and West Kalimantan to speculate about the ‘real’ agenda of Jakarta. Many Dayaks believed that the government wanted ‘to reduce the indigenous people’<sup>22</sup> and to keep ‘the Christian population small.’<sup>23</sup> The belief that transmigration aimed at the Islamisation of areas with historically large Christian populations was also wide-spread.<sup>24</sup> This speculation was grounded in the changes in Indonesia in the 1980s and 1990s which saw a resurgence of Islam at a popular level followed by a shift in attitude of the central government which led to the establishment of the Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals Association or *Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia* (ICMI) headed by Vice President BJ Habibie. ICMI actively sought to increase the number of Muslims in leading positions in government and society in the eastern provinces.

Against these developments at national level the increasing number of Muslim migrants placed considerable strain on the informal Christian-Muslim power-sharing arrangements in Central Sulawesi and Maluku. Poso district saw a shift from a fairly evenly balanced population<sup>25</sup> to a 57.2 percent Muslim majority by the end of the New Order. Moreover, between 1989 and 1999 the top fifty positions in the office of the *bupati* (regent), the heads of offices, agencies, divisions, and sub-districts saw the percentage of Christian office holders drop from 54 per cent to 39 per cent (Mappangara 2001, appendix 2). Dating from the appointment of Arief Patanga as *bupati*, it was not only the number of Muslim bureaucrats which increased but practically all leaders of the executive and legislative were members of ICMI (Damanik 2003, xxxvii), including many migrants.

Similarly, between 1971 and 1990 the percentage of Muslims in Maluku province grew from 49.9 to 56.8 (Van Klinken 2001, 12). By 1997, it had reached 59.02 percent (ICG 2002, 1). While at provincial level the balance shifted from 50/50 to 40/60 in favour of the Muslims, in Ambon city the religious balance shifted from a Christian majority of 57.5

percent to just under 50 percent which included at least 50,000 Muslim migrants from South Sulawesi (Jubilee Campaign UK 1999, 4). These changes dated back to the first Muslim governor Akip Latuconsina in 1992 who was also the provincial head of ICMI. His appointment was seen as the start of the political marginalization of Ambon's Christians as Latuconsina 'reformed' Maluku's civil service by removing 'top bureaucrats with Christian names', replacing them with Muslims (Van Klinken 2001, 19).<sup>26</sup> By 1996, all the *bupatis* in Maluku province were Muslim (Bertrand 2004, 118). Most new teachers hired by the government were Muslims. Moreover many originated from outside Maluku.

In light of this religious dimension, the question arises why non-Muslims in Ambon and Poso advanced an ethnic narrative when the conflicts erupted as exemplified by Ambonese Christian 'commander' Emang Nikijuluw's explanation that the Ambon conflict 'was not a clash between Ambonese Muslims and Christians but between Ambonese Christians and the BBM.'<sup>27</sup>

The ethnic narrative appealed for three key reasons: First, it more accurately reflected the multiple grievances and complex causes of the conflicts rather than reducing them to religion as the sole factor. Second, it allowed the Christians to frame their fears with respect to the Islamic resurgence in a way they believed would not upset indigenous Muslims with whom relations were largely harmonious, aided by the fact that they had a shared local history, culture, and even ancestors. Third, it allowed them to put forward their grievances in a 'neutral' way in country in which the Islamisation had considerably narrowed the space for Christians to advance a 'religious narrative' as many Muslims associated Christians not just with colonial history but the more recent appearance of aggressive evangelical missionaries and the policies of 'western imperialists'.

Muslims in Ambon and Poso from the beginning of the two conflicts advanced a religious narrative. This narrative in Ambon emphasised that the attack against Muslims, who were celebrating Idul Fitri, had been planned by Christians in the Protestant Maranatha church.<sup>28</sup> The violence was referred to as 'Idul Fitri *berdarah*' (bloody Idul Fitri). In Poso Muslims emphasised that a Muslim youth had been stabbed in a mosque by a Christian on Christmas Eve.<sup>29</sup>

Why did Muslims in Ambon and Poso advance a religious narrative? First, for most local Muslims this was simply a reflection of reality as they saw it, evidenced by the violence erupting on religious holidays and the targeting of religious buildings. Second, the shift away from distinctly local Muslim practices towards a more universal Islam over the previous two decades, had created a religious solidarity between local Muslims and Muslim migrants,

although their relationship remained complicated on an ethnic, social, economic and political level. Third, the Islamic resurgence in Indonesia in the years immediately preceding the conflict had strengthened Muslim identity to such an extent that it had become the core identity for many Muslims in Ambon and Poso. And fourth, the religious narrative provided local Muslims with a vehicle for appealing to Muslims in other parts of Indonesia for humanitarian assistance after the conflict erupted. For Ambonese Muslims there was an additional, fifth, reason: they were not convinced that the BBM were targeted for ethnic reasons and feared that they would be next.<sup>30</sup>

In 1999 the first volunteers from Jemaah Islamiyya (JI) and Kompak arrived in Ambon followed by Laskar Jihad in 2000; JI and Kompak arrived in Poso in 2000 and Laskar Jihad in 2001. They came to provide humanitarian aid, to defend their fellow Muslims and for *dakwa* (proselytization). The arrival of these *mujahedin* reinforced the religious narrative by recasting the conflict as a *jihad*. Their participant narrative diverged somewhat from that of most local Muslims in that it added *salafi* notions of puritanism as well as international *jihadi* notions of conflict between Islam and the Zionist-Crusader alliance. Laskar Jihad's extreme anti-Christian rhetoric, moreover, played a key role in shifting the narrative advanced by Christians in Ambon and Poso from an ethnic one to a religious one. It also resulted in a shift from trying to appeal to the Indonesian government for help to appealing to the Christian World as well as the United Nations (Damanik 2003, 78). Here the key role was played by the churches (Hehanussa 2013, 226), further reinforcing the reframing of the narrative along religious lines.

This shift is interesting as it shows that narratives can influence the trajectory of the conflict - as the arrival of the *mujahedin* proves - and that changes in the trajectory of the conflict can, conversely, reframe existing narratives. It also reveals that narratives can be a strategic choice. The shift in the Christian narrative was not just a response to the attacks on their religion but it was also a strategic reframing of the narrative signalling 'giving up' on waiting for help from the Indonesian government in favour of trying to get help from the international community. It reflected the recognition that while Christians had little to gain from a religious (Christian) narrative in an Indonesian national context, a religious narrative served them better than an ethnic one in an international context as it tapped into increasing, mainly western, concerns about militant Islam and the persecution of Christian minorities.

This leaves the participant narratives in the Sambas conflict which were and remained ethnic, partially because this was a much shorter conflict with fewer opportunities for a narrative shift but also because there was a clear victor from the outset. The Dayak narrative

emphasised the Madurese violation of *adat*, their cultural incompatibility, and their lack of indigeneity. The Malay narrative similarly pointed to the ‘Madurese character’ as aggressive and disrespectful, stereotyping them as thieves, and stressing their migrant origins. The Madurese narrative portrayed the Madurese as helpless victims of ‘primitive barbarity’ who had been forsaken by the Indonesian government and security forces.

Why was the Sambas conflict seen as ethnic despite the fact that the actors were Catholic and animist Dayaks, Muslim Malays, and Muslim Madurese? Moreover, why did the Malays as Muslims fight alongside the non-Muslim Dayaks against their fellow Muslim Madurese?

There are five interconnected explanations: First, the Sambas conflict must be viewed not as a stand-alone conflict but as an episode of the broader anti-Madurese violence in West Kalimantan since the beginning of the New Order. This conflict had started as one over land and land was at the heart of at least 11 outbreaks of anti-Madurese violence between 1967 and 1997 (*DR*, 29 March – 3 April 1999). However, it was also seen as a Madurese assault on the rural Dayak way of life and everything that defined ‘being Dayak’. It thus was cast not simply as an indigenous-migrant or a land conflict but as an ethnic struggle. Second, the broader Madurese-Dayak conflict erupted at a time when the Indonesian national mood had swung against Islamism. The defeat of the Darul Islam (DI) rebellions, which had challenged the Indonesian state from 1948 to 1962, as well as the relegation to the political periphery of Muslim groups involved in the violence of 1965-66, effectively closed the door to a narrative of ‘religious violence’. Religion, in general, and Islam, in particular, were portrayed as a force in retreat by Jakarta while ‘secular’ nationalism and developmentalism were hailed. This made it ‘un-strategic’ for the Madurese to cast the conflict in Muslim-Christian terms and allowed the Dayak to shape the conflict narrative as an ethnic one. Third, moving on specifically to Sambas, the initial violence was between two Muslim groups. Constructing a narrative around ‘*Idul Fitri berdarah*’ was thus difficult despite the fact that the violence, like that in Ambon, erupted on *Idul Fitri*. What set the Malays and Madurese apart was ethnicity as well as the latter’s clear status as migrants – not religion. Fourth, the Malays felt closer to the Dayak than the Madurese as they had a shared, albeit separate, history in West Kalimantan but also cultural and family links through Dayak conversions to Islam and inter-marriage. And finally, fifth, Muslim Malays sided with non-Muslim Dayaks against Muslim Madurese because they not only felt economically threatened in the cities with the Madurese moving into urban areas in large numbers, but they also wanted to strengthen their position in local politics vis-à-vis the Dayaks and the only way to do this was through asserting



indigeneity as Davidson has argued (Davidson 2008). That then explains the ‘Dayak-like’ headhunting and the thoroughly un-Islamic drinking of blood and consumption of human flesh despite the admonishment by the *ulama*.<sup>31</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The Ambon, Poso and Sambas conflicts erupted during Indonesia’s transition from authoritarianism to democracy. They were linked to the struggle for political power and control over resources in the context of decentralisation. All three conflicts shared similar causes resulting from the in-migration of other ethnic groups and the disrespect of local *adat* by migrants coupled with social, economic, and political competition between locals and migrants. In all three cases violence by indigenous actors specifically targeted migrants in order to defend their local resources, particularly land, from encroachment by migrants and the Indonesian state. Thus, there is little to suggest that the Sambas conflict was somehow inherently more ethnic than the other two. Indeed, the ethnic narratives advanced by the non-Muslims in all three conflicts were broadly similar in their emphasis on the indigenous experience of physical, social, cultural, and political displacement by migrants from other ethnic backgrounds. Yet, participant and observer narratives on the Ambon and Poso conflicts were largely framed in religious terms while those on the Sambas conflict cast the violence as ethnic.

It has been argued here that at a broader level, the religious narrative dominated in the Ambon and Poso conflicts because it reflected the religious tensions nationally resulting from the resurgence of Islam in Indonesia since the 1990s while the ethnic narrative dominated in the Sambas conflict because there was an extant historical narrative, which was ethnic as it predated this resurgence.

The ethnic narrative was retained in Sambas because the first phase of the violence pitted Muslims of different ethnicity against each other which precluded a religious narrative. The entry of the non-Muslim Dayaks into the conflict in the second phase did not result in a narrative shift because the political, economic and social interests of the Malays lay in emphasizing shared indigeneity with the Dayaks rather than shared religion with the Madurese. Moreover, the fact that the conflict overall was quite brief, when compared with the Ambon and Poso conflicts, limited the scope for an ‘evolving’ narrative. And finally, the episodic nature of the broader anti-Madurese violence in West Kalimantan not only reinforced the existing narrative but self-validated it.

In comparison, the Ambon and Poso conflicts were of recent nature, following several decades of peaceful co-existence between local Christians and Muslims. They erupted at a time of Islamic resurgence leading local Muslims to almost automatically adopt a religious narrative as it reflected their core identity at the time and resonated with broader Muslim grievances resulting from the first two decades of the New Order. Local Christians advanced an ethnic or mixed narrative which then shifted to a religious narrative as the conflicts progressed over years. This shift reflected a change in the conflict trajectory with the arrival of the *mujahedin* and particularly the arrival of Laskar Jihad, which resulted in the Christians seeing themselves as victims of religious aggression but also in a strategic reframing of the narrative in order to appeal to the international community.

More generally, the comparison of these three conflicts has shown the impact and importance of national and even global dynamics on the shaping of local conflict narratives as well as why some narratives have historical durability. It has also illustrated that narratives, particularly in protracted, on-going conflicts, are often reframed to reflect developments on the ground or strategic needs, resulting in the emergence of a particular narrative even when a different one was equally valid. And finally, it has been demonstrated that the competing interests of the actors result in a contest of narrative framing. It is this area which has considerable scope for further research by delving more deeply into the question of which actors get to frame or reframe the narrative, which ones are excluded from the process, and why.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Interview with Jacky Manuputty, Ambon, April 1, 2005.
  - <sup>2</sup> Interview with Mgr A Agus, Apostolic Administrator (Sintang), Pontianak, West Kalimantan, September 3, 1999.
  - <sup>3</sup> Interview with Father Jeremias, Menyalin, West Kalimantan, September 5, 1999.
  - <sup>4</sup> Interview with Father Petrus, Pontianak, West Kalimantan, September 4, 1999.
  - <sup>5</sup> Interview with Jusuf Kalla, Coordinating Minister for People's Welfare, Jakarta, April 11, 2003.
  - <sup>6</sup> Interview with Des Alwi, Jakarta, June 18, 2001.
  - <sup>7</sup> Interview with Father Petrus, Pontianak, West Kalimantan, September 4, 1999.
  - <sup>8</sup> Interview with Father Sekundus, Pontianak, West Kalimantan, September 3, 1999.
  - <sup>9</sup> Interview with Stepanus Djuweng, Institute of Dayakology, West Pontianak, Kalimantan, September 6, 1999.
  - <sup>10</sup> Interview with Lt. Gen (ret.) Z.A. Maulani, former head of BAKIN, Tangerang, April 24, 2001.
  - <sup>11</sup> Interview with Prof Dr YC Thambun Anyang, SH, Pontianak, West Kalimantan, September 4, 1999.
  - <sup>12</sup> Interview with Jacky Manuputty, Ambon, April 1, 2005.
  - <sup>13</sup> Interview with Albert Tumimor, district attorney, Tentena, January 13, 2003.
  - <sup>14</sup> Interview with Jacky Manuputty, Ambon, April 1, 2005.
  - <sup>15</sup> Interview with Jacky Manuputty, Ambon, July 31, 2012.
  - <sup>16</sup> Interview with Reverend Nelly, Silancar village, January 11, 2003.
  - <sup>17</sup> Interview with Reverend Tobundo, Synod Head, Tentena, January 12, 2003.
  - <sup>18</sup> Interview with Reverend Irianto Konkoli, Palu, January 8, 2003.
  - <sup>19</sup> Interview with Sanussi M Asri, SH, Pontianak, West Kalimantan, September 6, 1999.
  - <sup>20</sup> Interview with Father Jeremias, Menyalin, West Kalimantan, September 5, 1999.
  - <sup>21</sup> Interview with John Bamba, Institute of Dayakology, Pontianak, West Kalimantan, September 6, 1999.
  - <sup>22</sup> Interview with Prof Dr YC Thambun Anyang, SH, Pontianak, West Kalimantan, September 4, 1999.
  - <sup>23</sup> Interview with Father Sekundus, Pontianak, West Kalimantan, September 3, 1999.
  - <sup>24</sup> Interview with Albert Bisalemba, Lucas und Rasip Ley, Kelompok Merah (Red Forces Christian vigilante group), Tentena, January 13, 2003.
  - <sup>25</sup> Interview with Reverend Tarau, Partai Kristen, DPRD, Palu, January 8, 2003.
  - <sup>26</sup> Interview with Jacky Manuputty, Ambon, April 1, 2005.
  - <sup>27</sup> Interview with Emang Nikijuluw, Christian grassroots (vigilante) leader, Ambon, February 22, 2011.
  - <sup>28</sup> Interview with Ali Fauzi, Ambon, December 20, 2001.
  - <sup>29</sup> Interview with Hj Adnan Arsal, Poso, January 11, 2003.
  - <sup>30</sup> Interview with Ali Fauzi, Ambon, December 20, 2001.
  - <sup>31</sup> Interview with Sanussi M Asri, SH, Pontianak, West Kalimantan, September 6, 1999.