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The Devil is in the Details: representations of conflict in North Maluku, eastern Indonesia

In mid-August 1999 violence broke out on the eastern Indonesian island of Halmahera over the creation of new administrative boundaries. What started as a dispute over redistricting quickly took on religious overtones and left several thousand dead and over 220,000 people displaced over the course of the next 10 months. This conflict was not unique in turn of the century Indonesia; similar conflicts had erupted in Central Sulawesi (Aragon 2001), West Kalimantan (Davidson 2003), Maluku (Klinken 2001) and elsewhere. These outbreaks of communal violence have become a favorite topic of academics interested in Indonesia (cf. Wemmer and Wimhöfer 2001; Colombijn and Linbald 2002; Bertrand 2004; Coppel 2004; Klinken 2007; Sidel 2007). Much of this academic discussion concerns the causes of the violence and scholars have put forth numerous theoretical explanations. They argue the relative merits of instrumentalist approaches that highlight the role of elites or culturalist approaches that attempt to place the violence within the larger cultural and historical context of a particular society (cf. Bubandt 2000; Aragon 2001; Davidson 2003). For example, they have debated the importance of a rising middle class (Klinken 2005) as opposed to the millenarian tendencies of North Moluccans (Bubandt 2000) as mitigating causes for the violence in North Maluku. Others have put forth conspiracy theories that attempt to explain the various outbreaks of violence as efforts by the former President Suharto or his cronies to hold onto power or to discredit the reform movement (cf. Aditjondro 2001).

One shortcoming of these various approaches, particularly instrumentalist ones, is that they fail to grasp how the violence was understood and experienced on the ground. What caused people to take up arms against their neighbours? What made certain interpretations of the violence plausible to local people? In order to understand these events, academics must pay attention to the agency of the violence, to look at how it was experienced by local people and how these lived experiences in turn affected the eventual course of the violence (Mamdani 2001: 7-8). Simply explaining the violence as a conflict over resources, or the result of instigations from the political elite, is too simple. It fails to account for how local people and local communities were caught up in events that overturned the established social order in North Maluku and elsewhere. These metanarratives often overlook the details of particular events and how these events were experienced and understood by perpetrators and victims and how these understandings changed over time.

Anthropologists who study communal conflict have tried to move beyond this purely instrumentalist approach to understanding violence and to include non-political aspects of violence in their examinations of communal conflict. Some of these anthropological approaches have examined the symbolic and ritual dimensions of violence (Feldman 1991; Tambiah 1996; Zulaika 1988). Some have tried to combine larger cultural models with microlevel psychological factors to understand large-scale violence (cf. Hinton 1998). Others have attempted to understand outbreaks of communal violence through the analysis of how people talk about it. For example, Mironko's (2004) work on the genocide in Rwanda provides a discourse analysis of how Hutu participants in the genocide talk about their motivations for taking part. From this nuanced examination of ways of speaking, Mironko is able to identify the cultural perceptions and ideologies embedded in these accounts and find insights about popular participation in the Rwandan violence. Although not undertaking a discourse analysis as Mironko has done, in this paper I seek to examine how North Moluccans discuss the violence and how the details of these ways of speaking affected people's motivations for taking part.

One way to better understand the role of those directly involved is to examine how they talk about the violence amongst themselves or with others. How do people who took part in the fighting, either as victims or as perpetrators, describe the violence? Although a number of scholars have examined how the media (cf. Spyer 2001, 2002, 2003; Aragon 2005; Fox 2005) or internet users (cf. Hill and Sen 2002; Bräuchler 2003, 2004) discuss conflict in Indonesia, very few have actually explored in detail how participants talk about, or take part in, violence (see Timmer 2002 for a rare exception). Although one could argue that this omission stems from a lack of access to conflict regions, there were at various points hundreds of thousands of displaced people throughout in Indonesia who had fled conflict zones and could have been interviewed or surveyed in relative safety. Scholars, however, appear to be averse to investigating communal violence at this level of detail, opting rather for analysis from afar or a reliance on bland metanarratives to understand outbreaks of communal violence. In what follows I contrast the reluctance of scholars to discuss the details of violent conflict with how victims and perpetrators discuss these acts. I argue that scholars' avoidance of detail out of a concern for the sensitivity of others (more often their own colleagues than the people under discussion) and their focus on chronologies and causal models of conflict limit the explanatory power of their arguments (cf. Das 1984; Avruch 2001).[1] In contrast, victims and participants are quite aware of the explanatory and persuasive power inherent in detailed accounts of violence and deploy these descriptions to achieve various goals.

A brief review of the conflict in North Maluku

The Southeast Asian nation of Indonesia is no stranger to violence. President Suharto, who ruled the archipelago from 1967 until 1998, came to power in an anti-communist bloodbath that claimed over half a million lives (Cribb 1990). Once in power he was never reluctant to use violence to achieve his goals whether putting down separatists or enforcing government forestry policy. Some would argue that it was his willingness to use violence and the strength of his military and police that enabled him to hold together such a diverse nation: home to five of the world's major religions, over 300 hundred ethnic groups, speaking just as many languages, spread across 13,000 islands. However, the Asian financial crisis of 1997, the subsequent devaluation of the Indonesian Rupiah, and the increasing evidence of the first families' corruption, loosened Suharto's grip on power and eventually forced him to resign (cf. Dijk 2000).

With Suharto's fall from power (and in some cases before that) violence broke out in various places across the archipelago, including anti-Chinese riots in several major cities, renewed calls for separatism in Aceh and West Papua, and outbreaks of communal violence in Indonesian Borneo (Kalimantan) and Central Sulawesi (see map p.5). One of the longest running conflicts began in the Moluccan capital of Ambon in January 1999. A dispute between a bus driver and a passenger quickly escalated into large-scale communal violence pitting Christians

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[1] An increasing number of authors have chosen to forefront violence in their work, particularly those who work in conflict zones throughout the world (cf. Sluka 1989; Feldman 1991; Hutchinson 1996; Nordstrom 1997; Taylor 1999).

Indonesia

against Muslims in Ambon and on surrounding islands.[2] A province that had once been held up as an example of religious tolerance was now associated with communal violence and religious cleansing. Newspaper journalists started using the name of the town as a verb meaning "to erupt in collective violence (*diambonkan*)" (cf. *Bali Post* 2000).

As the fighting raged in Ambon and central Maluku, the northern parts of the province, what would soon become the separate province of North Maluku, remained peaceful (See Map 2).[3] However, in mid-August 1999 violence erupted on the island of Halmahera in the sub-district of Kao between Makian migrants and indigenous people. The dispute centered on a local redistricting initiative that would have given the Makian migrants their own sub-district carved out of the Kao sub-district. The new sub-district would consist of all the Makian villages that were established in 1975 when the Indonesian government moved the Makian from their homes on Makian Island to empty land in Kao to protect them from a predicted volcanic eruption. As is often the case in Indonesian resettlement schemes, this empty land actually belonged to indigenous groups in the area

(Duncan 2002). In this instance, most of the land was claimed by the indigenous Pagu people who were less then pleased with its annexation by newcomers. Over the next 25 years relations between the Makian and their new neighbors were rarely more than cordial. The indigenous people remained upset over the loss of their land and were offended by what they perceived as the privileged treatment given to the Makian by the local government. The people of Kao also accused them of being culturally insensitive and religiously intolerant. In response, the Makian argued that the indigenous people were lazy and resented the Makian for their economic and political successes.

The conflict in 1999 revolved around the inclusion of several indigenous Pagu villages in the proposed new sub-district. The Pagu people were not pleased with this decision. They had no desire to be ruled by the Makian or to be separated from their indigenous brethren with

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[2] For discussions of the violence in Ambon see Klinken 2001; Bertrand 2004:114-134; Spyer 2001.

[3] This account is an extremely abbreviated one due to the limitations of space. For a longer version see Duncan 2005a. For other viewpoints see Nanere 2000 and Ahmad and Oesman 2000.

whom they have traditional ties. The indigenous people of Kao have a strong sense of unity based in their *adat* belief that the four "tribes" of Kao (the Pagu, Modole, Tobelo Boeng and Kao Islam) can not be divided. The inclusion of the four Pagu villages in a new Makian sub-district was seen as an affront to this historical unity. Despite protests from the indigenous population, the government went ahead with the re-districting. Fighting eventually broke out on August 18, the same day that the new sub-district was to be formalized. In the ensuing violence the Makian burnt down two Pagu villages. Security forces quickly intervened to stop the violence, but the problem remained unresolved. The Makian remained determined to have their new sub-district and the Kao remained as equally determined to stop it. Disturbances broke out again in October, this time resulting in the total defeat of the Makian by the indigenous population. Approximately 15,000 Makian internally displaced persons (IDPs) fled to Ternate and Tidore.

The violence then spread to the islands of Tidore and Ternate with the appearance of a contentious letter calling for Christians to cleanse the region of Muslims. This letter infuriated parts of the Muslim community and the ensuing riots forced around 13,000 people, mainly Christians, to flee from Tidore and Ternate to North Sulawesi and Halmahera. These riots were followed by "Muslim" attacks on the central and southern regions of Halmahera that forced thousands of Christians to flee to North Sulawesi and northern Halmahera. At the end of 1999, after months of tension, fighting broke out in the town of Tobelo resulting in the deaths of several hundred Muslims and the complete destruction of their homes and mosques. Provocative media accounts of events in Tobelo played a role in the creation of the Laskar Jihad, a group of self-proclaimed Muslim "Holy Warriors" who vowed to help their religious brethren in eastern Indonesia. In North Maluku, a small number of these Laskar Jihad troops joined with local Muslim militias and attacked

and destroyed a number of Christian villages before the major hostilities came to a halt in June 2000. By the time the violence had stopped, few areas were unaffected and over 220,000 people (almost one quarter of the population) had been displaced from their homes.

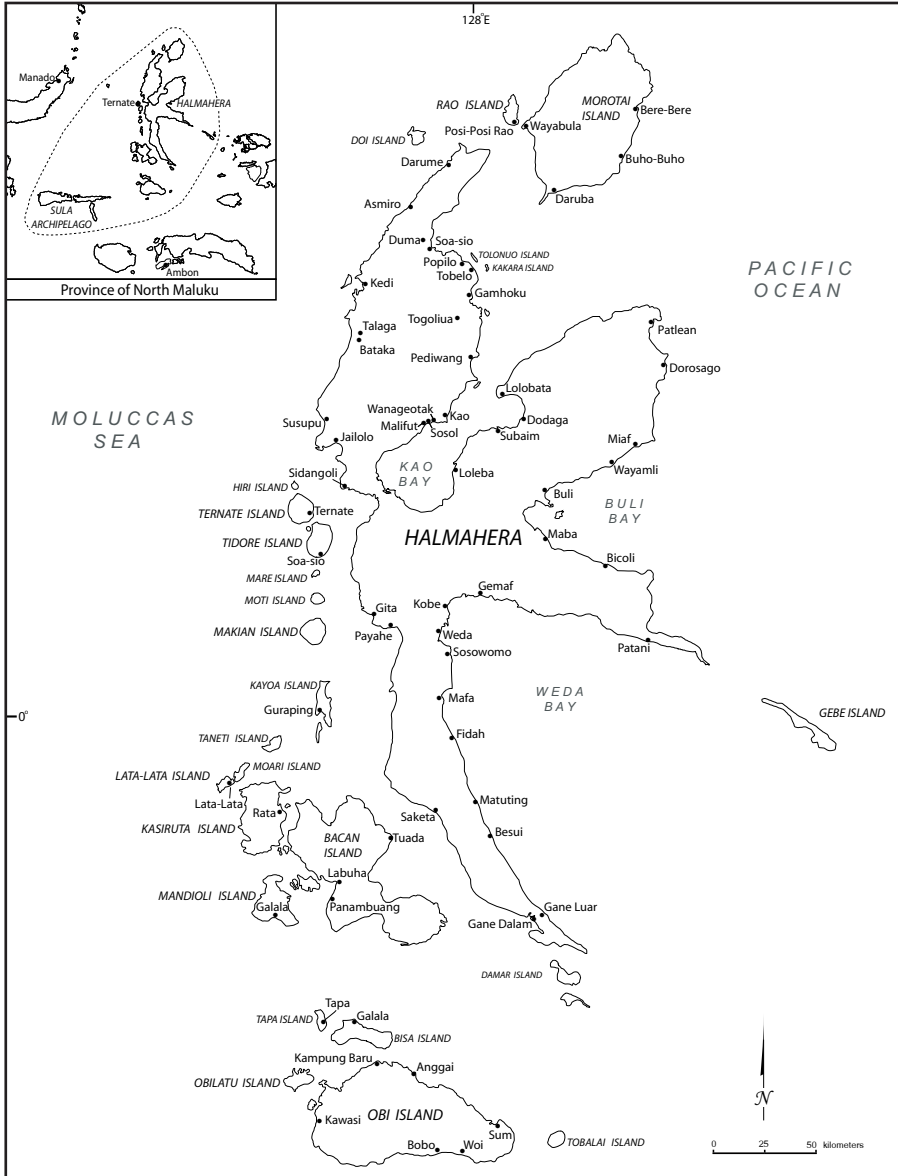## Depicting violence: how important are the details?

> Depicting violence may upset or offend people: it should, I think. Violence, in fact, is revolting. An accurate depiction must be that, too. If not, it depersonalizes both the perpetrators and, especially, the victims of violence (Dentan 2000).

The brief account presented above conveys what happened in North Maluku as a series of events and dates along a timeline. Chronologies such as these provide a general picture, but they do they not convey the horror, the suffering, or in some cases the exhilaration of the violence. Are portraying these aspects of conflict important? Academics usually avoid the violence itself, the bloodshed, death and destruction; they focus on the causes or the after-effects. The violence that actually occurred is a disturbing topic that brings up disconcerting images, ones that we set apart, or omit from our discussions. Nordstrom (1997: 17) notes this aversion among scholars to discussing these details: "There is a powerful yet often unstated cultural perception that hearing about violence is, in some curious existential inversion, worse than enduring it". On the other end of the spectrum Daniels (1996: 4) notes: "When faced with the risk of an account's being fattened up into prurience, flattening it down into theory presents itself as the easy alternative to the scholar." By "flattening out" the violence, by removing its "brutal immediacy", it becomes far more amenable to discussion or to theorizing (Daniels 1996: 4). Das (1984: 5) refers to this avoidance of detail as "unconscious censorship". Daniels (1996: 4) points out that anthropologists are faced with a quandary: they can present the details and be accused of prurience or flatten out accounts of violence to the point where they

are theoretically palatable. The latter approach, however, removes the "brutal immediacy" that is vital to understanding violence in the first place. Anthropological discussions of the violence in Indonesia have tended to flatten out descriptions of violence in an effort to theorize causal explanations. In many cases the violence is omitted altogether and only competing theories are discussed (cf. Klinken 2005).

Halmahera and surrounding islands

Province of North Maluku

Manado
Ternate HALMAHERA
SULA ARCHIPELAGO
Ambon

128°E
RAO ISLAND
MOROTAI ISLAND Bere-Bere
DOI ISLAND Posi-Posi Rao Wayabula
Darume Buho-Buho
Asmiro Daruba
Duma Soa-sio
Popilo TOLONUO ISLAND
Tobelo KAKARA ISLAND
Kedi Gamhoku
Talaga Togoliua
Bataka Pediwang
Wanageotak Patlean
Susupu Malifut Kao Dorosago
Jailolo Sosol Dodaga
Sidangoli Subaim Miaf
HIRI ISLAND Loleba Wayamli
TERNATE ISLAND Ternate Buli
TIDORE ISLAND KAO BAY BULI BAY
Soa-sio Maba
MARE ISLAND Bicoli
MOTI ISLAND Gemaf
MAKIAN ISLAND Gita Kobe
Payahe Weda
Sosowomo Patani
KAYOA ISLAND Mafa WEDA BAY
Guraping GEBE ISLAND
TANETI ISLAND Fidah
LATA-LATA ISLAND MOARI ISLAND
Lata-Lata Rata Matuting
KASIRUTA ISLAND Saketa
Tuada Besui
BACAN ISLAND
Labuha
MANDIOLI ISLAND Galala Panambuang Gane Luar
Gane Dalam
DAMAR ISLAND
Tapa
TAPA ISLAND Galala
BISA ISLAND
Kampung Baru Anggai
OBILATU ISLAND
Kawasi OBI ISLAND Sum
Bobo Woi TOBALAI ISLAND

MOLUCCAS SEA

PACIFIC OCEAN

HALMAHERA

N

0   25   50 kilometers

Lolobata

These concerns with toning down violence have not only affected the content of scholarly writings about conflict in Indonesia, but have also affected the tone of some journalistic accounts. In her work on the role of the media in the Moluccan conflict Patricia Spyer (2003) notes that some journalists adopted the tactic of "deliberate obfuscation" in their reporting. They avoided mentioning factors they though might lead to more violence, such as the religion of the perpetrators or victims, how people were killed, or the type of religious building that was destroyed. They hoped that omitting such details would prevent their news stories from being used as ammunition by those involved in the conflict. One only has to look at the effect of the incendiary media accounts published about the violence in Tobelo to see the impact that provocative journalism can have on conflict situations (cf. *Republika* 2000). These media accounts led to a national outcry, large-scale protests, and the subsequent intensification of violence in various parts of eastern Indonesia. Although these journalists' concerns were well-founded, Spyer (2003) argues that such toned-down accounts can cause people who are seeking information to turn to more subjective and usually more provocative media in search of compelling news.

Scholars seem to have this predilection for "deliberate obfuscation" as well, but for different reasons.[4] Academics are not journalists, and we work (for better or for worse) under different constraints and for different audiences. Scholars often argue that we should set aside the graphic descriptions in order to avoid writing "a pornography of violence".[5] But are we missing something by leaving out these descriptions? Obfuscation can prove detrimental to the explanatory power of narratives of violence. By leaving out the details we restrict our ability to convey what happened both in a descriptive sense, as well as conveying what took place as our informants experienced it. In the case of North Maluku, I argue that these disturbing details, the ones so often set aside as

inappropriate for discussion, are vital to understanding why the violence took the course that it did. These details often provided the inspiration and justification for further attacks. The actual stories concerning the deaths and destruction wrought by the opposing side, the way they were phrased, whether about the killing of children, the disfigurement of individuals, or the destruction of religious buildings, are crucial to understanding what happened. People shaped their notions of victimization and suffering through these stories and detailed descriptions. It is these details that fuel the "social production of hate" (Das 1998) that, in turn, feeds people's decisions to engage in violence.

Payahe and Tobelo: the importance of detail

There are numerous examples in North Maluku where the gruesome particularities of certain incidents are crucial to understanding the course of the violence and people's willingness to take part. The violence that took place in the village of Payahe in the sub-district of Oba in central Halmahera provides one example (see map p.7).[6] As noted above, after the violence had subsided on the islands of Ternate and Tidore it spread to central Halmahera. Lying directly across the strait from Ternate and Tidore the small Christian population in the sub-district of Oba presented an easy target for "Muslim" (mainly Makian) forces. Over the course of November 1999 these forces destroyed almost every Christian community. Virtually all Christians, as well as some Muslims, fled the region, including the Christian community from the village of Payahe. As the displaced from Payahe trickled into Tobelo in late November and early December they brought with them horrific stories that they shared with their new hosts. In addition to the

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[4] See Nordstrom (1997: 1-32) for an in-depth discussion of this matter.

[5] See Rodgers (2001: 18) for a good discussion of the use of the term "pornography" to describe descriptions of violence.

[6] Throughout this paper I refer to sub-district boundaries as they were established prior to their realignment in 2002.

standard tales of betrayal, murder and flight through the forested interior, they told a particular story about the murder of young children that became a staple in Christian accounts of the violence. I heard the story numerous times over the course of 18 months of research, for example:

> When they [the Muslims] attacked us [in Payahe], we were not ready. We had no weapons. A few days before they invaded some people had threatened to attack us, but the village head and the police told us we did not need to worry. Some of us were scared, but they said they would protect us. They lied. . . When they [the Muslims] attacked us they had lots of weapons, guns and bombs. But all we had were machetes and bows and arrows. We could not fight them off so we had to run into the forest. Not everyone got away. They [the Muslims] caught some young children and killed them. For no reason. They tied the wrists of the small children and put them in rice sacks. They took them out into the ocean and tossed them in the ocean. When they ran out of fuel they beat the children to death with wood. The same way people kill a dog. (An IDP woman from Payahe recorded in Tobelo).

Although a disturbing story, these images of violence against children are integral to understanding the ensuing course of events in Tobelo later that year. This story about the murder of children, whether based in reality or on rumour and exaggeration, outraged Christians in Tobelo and elsewhere. People cited these reputed atrocities in Payahe as one of the justifications for the intensity of subsequent violence in Tobelo that left hundreds of Muslims, including women and children, dead.

Christians throughout Halmahera frequently cited the example of Payahe when discussing the violence in Tobelo. The riots in Ternate and Tidore had been a tragedy, but it was more

about the destruction of property and a violation of trust than a loss of life. That had changed in Payahe. For example, when asked about the intensity of the fighting in Tobelo one displaced Christian in Manado noted: "We saw what they [the Muslims] did in Ternate and Tidore. Then we heard about Payahe where they killed those children. . . We realized that if we did not kill them, they would kill us. That is why so many Muslims were killed in Tobelo, people were angry about Payahe. They wanted revenge". Muslims from Tobelo corroborate the effect that these stories had on the atmosphere in Tobelo. Many noted how tensions increased after the Payahe IDPs began arriving. According to some Muslims sources, it was at this point that many Christians started arming themselves.

Whether the stories from Payahe are true or not is largely irrelevant. In 2002, the story remained an accepted fact among the Christian population at large. Nearly three years after the violence, one could still see where people had spray-painted "Payahe" on the walls of burnt out mosques and destroyed Muslim homes in the Tobelo region. It was the particular details of the Payahe violence that gave the story its power. If the story had been about some children killed in the course of fighting it would have been tragic, but it would have been one tragedy among many and would not have attained the defining role that it did. Ironically, the violence committed against Muslims in Tobelo, in part a reaction to the violence in Payahe, provided Muslims with the same sort of pivotal incident that rallied others to their cause and justified future actions.

The second example concerns the violence in the sub-district of Tobelo in northern Halmahera in late 1999 that resulted in the death of several hundred Muslims. When the fighting reached the village of Popilo to the north of Tobelo town, the outnumbered Muslims retreated to one of the village mosques either for protection (the Muslim claim) or to rally their forces (the Christian claim). The Christians pressed the attack and destroyed the mosque and killed a

large number of people taking refuge inside it. Fighting also took place to the south of Tobelo town as Christians and Muslims fought in the Muslim village of Togoliua leading to the complete destruction of that village and the death of a large number of its inhabitants. The violence that took place in Tobelo was, as elsewhere, horrific. However, the main difference this time was the large number of people killed (estimates range between 771 and 3000 people), including a large number of women and children. Eyewitness accounts from survivors quickly spread throughout the Muslim community. For example, one survivor, a woman from the Muslim village of Togoliua, recounted her story:

> When they [the Christians] invaded there were too many people so we fled to the mosque. When we got to the mosque they started knocking in the mosque windows and [they] were able to get into the mosque and starting hacking at people. I was cut, but I did not see it because I was under people. Those that were still alive were hacked at again. . . Many women were killed in the mosque . . . from bombs, from being chopped up.

The details of this violence, in particular the video images of the aftermath made available on video compact discs (VCDs) (the charred corpses, dead children, mass graves, etc.) enraged North Moluccan Muslims and Muslims throughout Indonesia. This anger justified violence elsewhere and played a role in the creation of the Laskar Jihad whose intervention in Maluku, North Maluku, and Central Sulawesi prolonged all of these conflicts (cf. International Crisis Group 2004).

The stories of the violence in Payahe and in Tobelo told by survivors and others caught people's imagination and (for some) confirmed their worst fears. The details surrounding the death of children in Payahe and the large-scale killings in Tobelo were crucial to people's

interpretation of these events and the role they played in justifying actions or inactions. By omitting the particular details specific to these two events, we remove their explanatory power.

How North Moluccans talk about violence

Although scholars often avoid discussing the particular details of violence, many of the people I interviewed in North Maluku and North Sulawesi did not share these reservations. Whereas others talk of silence in the face of violence (Ettema 1994), many IDPs and others in North Maluku and North Sulawesi discussed the violence in all its detail on a regular basis. Veena Das (1984: 5), discussing violence in South Asia, has noted that the survivors of communal violence that she worked with "wanted their suffering to become known as if the reality of it could only be reclaimed after it had become part of a public discourse". I found a similar situation in Halmahera and North Sulawesi where many were eager, some insistent, to have their stories heard and recorded.

In many cases displaced people and others involved in the conflict wanted their experiences to be included in my research to ensure that I got the "whole story". They wanted their voices to be heard as a corrective to the "facts" put out by a government they mistrusted or biased media outlets. They often stated their belief that if the world knew the explicit details of what was happening in North Maluku it would come to their rescue. People would pass on stories they thought I needed to hear, or would insist I go and hear them myself. And for them, the more gruesome the tale, the better. For example, when the wife of a minister who had been killed during the conflict was visiting Manado, a number of IDPs contacted me and insisted I talk to her. As one man put it: "You really need to talk to her for your research. They wrapped her husband up in a mattress and burned him alive. This is the important kind of information that you need". In another example a man from the island of Doi sought me out in Tobelo because

he had heard that I was interviewing people about the violence: "I heard Mr Chris was recording people's stories from the conflict. They told me I could find you here. I came to explain to you what happened on Doi Island. So you can record it." At times it seemed as if people thought that the intensity of their own suffering would enhance their credibility as informants. Robben (1995: 83) notes one problem inherent in this type of fieldwork interaction when he warns of the "dangers of seduction" that ethnographers face when gathering accounts of violence from both victims and perpetrators. People involved in communal conflict have a great stake in ensuring that the anthropologist adopts their point of view and hopefully reiterates it in her publications. Thus, informants must persuade (or "seduce" to use Robben's phrase) the anthropologist into accepting their accounts of the violence as the "correct" ones that supersede those recorded from the other side.

Talking about the violence in this way served several purposes for IDPs. It highlighted the violence in their relations with the rest of the world and helped to maintain the reality of the conflict even after the conflict had ceased. The continuing presence of the violence justified their enduring sense of suffering. These narratives allowed them to continually reiterate their claims to being victims, which needed to be made for several reasons. On the most basic level, it justified their demands for aid from the government and NGOs. On another level, their suffering needed to be reified because the violence and pain they had experienced now compromised an integral part of how they defined themselves, and were defined by others. For example, individuals were often directly identified by the particular tragedy they had endured. People were introduced by name and number of kin lost: "This is Mr. X, he lost his wife and both children in the sinking of the Cahaya Bahari". Another woman was introduced to me in Togoliua as "This is Mrs X, she lost 12 family members in the massacre at

the mosque". Just as their religion had come to play a larger role in their cultural identity due to the nature of the conflict, so too did their sense of victimhood.

A key aspect of social introductions among IDPs in North Sulawesi and North Maluku was a discussion of a person's experiences during the violence, to convey how they and their family had suffered. This information allowed others to establish exactly who they were talking to, as well as the nature of what they could discuss. For example, when I brought along one research assistant to help in interviews, who was also an IDP, he invariably felt it necessary to start the discussion with a brief review of his own experiences and the fate of the various branches of his family. His story, one version that I recorded, usually ran as follows:

> I am an IDP [pengungsi] from Ternate. I was in Ternate when the Muslims rioted and tried to kill all of us. It took us totally by surprise. There was nothing we could do. . . I walked out of my house and there were people with white headbands everywhere with machetes and they wanted to kill us all. . . My family escaped but we lost everything. Everything. I spent over 20 years building a house, buying nice things for my family. We were not poor. We had a television, a stereo, a refrigerator, a satellite dish, they took it all. Now I have nothing. . . My [extended] family suffered a lot during the violence. We [my immediate family] lost everything in Ternate and had to flee to Manado. One of my older brothers was killed by the white troops in Ternate. We never found his body, but they say his head was chopped off. My sister fled Ternate with her family to Morotai, and then fled to Tobelo when the Muslims attacked Morotai. I lost my younger brother on the Cahaya Bahari [a ship that sank]. My other older brother [a soldier in the army] was thrown in jail in Morotai because they thought he would protect the Christians and fight the Muslims. My sister's son lost

everything in Weda when the *jihad* attacked. So my family has truly known suffering.

Only once he had established his own list of woes, could we move on to the interview. Often when people came to an IDP camp for the first time looking for relatives or friends, they would sit down near the entrance and introduce themselves to the people (often men) congregated there. The introduction often led to a brief discussion of their experiences during the conflict, where they had fled, which family members had perished, how they had died, etc. They were essentially providing a resume of their suffering. Only after these facts had been established would they move on.

This suffering was not only important in mediating relations between IDPs, but it also played a role in defining them to others, in particular to host communities. Once the conflict had ended, the IDPs were largely defined by their displacement. This fact was not lost on them. They realized that as soon as they ceased to be seen in this way, and were no longer seen as victims of social conflict, their welcome in host communities would grow cold.[7] This was exemplified by the experiences of Muslim IDPs in Ternate. This particular group of IDPs had developed a reputation for being arrogant and violent in the eyes of local community members. Many people in Ternate were uncomfortable with their continuing presence and saw them as a hindrance to the full recovery of the city. Furthermore, the population of IDPs was almost as large as the town population itself, thus many locals felt intimidated by their presence. The IDPs had demonstrated a number of times when they felt their aid has been misappropriated and at times these demonstrations had turned violent. With fading support from the host community, the Ternate city government was able to return several thousand of these IDPs back to Tobelo in late 2002, some against their will (Duncan 2005b).

The Christian IDPs from North Maluku were well aware of the various uses to which their own stories of violence and suffering (or those of others) could be put, and what it could gain them in terms of aid, jobs, or sympathy, particularly from Western church-based organizations. Many of these Westerners had their own ideas of who had suffered the most and needed their help. They appeared to have an implicit hierarchy upon which they based their aid distribution. Although giving aid to anyone truly in need, these largely church based organizations, seemed to focus on survivors from two particular places: the village of Duma in the sub-district of Galela and the village of Lata-lata near Bacan. The village of Duma was of particular significance for two main reasons. First, on June 19, 2000 attacking Muslim forces overwhelmed Duma and killed over 150 men, women and children. A number of the survivors then boarded the *Cahaya Bahari*, an overcrowded passenger ship that left Tobelo bound for Manado, but disappeared at sea. Only 10 of the more than 550 passengers on aboard were ever found. Second, Duma was the location of the first Protestant church in North Maluku. Dutch missionaries had acquired their first North Moluccan converts there in 1896 and the missionary who had overseen these initial conversions was buried in the village cemetery.[8] Church-based reports often mentioned this missionary history when discussing the violence at Duma (cf. Kerr 2001; Cry Indonesia 2002). The second group of displaced favored by church-based organizations came from the village of Lata-lata located on a small island off the coast of Bacan. Lata-lata was attacked on February 5, 2000 and quickly defeated. The approximately one thousand survivors were then forcibly converted to Islam,

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[7] For more on relations between IDPs and host communities see Duncan (2005b; 2005c).

[8] I would be remiss to not point out that linguists from the Summer Institute of Linguistics (also known as the Wycliffe Bible Institute) had lived in Duma for several years prior to the violence, a factor that increased its visibility in the West, as well as increasing its significance as a target (cf. Al Bunyan 2000).

a process that included supposedly circumcising every member of the community. This tale of forced conversions was a favourite in church-based accounts of the violence.

These organizations often placed accounts of violence from Duma or Lata-lata in their reports (cf. International Christian Concern 2001; Compass Direct 2002). These stories often included testimonials from survivors that provided graphic details of the violence (often accompanied by photographs):

> [Jane Doe] a 16-year-old girl is one of the young people who were wounded in the attack on Duma while trying to defend their church. With tears in her eyes, she recounted the events of that day. 'My legs were hit with bullets fired by the Jihad warriors as I was trying to roll fuel drums in the path of the advancing warriors in an attempt to form a barricade, but the bullets were piercing through the drums. I just didn't want them to take our church. I fell to the ground wounded and was helped by some of the young people. My father and older brother were killed. They burned my father alive and cut my brother to pieces with their machetes'. (International Christian Concern 2001: 4).

Some Indonesians accused these organizations of sensationalism a valid criticism since most of these reports were aimed primarily at fundraising. Many IDPs in North Sulawesi and elsewhere quickly learned how these organizations responded to survivor's accounts and some would adjust their stories accordingly, inserting the proper catchphrases to fit the perceptions of these Westerners and garner more aid.

During the conflict, both sides exploited these stories for their own ends, whether to raise funds or solicit recruits. Eyewitness accounts from survivors of the violence in Tobelo circulated in Muslim communities by word of mouth and in Indonesian magazines and on the Internet

often accompanied by graphic photos of corpses and mass graves (cf. *Hidayatullah* 2000; TIPKPU 2000). Muslim magazines in Indonesia, both radical and mainstream, ran dozens of stories covering the violence in detail. For example:

> 'Only by the power of Allah am I still alive', said Munir (22) surviving victim of the massacre at the Al-Muhajirin mosque, in Popilo, Tobelo (Maluku Utara). 'I saw people massacred in the mosque', he said again, with tears falling.
> When the village was invaded, Munir ran to the Al-Muhajirin mosque. A member of the red (Christian) troops then speared his chest from the upper left side though to the right. Blood spurted, and Munir began his death throes. It was not enough to spear [him]; they then twisted the spear so that it pierced him more. Munir's body stopped moving. Munir's body was shaken repeatedly to make sure he was dead. Once they thought he was dead, Munir was thrown onto a pile of corpses of people that had just been massacred in the Al-Muhajirin mosque. 'Most of those corpses were not whole, they were destroyed. I was buried under six layers of corpses. Other people around me were waiting for their predestined hour of death' (*Hidayatullah* 2000).

In addition to print media, a popular avenue for the distribution of these accounts, particularly among the Muslim community, was on video compact discs (VCDs) (Spyer 2002). A staple of these VCDs was graphic footage of the aftermath of the killings in Popilo. After the armed forces arrived in Popilo they buried the corpses from the large-scale killing in a mass grave, an action that was recorded on video. The images of bulldozers pushing dozens of bodies into a large grave appear in numerous VCDs about the conflict in Maluku and North Maluku and angered Muslims across the archipelago. Although people in North Maluku were aware of the strategic value of particular incidents of violence, they were also aware of how accounts

of the violence that they had committed themselves could affect their image and access to aid. They had to deal with the reality that both sides had inflicted suffering on others. The political elite (both Muslim and Christian) were well aware of the bad publicity that could result from these accounts of violence. In some cases they sought to silence the more graphic descriptions: photos were destroyed; topics were marked out as ones to be avoided; people were scolded for telling the "wrong stories" to foreigners. For example, the Christian elite in Tobelo often discouraged discussing the details of fighting that took place in Tobelo arguing that if Westerners heard the graphic details, it would affect their willingness to provide aid for Christians. They could not maintain total control of these discussions, however, as these events were favourite topics of discussion throughout the region. They might disappear at the appearance of a tape recorder, but once the tape recorder was gone they would be brought back on the table.

It is important to realize that these two types of stories – those of victims and those of perpetrators – are not as distinct as many outside observers would suggest. Oftentimes, stories about suffering are used to justify stories about acts of violence. As much as people respected victimhood in North Maluku, they also respected gallantry and ruthlessness in the face of the enemy. Telling stories about the violence, whether by victims or perpetrators, was a major aspect of social life in communities throughout Halmahera during 2001 and 2002. People would recount their roles in the violence, who they had killed, how they had killed them and what they had seen. Again, as when trying to establish victimhood, people appreciated the more gruesome stories. The exhilaration of hearing eyewitness accounts of the suffering of their enemies often brought shrieks of delight and laughter from the crowd. For example, I interviewed two men who took part in the fighting in Halmahera after they had been forced from their own homes:

> We were at [a particular battle] when it happened. . . We captured six men. [Our commander] tied them up and told us to bring them [back] for questioning. We were in charge of one prisoner. . . He asked to be spared and said he had been forced to take part in the fighting or be killed. We were not going to kill him, but then a man whose brother had been killed, came and shot him with an arrow from close range. His intestines were coming out of his body from the wound, so we figured he was going to die. So we killed him to put him out of his misery.

When asked to explain these acts of violence, the same sort that are decried as atrocities when committed by the other side, the justification usually consists of a reference to previous atrocities committed by the enemy elsewhere. After recording one particularly detailed account of a massacre from one of the perpetrators, I asked how he justified such actions, in particular the killing of women, children and the elderly. After a brief confused look, as he pondered the ridiculous nature of my question, his answer was: "They started killing us first. So we had to kill them".

Conclusion

As the above account demonstrates, close attention to the way in which participants in communal conflict discuss acts of violence can provide insight into how local communities and individuals were caught up in conflict. The details of these accounts, how they are presented and the audience for which they are presented, help explain how the violence was actualized and justified on ground during the conflict. The details of these acts of violence, enhanced with each re-telling, can explain the course that the violence took and its changing intensity. Oftentimes people were spurred to action by these stories or their anger and sense of injustice was intensified. Through an analysis of these accounts we can better understand the moral and ethical choices made by participants.

Furthermore, these accounts of violence by both victims and perpetrators, can help us understand how people are coping with their past experiences in post-conflict situations. The styles and locations of these retellings, whether they be a form of social introductions, story-telling, or providing accounts for foreign NGOs, can also provide insight into how participants are shaping their lives in relation to their past experiences. North Moluccans are well aware of the power of these narratives and how they can be deployed to achieve particular ends. It behooves academics to also pay attention to the details of these narratives. Closer attention to these accounts of violence and to the individual decisions and lived experiences of participants can provide a far more nuanced understanding of communal violence than a reliance on bland metanarratives.

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