



On the Margins of Conflict: An Introduction

Nils Bubandt and Andrea Molnar

(editors)

The violent conflicts that accompanied the fall of New Order rule tended, with the notable and still tragically unfolding exception of Aceh, to gravitate towards the eastern parts of Indonesia. By now a growing body of academic analyses in both Indonesian and in English has begun to disentangle the complex set of political, social, and discursive aspects of the conflicts in East Timor, Maluku, North Maluku, Poso, Kalimantan and Papua.¹ These studies have initiated a break with many of the simplistic and often biased accounts that emerged in the immediate wake of the conflicts. Instead they have begun to paint a fuller and more complicated picture of the ethnographic context, in which the ‘east Indonesian wars’ unfolded. Political provocation, economic tensions, discursive provocation, as well as local adaptations to religious and ethnic forms of identification are shown to have fused in various ways to provide different kinds of impetus and motive for participation in each of the many individual riots that flared up throughout eastern Indonesia after 1999. While each clash (even within one conflict region like Maluku or Poso) frequently has turned out to be politically and experientially unique, they also fed into one another, each riot adding to a growing sense of national paranoia, elaborated and disseminated in the media. And in the process each violent clash sowed the seeds for the outbreak of violence elsewhere.

Much work still needs to be done to more fully understand the complex interplay of global, national, and local contexts in these riots. Although some headway has been made, too many academic studies (both foreign and Indonesian) of the post-Suharto violence are still content to employ a too simplistic theoretical framework. One version of this simplistic approach was culturalist, seeing the conflicts as being either the result of a cultural essence or its attenuation by New Order politics. The problem of essentialising culture has for many years been rehearsed in anthropology, but essentialist explanations tend nevertheless to appear in concrete analyses time and again. Another—less criticised but nonetheless pernicious—form of simplification has occurred by adopting a simple political theory akin to that used in popular journalism. The tendency has here been to see the conflicts as being between a set of easily identifiable protagonists.² The political motives of these protagonists are portrayed as unambiguous their tactics as

¹ See for instance Anderson 2001; Bertrand 2003; Bubandt 2000; Colombijn and Lindblad 2002; Coppel 2004; Goss and Lange forthcoming; Hefner 2002; Tanter et al. 2001; van Klinken 2001; Wessel and Wimhöfer 2000. The journal *Antropologi Indonesia* has featured many fine analyses in Indonesian.

² See Keen 1999.





clear-cut and successful. In the end the culprits are named, and the case is solved... apparently. What is lacking from these accounts is 'ethnographic thickness', a sense of how violence in this particular place at this particular time was made through the 'unmaking' of a normal life-world.³ What is also missing are detailed descriptions of the ambiguity of the motives of the actors in the conflict, of the unintended consequences of their actions, of the socio-political processes through which some subjectivities are deconstructed and new forms of identity are discursively produced, of the interplay between global, national and local narratives and fears. What is lacking, in short, are studies that are ethnographically thick and theoretically sophisticated enough to capture the many levels and complicated processes involved in the production of violent conflict.⁴

In this sense, studying conflict and violence ought to be no different from studying cultural and political processes in 'ordinary' situations. The social theory ought to be the same. It is true, of course, that the human and social costs of violent conflict and the destruction of normalcy by traumatic experiences make violence very different from ordinary life. Theoretically, however, actors, motives, actions, discourses, and representations should be analysed in the same way, instead of foregoing on anthropological theory whenever violence happens. The tendency to see violence in terms of either essentialised culture or rational choices, stringent pragmatics and *Realpolitik* means that the symbolism of politics, the varieties of rationality, and the social construction of choices remain opaque. Anthropologists have long since stopped seeing violence as somehow unique to some cultures. With the sophistication and reinvention of cultural theory, we ought now also be able to 'localise violence'. Instead of accepting at face value the explanations of political pragmatism, we need to explore how 'pragmatism' is made, how 'rational' choices are decided upon, how political tactics are made to appear obvious. An anthropological study of political violence begins, we believe, by seeing it as an extension of, or a modality of, 'normal' social politics, not as unique. As Mary Steedly reminds us, the academic focus on political violence in Southeast Asia is in itself a result of new modes of communication. The internet and other electronic media easily generate among academics a 'sense of continual crisis' by making violence visible in dramatic and new ways (Steedly 1999:445). This makes us blind to the banal aspects of everyday life and gives an elite bias:

Because of its tendency to highlight these elements of danger, violence, novelty, and terror, internet communication can obscure the ordinary aspects of life—things that go on even in a state of emergency. Moreover, by plugging us so directly to the experiences and views of individuals in Southeast Asia's cosmopolitan centers, it may lead us to disregard the nonurban, non-online majority—people living in villages, farmsteads, hills settlements, slums, and even 'middling' neighbourhoods—except for those moments when violence flares (Steedly 1999:445).

This special volume of *Antropologi Indonesia* attempts to give a different account of the violence in eastern Indonesia by focussing not on the riots themselves, but instead on a variety of perspectives on and consequences of these riots that remained marginal to the violence itself. The case studies follow communities who remained 'on the sidelines' of the major conflicts but nevertheless reacted to them and worried about them. They follow people caught up in the

³ See Nordstrom 1997.

⁴ See for instance Brass 1997; Hansen 2001; Malkki 1995; van der Veer 1994.



refugee flows that bourgeoned in the wake of the riots, describing the attempts of those displaced to adapt to new places and new situations, while also dealing with a traumatic past. Finally the cases describe some of the political processes that grew out of the conflicts, the attempts to re-establish a sense of community through the work of local NGOs and the revitalisation of tradition. The case studies in other words describes people, practices, perceptions and political processes that were 'on the margins' of the violent clashes in eastern Indonesia after 1999. They remained therefore outside of the 'crisis-focussed' news coverage and to some extent also outside academic interest. Nevertheless, they provide an important 'sideway' perspective on the violence.

Although the studies of people, practices, perceptions and politics in this volume were 'outside' conflict in terms of space and/or time, they were nevertheless deeply involved in the violence: by growing out of the violent clashes as an (un)intended consequence or by reacting and adapting to rumours and news of the clashes. They highlight how the conflicts that raged around the everyday lives of these communities impinged on and reconstructed their 'ordinariness'.

The local sense of the everyday was in many of the case studies presented here disrupted by the conflict. Thus **Robert Barnes** shows how people in the district of Witihamo on Adonara in 2000 and 2001 were extremely mindful of the conflicts in Maluku and the former province of East Timor and as consequence maintained a deliberate vigilance against the threat of contamination by barring the influx of refugees and emphasising interdenominational solidarity. In North Sulawesi, which was host to 35,000 IDPs from North Maluku, this strategy of containment was not possible. As **Chris Duncan** discusses, this influx created persistent tension between local Minahasans and the North Malukan refugees as social envy in both groups translated into the elaboration of mutual prejudice. The religious overtones of the conflict in North Maluku and Maluku nevertheless weighed heavily on many Minahasan minds after 2000 and formed the initially very generous reception of refugees. It was against this 'politically-motivated' compassion that the emerging tensions played themselves out.

At the same time, however, news of the violence was incorporated into local ideas of history and belonging. The perception that the Malukan conflict was religious thus informed also informal aspects of Minahasan life. **Gabriele Weichart** shows how Minahasans ideas of Minahasan taste and cuisine are reinterpreted in the light of local ethno-history and regional identity formation. This emphasis of regional ethno-history and identity, however, only makes sense against the backdrop of the 'religious' conflicts in Poso, Maluku and North Maluku and the political process of decentralisation. **Eriko Aoki** shows how 'the eastern Indonesian wars' were indigenised within an overarching 'Austronesian cosmopolitanism' in the mountains of Flores. While Flores lacked the main material root causes for conflict: political contention over natural resources and social capital, Aoki argues that also a cultural element was involved in the Florenese rejection of violence. The exclusivist categories of religious and ethnic opposition were thus being consciously rejected in favour of a long tradition of social flexibility and tolerance that Florenese people have employed in changing ways as migrants for centuries. As **Blair Palmer** shows in his article, Butonese IDPs who returned from Ambon to Buton in the wake of the Ambon violence, refused to see themselves as 'refugees' (*pengungsi*). Instead they insisted on seeing themselves as returned migrants. The reason was that this label connoted higher prestige and helped them in the efforts to integrate in Butonese society in the face of local suspicion.



The studies thereby illustrate Steedly's point that also amid a state of emergency the everyday is continually reconstituted, because without such reconstitution social life cannot endure. The ordinariness of everyday life and the extraordinariness of violence in other words continuously constitute and recalibrate each other. The sense of normalcy is disrupted by news of the violence and by fears that it might spread; yet violence is also narrativised to accord with local senses of self and time. Today's violence thereby becomes tomorrow's mythical narrative.

Tradition or *adat* is in most Indonesian communities a label to denote the universe of accepted normalcy. *Adat* names the horizon of the common-sensical order of the world as this has been handed down by the ancestors. *Adat*, however, has also—at least since colonialism—been a reflexive political tool. Being both doxic (in Pierre Bourdieu's sense of being 'that which goes without saying') and a modern political contrivance, *adat* has received renewed attention in the wake of the eastern Indonesian wars and the restructuring of the political landscape after Suharto. This dual importance of *adat* is discussed by the two articles that open this special volume. **Nicola Frost** focuses on the efforts of Malukan NGOs to use Malukan *adat* as a tool for reconciliation and the reconstruction of civil society. The challenge for these NGOs, as Frost highlights, is how to avoid essentialising *adat* in the process. The goal is to allow *adat* to entail true pluralism and tolerance rather than being a new tool for intolerance and renewed statism. On the basis of field material from Ternate **Nils Bubandt** argues that a similar *adat* politics is emerging in North Maluku and indeed throughout Indonesia. This new 'politics of tradition', so Bubandt argues, is the combined result of changes in global forms of governance, a strong political focus on ethnic and religious identity in the 'era reformasi' and a local willingness to employ these identities to garner support in the new political landscape of decentralisation. The new politics of tradition thus played complex roles both in the production of the eastern Indonesian wars and in current attempts to reconcile affected communities after conflict.

This volume is the direct result of the contributions made to the panel entitled, 'How will Eastern Indonesia maintain "Unity in Diversity"?' during the Third International Symposium organized by Jurnal Antropologi Indonesia and University of Indonesia at the Udayana University in Bali, July 16-19, 2002. The guest editors of this volume wish to thank Jurnal Antropologi Indonesia and University of Indonesia for their initiative and hard work in organizing this international symposium as well as acknowledge the hospitality of Udayana University. The panel on which this volume is based contained numerous contributions. All of them were fascinating, but we have had to limit the final number of papers in this volume in order to maintain a single theme and to observe the space restrictions set by the journal. We wish, however, to thank all contributors to the panel for their role in making our section of the symposium so rewarding.

Lastly, on a more personal note, Andrea and Nils initially proposed this panel on current issues in eastern Indonesia—with the strong encouragement of AIs editor Yunita Winarto—as a small way of repaying our academic debt to our mutual mentor and former supervisor, Professor James Fox, a true pioneer in eastern Indonesian anthropology. The topic of the volume has changed a few times since its initial conception, but we believe that the argument of this volume to see violence and conflict as not dissociated from but rather closely bound up with the everyday, mythical and ritual aspects of life is very much testimony to our debt to Jim.



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