Introduction

This article aims to demonstrate how opportunities to settle private disputes over land access were an essential factor behind the recent Christian-Muslim violence on the island of Ambon. Although not a root cause of the initial riots, land very quickly became a point of contention during the ongoing logic of the communal conflict. In this regard, the displacement of whole communities should be understood as one of the primary objectives of the bitter and long-term communal warfare in Ambon, rather than a mere side effect. The emergence of these private opportunities partly explains why so many ‘ordinary’ folk participated in the forced expulsion of whole communities. Therefore, people were much more proactive than is generally acknowledged in narratives explaining the violence in Maluku, which too often tend to portray the civilian population as passive actors being manipulated by greedy elites.

At the same time, the case studies this article discusses clearly guard against portraying the violence in Ambon as an ‘all Christians against all Muslims’ story. While many people did indeed have a rational motive to engage in communal violence, equally many deliberately decided not to take part in it. In particular, the sudden escalation of violence following the first riots in the town of Ambon in January 1999 was intimately linked to long-

1 The town of Ambon is situated on the island of Ambon and is the capital of Maluku province. Currently, the town officially has a population of 258,331 of whom there are 120,489 Muslims, 122,407 Protestants and 15,175 Catholics (BPS 2007)
Map 1. Ambon
term enmities between different communities that involved competition for resources such as land. Where these sorts of enmities were not present, the potential of communal conflict was less. Therefore, much of the violence that erupted on the island of Ambon – particularly in rural areas – should be understood as the re-eruption of localized, long-standing border disputes sparked by the urban riots of January 1999.

Communal conflict in Maluku

The Christian-Muslim riots that broke out in the town of Ambon in early 1999 left many people puzzled. The communal character of the conflict in which seemingly ‘normal’ people started killing each other without a clear-cut ideological, class-based or economic motive is partly responsible for this astonishment. Just like in other cases of communal conflict in Indonesia around that time – such as the Christian-Muslim violence in North Maluku (August 1999) and in the city of Poso in the province of Central Sulawesi (April 2000), the ethnic riots between Dayaks and Madurese in Central (February 2001) and West Kalimantan (January 1998), and the Malay-Madurese riots in West Kalimantan (February 1999) – violence was not aimed at strangers or unknown occupiers but was fought between brothers, neighbours coming from the same area but divided along communal lines. In this regard, the communal violence in Ambon and other places in Indonesia was highly intimate (Kalyvas 2006), and divisions between the roles of victim and perpetrator were blurred. During the 32-year New Order regime (1966-1998), apart from the killings of 1965/66 which ultimately ushered in the military dictatorship, this sort of communal violence was present but never on such a massive scale as in Ambon. It therefore seemed as if the implosion of the New Order had forced scholars of Indonesian society to look for new frameworks in order to explain this kind of civil unrest (Schulte Nordholt 2003; Purdey 2004).

Among the multitude of explanations offered for the sudden eruption of violence on Ambon, the most elaborate and detailed accounts are those utilizing a classical political economy approach. Of special importance is the recent book by Van Klinken (2007), but earlier works by Bertrand (2002, 2004) and Goss (2000) also identify certain characteristics of the Ambonese political economy that underpinned the explosion of the religiously-inspired violence in 1999. Within this body of literature, two converging dynamics stand out.

---

2 The most notable exception is the province of West Kalimantan, which already during the New Order experienced ‘sustained, non-separatist bloodletting’ (Davidson 2008:11).
3 A well-known Ambonese voice in this debate is NGO activist Thamrin Ely (see ‘Politik dan kecemburuan berbungkus agama’, Ummat 35, 15-3-1999)
First, Ambon is characterized by a long-term politicization of religious identities that are strongly attached to networks negotiating access to both the colonial and the post-colonial state (Bertrand 2002:62-3, 2004:115-6). As far back as the seventeenth century, Ambon witnessed the build-up of a tiny but visible Dutch colonial administration by the VOC (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, Dutch East India Company), which had a close relationship with the Christian part of the population.4 Muslims, on the other hand, were considered more untrustworthy and prone to rebellion (Knaap 2004:107, 124). These close relations between the Dutch rulers and the Christian Ambonese deepened after the abolition of the world-wide monopoly on cloves in 1863 and the ensuing economic malaise which gripped the whole Ambonese region. With the price of cloves plummeting, on the one hand, and the expansion of the Dutch East Indies requiring a growing colonial administration on the other, the number of surplus workers in the Moluccas willing to take up jobs in the colonial administration and the KNIL (Koninklijk Nederlands-Indisch Leger, Royal Army of the Dutch Indies) grew (Chauvel 1990:37). With predominantly Protestant Ambonese filling these jobs, a system of religious division was installed in which a Protestant elite gained privileged access to the colonial bureaucracy and the political and economic advantages related to it.5 As the Australian historian Richard Chauvel (1980:47) notes: ‘Under colonial patronage, they [Christian Ambonese] acquired a privileged status above their compatriots [and below the Dutch]’. In effect, this rendered the Muslim population second-class citizens in colonial Ambonese society (Chauvel 1980; Bartels 2003), and to this day Ambonese Protestants are somewhat bitterly referred to by the Muslim population as the anak emas or golden child. Following Indonesian independence, this privileged status of the Protestant elite largely continued (Bertrand 2002). Both in the Soekarno era and during the New Order, Ambonese Protestants maintained close ties to the regime in Jakarta through which they kept a strong grip on the local bureaucracy.

On the other hand, throughout the New Order, political competition defined along religious fault lines increasingly became a hallmark of Ambonese society. For instance, as early as 1977 the anthropologist Dieter Bartels (1977:326) noted that: ‘The people battling in the political arena are often identical or allied with religious purists and fanatics within the religious structures of Islam and Christianity’. In particular from the late 1980s onwards, high-ranking positions in the administration became increasingly

---

4 For instance, already during the first decades of VOC rule, Christians dominated the ‘land-raad’, the highest body of the colonial administration in which Ambonese were allowed to participate (Knaap 2004:53)
5 Bartels 2000. There is also a Catholic minority in Ambon. When reference is made in this article to Christians it includes both the Catholic and the Protestant communities of Maluku.
contested between the two religious blocks. One of the first strongly divisive figures was Dicky Wattimena, Christian mayor of the city of Ambon from 1985 to 1991, who was particularly resented among Muslim migrants for his attempts to break their strong grip on informal economies such as petty trading. Around the same time, a rival Muslim network emerged that challenged the traditional Protestant hegemony in the region. This network operated under the umbrella of a national Muslim organization, ICMI (Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia, Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals), founded in 1990. This organization was chaired by Minister of Research and Technology B.J. Habibie, later to become Indonesia's first post-New Order president. At its second national congress, held in 1995, almost half of all Indonesian ministers were elected to leadership positions in ICMI, making it one of the most important ‘state corporatist organizations’ through which the New Order aimed to control the army and gain the support of a fast-growing group of middle-class Muslims (Liddle 1996:613, 618). The rapid rise of ICMI is illustrative of the so-called greening of the New Order, in which Soeharto was turning to modernist Islamic groupings to support his regime from the late 1980s onwards and was increasingly ‘playing the Muslim card’ (Hefner 2000:128). In the meantime, modernist Islamic groupings such as ICMI gained a substantial influence in the upper echelons of the Soeharto cabinet, which increased the fear of many Christian Ambonese of becoming a small minority in a Muslim-dominated country. An important victory for this network at the Moluccan level was the appointment in 1992 of Akib Latuconsina – a prominent and well-known member of the Ambonese ICMI branch at the time – as the first Muslim Moluccan governor. Among the traditional Protestant elite this move was interpreted as evidence of an Islamic offensive challenging their traditional hegemonic status and thus further polarizing the two religious communities. This growing power of the Muslim part of Ambonese society was also symbolized by the term ‘OPEK’. This abbreviation stands for the villages of Ori, Pelau and Kaliolo situated on the island of Haruku. These villages are home to such well-known Muslim families as Tuasikal, Latuconsina and Marasabessy, who obtained growing influence in the state bureaucracy throughout the 1990s.

The second factor explaining the inter-religious communal conflict in the province of Maluku is the emergence of opportunities to renegotiate access to the state arising from the fall of the New Order. This was reinforced by a far-

---

7 Bertrand 2002, 2004. Evidently, the establishment of a network of Ambonese Muslim intellectuals did not happen overnight. Following decolonization, Ambonese Muslims increasingly developed contacts throughout Indonesia and the outside world, setting in motion a slow yet steady process of emancipation of Ambonese Muslim society (Chauvel 1980).
reaching decentralization move that transferred different competences from the national level to the provinces and districts. Decentralization thus made gaining access to the state at these regional levels all the more relevant and therefore all the more contested. A creeping polarization of more than a decade took a drastic turn once the Soeharto-led centralist state finally imploded in May 1998 and alternative networks seized the chance to use the institutional turmoil to challenge existing power structures (Van Klinken 2007). During this process, religion became a vehicle for political mobilization in a fast-changing society, with people becoming much more involved in political life through the first open and direct elections since 1955. Apart from the emergence of certain opportunities during this period, mutual suspicion and the anxiety of losing powerful positions in a new and uncertain era further politicized the two religious communities. Among Christians, a general phobia existed that post-New Order Indonesia would be transformed into an Islamic state, thus putting them in a vulnerable position in Maluku. Conversely, among Muslims there was a suspicion that in the new democratic era the PDI-P (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia - Perjuangan, Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle) would obtain a majority in the Moluccan elections and use it to reinstate Christian control over the state bureaucracy. This Christian dominance of the PDI-P in Maluku stems from the fact that the PDI-P is composed of different parties that were forced to merge together in 1973 to form the PDI (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia, Indonesian Democratic Party). In October 1998, the PDI changed its name to PDI-P, adding Perjuangan (struggle) to stress the difference with the inferior position they held during the New Order. Historically, the most important building blocks of the PDI in Ambon have been the Parkindo (Partai Kristen Indonesia, Indonesian Christian Party) and the PNI (Partai Nasional Indonesia, Indonesian National Party). In contrast to other parts of Indonesia, Christians have historically dominated the PNI in Maluku. Yet the influence of the Parkindo in particular has been central in defining the Christian character of the Moluccan PDI-P branch (Van Klinken 2001:22). Traditionally, Parkindo has been the most powerful political party representing the interests of the Christians, in particular in the town

---

8 This general fear among Indonesian Christians of becoming an Islamic state somewhat dissipated following the poor results for Islamic parties during the general elections of 1999. In these elections the two big nationalist parties Golkar and PDI-P won 24% and 30.6% of the votes, respectively. The biggest Islamic party, PPP (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, United Development Party), only gained 11.6% of the votes (Singh 2003).

9 This should be understood as a government plan to curtail opposition and transform multi-party politics into corporate group representation. The reason why opposition parties were not simply abolished was the fact that these parties still represented important elite factions within Indonesian society which could not completely be pushed aside. Moreover, the New Order regime wanted to maintain some sort of ’democratic appearance’ in order to seek international legitimacy (Eklöf 2003:54-9).
of Ambon, where in the 1955 elections this party obtained 50% of the votes, making it the town’s dominant party. Even in the provincial elections of 1971, in which there was substantial intimidation of people in Ambon to vote for the government party Golkar, Parkindo managed to remain the largest party in Ambon town, obtaining 6 seats while Golkar won only 5 seats.\textsuperscript{10} When the New Order finally collapsed, PDI-P saw its chance to shed its subordinate place under Golkar and position itself at the forefront of Ambonese political life. However, the prospect of the PDI-P creating a new Christian stronghold in Maluku made many Ambonese Muslims nervous, since they did not have a strong, unified party that could equal the PDI-P.\textsuperscript{11} This mutual distrust led to a further activation of religiously-defined patrimonial networks. The work done by Van Klinken (2007:96-106) demonstrates how local Ambonese elites with obvious political party affiliations were instrumental for instigating this violence through these networks, which in many cases were organizations affiliated with churches or mosques. An example of such an organization is the youth wing of the GPM (Gereja Protestan Maluku, Protestant Church of Maluku).

\textit{Private opportunities during collective violence: theoretical framework}

Although this focus on the regional political economy and struggles to access a patrimonial state yields strong arguments to explain the outburst of violence in Ambon, it also has some deficiencies. First, as is often noted, studies on collective violence tend to overlook the factors that further escalate the riots and contribute to their perpetuation (Brass 1996, 1997). This is the case with these political economy accounts that succeed in explaining the causal roots of a conflict but have greater difficulty grappling with the ongoing logic of communal violence. In other words, they fail to account for the violence’s protracted nature. Second, the agency of ‘the masses’ is largely underestimated in this structuralist framework.\textsuperscript{12} These masses are portrayed as languid actors simply

\textsuperscript{10} Van Fraassen 1972:1-3. One of the best-known Ambonese politicians in the history of Indonesia, Johannes Leimena, was also a Parkindo member. Leimena served many years as health minister and ultimately became deputy prime minister under Soekarno from 1957 until 1966.

\textsuperscript{11} Not coincidentally, the PDI-P victory in June 1999 for the Ambonese city council, gaining 53% of the votes, was one of the triggers that started a second round of rioting in July 1999 (Van Klinken 2001).

\textsuperscript{12} The same can be said of those accounts that blame outside forces or provocateurs (provokateur) for the eruption of violence in Ambon (Aditjondro 2001; Hefner 2001; Ratnawati 2006:59-62). Another prominent defender of this provocateur thesis is the late human rights activist Munir (‘Senjata dibagi-bagikan senjata’, \textit{Jumat Kliwon}, 19 February 1999). Often, these provocateurs are considered to be Jakarta-based elites with strong links to the TNI and the New Order regime. Strong evidence for this thesis is lacking (Azca 2003).
following local, greedy elites. As Fearon and Laitin (2000:854) argue, it is not sufficient to look at elite interests in explaining ethnic violence; equal attention has to be paid to reasons why ‘ordinary folk’ decide to engage in conflict.

These two limitations come together in one simple but essential question: why so many ‘ordinary folk’, who had little chance of accessing the state bureaucracy, became involved in the violence. To answer this question, this article seeks to explain how the violence opened up private economic opportunities that led to the involvement of a range of new actors in the conflict. It is relevant to refer to the work done by Stathis Kalyvas (2003, 2006) in this regard. After an elaborate analysis of a whole range of civil wars, Kalyvas (2003:475) concludes that ‘civil wars are not binary conflicts but complex and ambiguous processes that foster an apparently massive, though variable, mix of identities and actions’. In this mix of identities and actions, Kalyvas observes that actions at the micro-level of society in situations of protracted civil warfare often have a private character and bear little relation to the reasons behind its instigation. Civil warfare therefore presents a forum where actors take the opportunity to settle private disputes outside the realm of the master configuration of the conflict. While everyday tensions would never result in violence under normal circumstances, the conflict opens up possibilities of settling old accounts (Kalyvas 2006:365). These ideas correspond to the distinction David Keen (2002, 2008:73-89) makes between bottom-up violence and top-down violence during civil warfare. According to Keen, top-down violence is mobilized by political leaders and entrepreneurs who deliberately manipulate ethnic, religious or other fault lines. In the case of Ambon, this typology is evident in the political struggles described above during which certain elites instigated the conflict through religiously defined grassroots organizations. Bottom-up violence, on the other hand, is actively embraced by a variety of ordinary people as a solution to problems of their own.

The central hypothesis of this article is that many of the actions undertaken by people during the conflict in Ambon were intended to settle long-term disputes regarding access to land. As John T. Sidel (2008:47) correctly points out for the conflict in Maluku: ‘it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the violence served as a means of effecting displacement, rather than displacement coming as a by-product of the violence’. One of the reasons for effecting the displacement of whole communities was an economic one: to gain access to land. This is not to say that land lies at the root of the violence in Ambon. The only discussion of the role of land in the Ambonese conflict so far has centred on the question of whether land tensions and demographic pressure are at the root of the conflict (Soselisa 2000:76; Bartels 2000). The view defended here is that competition to access land does not explain the outburst of violence in the city of Ambon. In the run-up to the initial riots in January 1999 no organizations can be found mobilizing people around the issue of land, in contrast to
How ordinary folk became involved in the Ambonese conflict

the struggles to access the state bureaucracy. Moreover, struggles over land and issues of migration and population pressure cannot be seen as typically ‘Moluccan’ as these can also be found in other parts of Indonesia that never turned into an enduring communal conflict. Nevertheless, during the Ambon conflict, land and religiously defined competition over access to land quickly became an issue. The subsequent case studies of the villages of Hila, Kaitetu, Waai and Liang show how people had their own incentives for engaging in violence and displacing certain religious communities. These are related to the settling of private disputes regarding access to economic resources such as land. In this regard, land came to be a point of contention during the conflict in Ambon rather than having been a clear-cut motivation for its commencement.

Case study: the Christians of Hila and Kaitetu

Kaitetu is a village situated in the Muslim-dominated Leihitu peninsula on the island of Ambon where, before the January 1999 riots, a Christian minority of some 120 households lived. This Christian community consisted of people who migrated from neighbouring islands to act as guards around the VOC fort Amsterdam during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Over time, they developed strong social bonds with the villages of Hila and Kaitetu. Although the community administratively belonged to Kaitetu, according to adat or customary law the land the Christians lived on was claimed by a clan coming from neighbouring Hila. Therefore, the Christians have always characterized themselves as originating from Hila. This apparent contradiction only concerned the land they lived on. The question of the land the Christians were cultivating is different and more complex. Here we can observe how a mixture of different kinds of property rights allowed the majority of Christian households to obtain secure and satisfactory access to land. Due to their migrant status, the Christian community was not considered part of the original negeri (village) of Kaitetu or Hila. According to strict adat law they could therefore not obtain the ownership rights necessary to cultivate long-term crops such as cengkeh (clove), kelapa (coconut) and palo (nutmeg). Under the adat system, as it is commonly practised in Hila and Kaitetu, the privilege of cultivating long-term crops is solely reserved for people who originate from a clan (dati) belonging to an original negeri (village). Despite the migrant status of the Christians living in Hila and Kaitetu, their overall social standing

---

14 For an elaborate explanation of the Moluccan adat system, see Von Benda-Beckmann and Taale 1996.
was higher than that of other non-Moluccan settlers who are still somewhat derogatorily referred to by terms such as ‘pengungsi kemarin’ (former refugees), ‘buruh tanah’ (land labourers) or ‘orang pendaatang’ (migrants). These terms were never applied to the Christians, largely due to the fact that their historical presence led to intermarriages with families of both Kaitetu and Hila. Accordingly, several Christian families received _adat_ rights to freely grow long-term crops on lands that belonged to these ‘original’ Muslim families. Over the years, they also managed to buy some lands privately on which they cultivated long-term crops. Other migrants such as the Butonese also received the privilege to cultivate these crops but had to share the harvest with the people of Hila and Kaitetu (Brouwer 1998).

This Christian community fled on 20 January 1999, one day after the initial riots buffeted the town of Ambon on the other side of the island. During their flight, the community was split up, with one part going to Hatiwe Besar, the other to Laha. After being separated for three years, they finally settled in 2002 in Tanah Putih in the _negeri_ of Tawiri, near the airport, where they still live today. I attempted to find out why the Christians fled so immediately, but the story appears somewhat unclear. According to the Christians, Muslims from Hila chased them away by destroying their houses and other property, something which is vigorously denied by people interviewed in Hila. According to their version, bands of youth from the neighbouring village of Hitu were responsible for driving the Christians away. Interestingly, what is acknowledged in Hila is that people from Hila were responsible for cutting down the crops and trees the Christians were cultivating within the borders of their village and for destroying the houses they lived in.

How do we understand this story? First, it is important to interpret the destruction of property as a deliberate strategy to drive people away. Talking with several displaced communities throughout the island, it emerged that not all of these people were directly physically threatened or had to run for their lives. For instance, many IDPs stated that they decided to leave their homes after their windows were smashed with stones or their houses were daubed with paint. This served as a symbol that they were no longer welcome in the place they lived. This was also the case in Hila and Kaitetu, albeit in a more hasty manner. People were chased away by bands of youth throwing

---

15 In Hila and Kaitetu, these non-Moluccan settlers consist of Butonese communities, originating from the neighbouring island of Sulawesi. Most of these people have been settled in Ambon for decades. Their migration to Ambon and surrounding islands was a spontaneous one driven by economic incentives.

16 Understanding resource management in the Ambonese context requires distinguishing between property rights for land as such and property rights for what is on the land such as trees or houses. In this case, many Christians did not own the land but nevertheless had rights to grow crops on these lands (see also Von Benda-Beckmann and Taale 1996:41).
stones and shouting all sorts of provocations. Rumours that Muslims from Hitu were on their way to Hila, after having eradicated the Christian village of Benteng Karang, only increased the anxiety that gripped this community. In their flight, however, nobody was killed or even wounded. In this regard, there is little point in distinguishing between those who chased the people away and those who destroyed crops and houses afterwards. It was all part of the same movement and occurred largely in the same time frame. The same day the Christians fled to the mountains, people started destroying property belonging to them. In this regard, destruction should not be interpreted as the manifestation of some sort of ‘irrational religious fervour’. In most cases, it was a deliberate attempt to clear a certain space with the aim of assuming control. At the same time, this case study modifies the conventional representation of the Ambonese violence as an all-Christian against all-Muslim conflict. Many people – such as the community of Kaitetu – took no part in the violence and even attempted to offer protection to those who were ejected.

Second, clear-cut economic reasons lie behind the expulsion of the Christians. The cutting down of trees is illustrative. As adat law states that one loses the informal adat property rights to one’s land once the long-term crops have died or have been eradicated, cutting down trees indicates a conscious attempt by some villagers of Hila to reclaim lands Christians had been cultivating for generations. In this regard, the destruction of property not only serves to chase a community away but also becomes a deliberate attempt to symbolically eradicate its traces and claim its property. As a result, the Christian community of Hila has once and for all lost these lands. In a similar but seemingly contradictory way, the houses belonging to Christians were destroyed and burned down by youth who also came from Hila. Rather than an act of ‘irrational’ behaviour, this destruction should be understood as a strategic move in a simmering border conflict between the villages of Kaitetu and Hila. As was described above, the land the Christians were living on was claimed by a customary clan of Hila, although this land was within the administrative boundaries of Kaitetu.17 This border dispute dates back to colonial times and has resulted in a strained relationship between the village of Kaitetu and this customary clan. This border conflict was given new impetus one year before the outbreak of violence when a large number of Christians attempted to obtain a formal ownership certificate for this land. This would have made them the formal owners of the land; the customary clan therefore would lose their customary claim and the village of Kaitetu could

17 Despite the small size of the plot, this land was considered to be of high economic value due to the presence of the VOC fort Amsterdam and the Emmanuel church being the oldest church in the whole of Indonesia. These assets could have potentially led to some small-scale touristic exploitation of the area.
more securely claim this land as their village land. This process has now been halted due to the violent removal of the Christian community. Through the destruction of their property, any trace suggesting that Christians once lived on this land was removed. Since then, this ‘empty’ land has been reclaimed by the customary clan from Hila and various signs have been put up stating that the land cannot be entered without their consent.

Case study: Waai

A second example where a localized, long-term border dispute re-erupted after the urban riots of January 1999 occurred in the villages of Waai and Liang. The Christian village of Waai is geographically wedged between the Muslim villages of Liang and Tulehu (see Map 1). Starting on 23 February 1999, Waai became involved in a fierce battle with these two neighbouring villages, resulting in dozens of dead and wounded on both sides. Ultimately, it was not until Waai was attacked simultaneously from the sides of Tulehu, Liang and the sea with the help of newly arrived, well-equipped Laskar Jihad fighters, that this community was forced to flee to Passo, a large Christian village about 20 km from Ambon city, in July 2000. In this village they stayed until August 2003. This final offensive was divided into two major parts. The first attack occurred around 6 and 7 July and resulted in 22 deaths, 51 heavily wounded, and the displacement of the majority of the Waai community. The final attack that cleared the whole village took place from 30 July to 1 August 2000 and resulted in at least 23 deaths on the Christian side (Suara Maluku 5-8-2000). Data on the Muslim side could not be obtained.

Although this story can easily be interpreted as a religious war, a more complex picture emerges when the story is reconstructed in detail. It is apparent that people from Waai interpret the violence with Liang, on the one hand, and Tulehu, on the other hand, in two different frameworks. The harsh fighting with Liang is explained by a narrative that originates in colonial times and in

18 The Laskar Jihad or the Jihad Paramilitary Force was the paramilitary division of the salafist Forum Komunikasi Ahlu Sunnah wal-Jama’ah (FKAWJ). It was founded in early 2000 and was gradually disbanded from 2002 onwards. One of its explicit aims was to support Muslims in their battle with Christians in places such as Ambon, Poso and North Maluku (Davis 2002; Noorhaidi Hasan 2002, 2005). It is important to stress that these Laskar Jihad fighters were outsiders and largely Java-based.

19 Suara Maluku 8-7-2000. Remarkably, on the Christian side there were about 17 deaths and 10 wounded, while on the Muslim side there were 5 deaths and 41 wounded. These data therefore seem to buttress the argument that heavier and more professional weaponry was found on the Muslim side because of the involvement of the Laskar Jihad. The Christians on the other hand had to stick to amateurish weapons such as spears, stones, self-made guns resulting in a lot of wounded but fewer deaths.
How ordinary folk became involved in the Ambonese conflict

37

which the recent fighting is perceived as one more chapter in a long history of violence. A clear distinction is made between the recent unrest and this historically strained relationship with Liang, although it is admitted that both became closely intertwined. Trying to reconstruct the history of this border dispute, one is confronted with a variety of differing interpretations, not only between the two villages but also within each village. Yet the overall issue behind the competing land claims is a dispute over who arrived and cultivated the land first, guaranteeing customary ownership rights over that land. In Waai, the people of Liang are perceived as invaders of their historical territory, which was considered to have originally been much larger. According to people living in Liang, these claims by Waai are baseless. These conflicting interpretations gave rise to a simmering border dispute between the two villages, with occasional outbursts of violence occurring before 1999. On both sides, the detailed knowledge in the telling and retelling of these violent stories is remarkable, even among teenagers, who give accurate accounts of legal battles and killings during Dutch times. Also apparent is the ferocity and scale of these skirmishes. During certain periods, all children and women of the village had to flee to the mountains for a couple of days, and crossing each other’s borders would result in certain death. As the riots in Ambon commenced, these simmering tensions were given new impetus as the two parties were provided with opportunities to settle this long-standing dispute. On the border between Waai and Liang, all trees and crops growing there were destroyed, with the aim of taking over these contested lands. Eventually, the people from Waai were forced to flee. This gave Liang the chance to fell all the trees on the border and also to erect a marker to delineate a new boundary between the two villages, thereby usurping large tracts of land owned by people from Waai before the conflict.

The violence between the villages of Waai and Tulehu is understood in a different framework, since historical tensions are not considered to be at the root of it. In fact, the inhabitants of Waai and Tulehu have a traditionally close relationship and they consider themselves to come from the same ancestors, despite their different religious backgrounds. Evidence of this is found in the similar family names in the two villages. For instance, while Salomi is a common family name in Waai, many people in Tulehu have Tuasalomi as a family name. Neither has the border between the villages ever been contested. This does not mean that relations between the two communities remained totally peaceful throughout the unrest. Violent skirmishes were noted, but the level of violence never reached the same intensity as that of Liang. Although data on the number of people wounded and dead are lacking, all parties agreed that – until the arrival of the Laskar Jihad in May 2000 – most heavy fighting was in fact conducted on the border between Waai and Liang, resulting in most of the dead and wounded. Due to good relations between Waai and Tulehu, traditional leaders from Tulehu kept in contact with leaders from Waai and
also made several attempts to keep ‘hot tempered’ youth in their village under control. People from Waai and Tulehu also often visited each other before May/June 2000 in order to buy food or just socialize. This was unthinkable in the case of Waai/Liang, where merely crossing the border was considered extremely perilous. Also illustrative is the fact that the land on the border between Waai and Tulehu never suffered the same fate as that on the border with Liang. On the Tulehu border, no crops or trees were destroyed. In fact, many people of Tulehu took care of the trees owned by people from Waai after the flight of the Waai community to Passo. No borders have been removed or other attempts made to take over land.

So what explains the fact that the final attack on Waai in July 2000 also came from Tulehu? According to people from Waai and Tulehu, the primary reason for the attack is linked to the considerable Laskar Jihad presence in Tulehu from May 2000 onwards. The Laskar Jihad set up an important posko (coordination centre) in the village of Tulehu, more particular in the dusun (hamlet) of Gurnala. It is only following the entry of the Laskar Jihad – constantly referred to as an alien, Javanese phenomenon – that a fierce attack was carried out. In this regard, the violence that occurred between Tulehu and Waai is not understood within the framework of a long-term, historical enmity between the two villages but instead is considered a product of the recent fighting and more particularly a product of the pressure and intimidation the Laskar Jihad fighters exercised among the villagers of Tulehu. This indicates how the coming of the Laskar Jihad gave a new turn to the conflict and became an important additional factor resulting in violence, apart from localized struggles to access resources such as land. Although it is always hard to distinguish between fact and myth in reconstructing these types of stories, it is remarkable that the interpretation of events is largely similar between the people of Waai and Tulehu. Through numerous details, people in both Waai and Tulehu tried to show how the recent riots were nothing more than an ‘accident de parcours’ in a normally peaceful relationship. For instance, it was often noted that the people of Tulehu came to warn the people of Waai just before the last large-scale attacks in July 2000 so that older people and children could take refuge in the woods and lives could be saved. As one older Waai woman told me: ‘the people from the Tulehu came to warn us and risked their lives while the Liang people just wanted us all dead’.

The informal economy and contested spaces in urban areas

These two examples illustrate how the general Muslim-against-Christian dichotomy through which communal conflict in Ambon was organized found fertile ground because competition over land partly followed these same reli-
How ordinary folk became involved in the Ambonese conflict

39

igious lines. While in the case of Hila and Kaitetu, this made a radical difference between engaging or not engaging in violence, in the Waai case it explains considerable variations in the intensity of the violence. Too often this observation has been neglected in analyses of the Ambon conflict that focus on national and regional dynamics and thereby overlook the way violence is conducted at the micro-levels of society. These sorts of historical, local tensions serve as one of the primary explanations of why the violence escalated so quickly and dramatically, and cannot be overlooked if one wants to fully understand the complexities and different genealogies of the violence (K. von Benda-Beckmann 2004).

Private opportunities involved more than just seeking to gain access to land in rural areas. Local political elites were instrumental in instigating riots in the town of Ambon with the primary objective of obtaining access to the state in a new and uncertain era (Van Klinken 2007). Yet this observation does not fully account for the incentives of people – in particular male youth – in this urban context to engage in communal conflict. Similarly, in the town of Ambon, cleansing whole neighbourhoods of a religious minority often followed a particular economic rationale. In this way, since the end of the conflict new groups have managed to obtain access to certain sectors of the town’s informal economy. A typical example is that young Christian males have taken over major parts of the informal transport sector from which Muslims have been violently expelled (Adam 2008). The near monopolization of this transport sector by Muslim migrants before the start of the riots had been a source of enduring frustration among many unemployed male Ambonese youth, occasionally resulting in low-intensity skirmishes between the two groups (K. von Benda-Beckmann 2004). The conflict presented a unique chance to settle these disputes in favour of previously marginalized groups such as unemployed young Christian men. For instance, all the becak (tricycle taxis) left behind by minority Muslim communities were immediately possessed by Christians. Importantl, in addition, the spaces where the becak business was performed by Muslims have been ‘cleared’. Following the end of the conflict, this religious division of the informal economy was vigorously maintained, although Christians and Muslims gradually recommenced circulating in each other’s areas from 2003 onwards.20 Bearing this in mind, the logic behind violent evictions in rural areas and in urban areas have striking resemblances. In both cases, access to space became a major incentive to

20 The incentives to penetrate the informal economy only increased throughout the conflict as the formal economy radically declined. This was particularly the case for men, as they were the ones most drastically affected by the implosion of the formal economy and many lost their traditional role as wage earner of the household (Adam and Pielouw 2008). This further increased competition to access space for informal economic activities and gave rise to rivalry not only between but also within the Christian and Muslim communities.
drive people out. While in rural areas this space is mainly used for agricultural purposes, in urban areas space is used to engage in informal economic activities such as transport.

Various sources stated that competition for access to the informal economy is at the root of the conflict in Ambon. This is particularly the case for reports written shortly after the start of the first riots by fact-finding teams of the local Unpatti University (Tim Pengkajian 1999) and the Jakarta-based University of Indonesia (UI) (Tim Peneliti Universitas Indonesia 1999). In these reports, the existence of sharp communal tensions over access to the informal economy in the town of Ambon are considered pivotal for the start of the conflict. In the UI report, these tensions are named as the most prominent factor explaining the outburst of violence. This competition is also understood to be ethnically defined by the division between the migrant community of the so-called BMM (Butonese, Bugis and Makkasarese) who largely dominated the informal economy prior to the start of the bloodshed, and the autochthonous Ambonese. It is then further claimed that this ethnic violence was gradually transformed into a religious conflict (Tim Peneliti Universitas Indonesia 1999:118-24). Contrary to this view, I believe that competition for access to the informal economy was not the cause of the violence but should be understood as part of the ongoing rationale during the course of the violence. Similar to the question of land access, no specific organizations mobilizing people around the issue of the informal economy could be found in the lead-up to the conflict. Moreover, one could query the timing of the violence, given that tensions surrounding access to the informal economy were already present throughout the 1990s. Viewed from this perspective, a classic political economy approach explains much better the temporal and spatial dimensions behind the violence. At the same time, existing frustrations and tensions arising from these issues constituted a rationale to settle disputes for economic gain and led to the involvement of a whole range of actors in the conflict.

In the UI and the Unpatti reports, it is also stated that the initial urban riots in Ambon were framed in an ethnic perspective and only later evolved into a religious conflict. This view is shared by many Ambonese, in particular Christian Ambonese. For instance, many Christian Ambonese stated that they felt deceived by their Muslim Ambonese brethren because after the first weeks of rioting they made a deliberate decision to side with the Muslim migrants. These sorts of statements are overdone, as communal violence in Ambon was religiously framed from the start. Yet it is true that ethnic and religious fault lines have always been closely linked to each other from the beginning of the unrest, although the religious framing of the conflict dominated. Competition for access to space in urban and rural areas has always had a strong ethnic dimension that plays out between autochthonous Ambonese, including both Christians and Muslims, and migrant communities consisting mainly
How ordinary folk became involved in the Ambonese conflict

of Muslims. On the issue of land access in Ambon, one soon notes that ethnic tensions are concentrated between Muslim Butonese migrants and ‘autochthonous’ Ambonese who are both Christian and Muslim. For instance, many Butonese settlements are found in Hila along the border with Hitu. Relations between these migrant Muslim communities and the autochthonous Muslim community of Hila have always been quite tense, as evidenced by past instances of verbal and physical aggression (F. von Benda-Beckmann 1990:250-2). Until now, this type of ethnically-framed, low-intensity violence has occurred periodically in Hila, as in many other places on the island. In most cases, these incidents are caused by conflicting interpretations of institutional arrangements for the management of resources. Yet while these tensions exist throughout the region, the recent violence did not present an opportunity to settle them, since they are ethnically defined and occur among Muslims. Following the religious logic of the way the conflict was fought, settling these sorts of ethnic disputes would not be acceptable. On the other hand, where minority Butonese communities lived in Christian areas, they were chased away and in most instances their land was deliberately taken over by Christians. Put somewhat cynically, the religious fault line laid down the ‘rules of the game’ that guided the settlement of private disputes. Therefore, Ambon did not descend into a situation of total chaos in which all economic tensions were operative. The general Muslim-versus-Christian opposition still mattered in Ambon, as it prescribed the lines along which these disputes could be settled.

New arenas of contention in post-conflict Ambon

The large-scale evictions explain some of the profound social transformations Ambon has gone through since the start of communal conflict and which have created new arenas of contestation and resentment. Not everybody lost as a result of the killings. A small minority managed to improve their socio-economic situation while putting at a disadvantage whole communities that were forcibly displaced and have since found themselves in dire economic circumstances. In the case of the Waai, rapprochement with Tulehu since their forced eviction has been relatively easy. As early as their escape to Passo, trade networks between the village of Tulehu and the Waai community emerged. Similarly, throughout 2002, people from Waai regularly visited Tulehu. The return of the Waai community has never been opposed by the majority of people from Tulehu, and as early as August 2000 leaders from Tulehu expressed to the governor their desire to facilitate the repatriation of the Waai community. This was not the case in Liang, where there was strong opposition to the repatriation of the Waai people. One reason is that the border dispute has remained a...
Among the people of Waai in particular, there remains a deep resentment and a sense that they lost as a result of the conflict. Many explicitly state that ‘whenever they have the chance’, they will do what they can to reclaim this lost land that was illegally taken away by the people of Liang. Some even admit they have deliberately stored weapons gathered during the recent conflict, with the future aim of forcibly reclaiming their land. Disconcertingly, this recent episode of violence and displacement is therefore presented as a chapter in an unfinished story that will likely have a sequel.

In the Hila and Kaitetu case, rapprochement has been much easier between Kaitetu and the resettled Christian community, principally because the clove and other trees owned by the Christians in Kaitetu were left standing. From 2005 onwards, the Christians gradually started spending time in Kaitetu to harvest the trees, staying with friends and relatives. In contrast, relations with Hila remain chilly, in particular between the customary landowners who took over the land the Christians lived on and the people who cut down the trees they owned. Similar observations can be made about the town of Ambon. For instance, many Muslim men who lost their tricycle taxis as a result of the conflict still harbour feelings of resentment. As some of these men confided to me, this is particularly the case when they recognize the becak they drove before the conflict and see how the new ‘owner’ is currently making money from it.

The emergence of these new arenas of contestation and resentment is probably most notable among the Muslim Butonese community. It is generally estimated that 160,000 Butonese were forced to flee Maluku province shortly after the outbreak of the January 1999 violence (Palmer 2004). Most of these Butonese lived in settlements situated in Christian negeri, such as the village of Eerie on the Christian-dominated Leitimur part of the island. This village hosted five Butonese settlements that were all wiped out during the conflict. Since their eviction, their land has actively been used by the Christian adat community from Eerie for the cultivation of long-term crops such as cloves and coconut. Some of the land has been privately sold, in most cases to Christians who were forced to flee Muslim areas and settled in Eerie. One part of the Butonese community who lived in Eerie fled to Sulawesi and have remained there. Another part were resettled in places with no arable land, and hence find themselves living in dire circumstances. An example is the camp of Kate Kate situated in the village of Nania on the Ambonese

---

21 As this land is contested and therefore considered legally insecure, nobody wants to make a serious financial investment such as replanting. Moreover, there is a fear in Liang that the planting of trees would be considered a permanent take-over, which could potentially provoke renewed violence. Therefore, preference is given to renting the land to migrant Muslim Butonese communities and other displaced communities such as a Muslim community who before the conflict lived in Iha on Saparua.
How ordinary folk became involved in the Ambonese conflict

coast. Here, frustrations about injustices suffered are prominent, and many Butonese consider themselves to be the big losers in the conflict. Due to lack of access to land, some have decided to illegally squat on land in order to farm. This in turn has given rise to tensions with the host community and some private companies that own land in that area. The large-scale eviction of the Butonese has also led to an increased awareness among them of how vulnerable their position was before 1999, and the importance of not repeating the same mistake. As one Butonese man in the resettlement camp of Kate Kate stated: ‘We have learned from these riots. When they try to throw us out the next time, we will be ready to stop them.’

Conclusion: the need for empirically grounded, integrative approaches

In most accounts seeking to explain the recent communal warfare in Ambon, great attention has been paid to political transformations occurring at the national level following the implosion of the New Order in May 1998. This also largely applies to accounts of other cases of communal violence that occurred around that time in Indonesia. This macro-perspective has provided us with many innovative insights, particularly when changes at the national level were connected to political manoeuvrings of local elites at the regional level. At the same time, some shortcomings can be noted. As Jamie Davidson (2008:6) points out, these broader structural frameworks fail to explain ‘signal variations’ between the different communal conflicts that sprang up during and after the end of the New Order. In addition, the agency of ‘ordinary folk’ engaging (or not engaging) in communal conflict tends to be overlooked. As Jemma Purdey (2004:201), in summarizing the existing literature on violence in Indonesia after the New Order, puts it: ‘More needs to be done, however, to explore the emotions and compulsions that exist among members of the crowds who participate in violence’. The same applies to Ambon, where, despite a wide array of studies about the origins of the violence, elaborate empirical accounts of the way violence was conducted at the micro-levels of society remain scarce. As a consequence, ‘ordinary folk’ (Brass 1997) are too easily viewed as an amorphous mass that follow the politics of greedy elites. The case studies presented here refute this image. People had specific, private interests for engaging in communal violence and were much more proactive than generally believed. When the first Christian-Muslim riots broke out in the town of Ambon, people had exceptional opportunities to take over land, particularly in those cases where institutional arrangements to access land have traditionally been contested. In most instances, these disputes took root during colonial times and had resulted in occasional outbursts of violence prior to 1999. Thus displacement and the subsequent ‘clearing’ of space have
to be understood as an important factor behind the violence itself rather than as an unforeseen by-product. This does not only apply to rural areas. A similar dynamic appeared in urban areas, where the clearing of space became the essential means for taking over certain activities in the informal economy.

Importantly, this observation does not serve as the ultimate explanation of the recent violence in Ambon; many other factors need to be taken into account in order to obtain a balanced understanding of why people decided (or not) to fight. Stressing the importance of private opportunities during communal violence does not mean that the recent episode of civil warfare in Ambon can be simply viewed as a situation in which ‘rational’ people solely sought ‘rational’ economic self-interest.\textsuperscript{22} Studying conflict at the micro-levels of society, one is inevitably confronted with a diversity of actions, making it impossible to point to the one true motive on the ground (Brass 1997; Kalyvas 2003). In other words, there exists no ‘golden bullet’ theory for understanding communal conflict. A full understanding of the conflict that engulfed Ambon therefore demands an integrative and multidisciplinary approach that takes into account the many overlapping dimensions that characterized the violence (Pannell 2003; K. von Benda-Beckmann 2004). Apart from the settling of private disputes, there is a multiplicity of other reasons why people engaged in communal violence. For instance, Dieter Bartels (2003:20) notes with regard to the violence in the Moluccas: ‘religious righteousness was not only the means to gain political and economic power but also an end in itself, proving the superiority of the religion of the victors’. In informal discussions, people regularly cite religion as the most important reason for engaging in violence. For instance, one older Christian woman who had been active in the production of guns and bombs openly stated: ‘Foreign researchers like you too easily downplay the central role played by religion in the conflict. I know it is maybe hard for western people to understand, but for me it was all about the preservation of my religion.’ It is also apparent how often one is confronted with very individualized, apparently banal reasons for engaging in violence that have little connection with the larger economic and political picture. For instance, revenge is often mentioned as the reason to kill people of another religion. Similarly, their involvement in the violence gave many young people – in particular unemployed young men – a new social standing. Becoming a protector of the community gave them local hero status and – at least in their own eyes – sharply increased their popularity among girls. Important markers of this newly acquired standing were the provision of free meals and the fact that they could ask for free cigarettes ‘from whoever

\textsuperscript{22} For a broader discussion on this issue, see Cramer 2002.
we wanted’. Considering this multitude of factors to start engaging in communal violence, stressing the importance of private opportunities to access space can only form part of a much more complex and multilayered picture. A number of additional empirically grounded studies analysing how and why violence was conducted at the micro-levels of society could therefore increase our understanding about the reasons and ongoing logic behind the recent communal conflict in Ambon. This also holds for many other cases of communal conflict in post-Soeharto Indonesia.

23 One can question whether this self-proclaimed societal status was shared among broader segments of the population. In the town of Ambon, these ‘akar rumput’ (grassroots) were definitely popular among some sections of society as they were considered to be the defenders of the neighbourhood in case conventional security forces failed in this task. On the other hand, these organizations were also referred to as ‘geng-geng’ and many people noted that, as the conflict progressed, the aggression with which these ‘gangs’ claimed free food or constantly asked for ‘uang rokok’ (tips, literally ‘money for cigarettes’) dramatically increased. In some cases, businesses were extorted in exchange for protection.

References

Adam, Jeroen

Adam, Jeroen and Lusia Peilouw

Aditjondro, George Junus

Azca, M. Najib
2003 ‘The landscape of the security forces in the conflict in Ambon; From the national panorama to the local picture’. Paper, Conference ‘Sectarian violence in Eastern Indonesia; Causes and consequences’, University of Hawai’i, 16-18 May.

Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Maluku

Bartels, Dieter

2000 ‘Your God is no longer mine; Moslem-Christian fratricide in the Central Moluccas (Indonesia) after a half-millennium of tolerant co-existence and ethnic unity’, in: Sandra Pannell (ed.), A state of emergency; Violence,

2003
‘The evolution of God in the Spice Islands; The converging and diverging of Protestant Christianity and Islam in the colonial and post-colonial periods’. Paper, Symposium ‘Christianity in Indonesia’ at the Frobenius Institute of the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt, 12-14 December.

Benda-Beckmann, Franz von
1990

Benda-Beckmann, Franz von and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann
2004

Bertrand, Jacques
2002
‘Legacies of the authoritarian past; Religious violence in Indonesia’s Moluccan Islands’, Pacific Affairs 75-1:57-85.

Brass, Paul R.
1996

1997

Brouwer, Arie
1998
How ordinary folk became involved in the Ambonese conflict

Chauvel, Richard
1980 ‘Ambon’s other half; Some preliminary observations on Ambonese Moslem society and history’, Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs 14:40-80.

Clark, Samuel

Cramer, Christopher
2002 ‘Homo Economicus goes to war; Methodological individualism, rational choice and the political economy of war’, World Development 30-11:1845-64.

Davidson, Jamie S.
2008 From rebellion to riots; Collective violence on Indonesian Borneo. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.

Davis, Michael
2002 ‘Laskar Jihad and the political position of conservative Islam in Indonesia’, Contemporary Southeast Asia 24-1:12-33.

Eklöf, Stefan
2003 Power and political culture in Suharto’s Indonesia; The Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) and decline of the New Order (1986-98). Copenhagen: NIAS.

Fearon, James D. and David D. Laitin

Fraassen, Christiaan F. van

Goss, Jon

Hasan, Noorhaidi
2002 ‘Faith and politics; The rise of the Laskar Jihad in the era of transition in Indonesia’, Indonesia 73:45-170.

Hefner, Robert W.

Kalyvas, Stathis N.
2006 The logic of violence in civil war. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Keen, David
2002 ‘Incentives and disincentives for violence’, in: Mats Berdal and David

Klinken, Gerry van

Knaap, Gerrit J.

Liddle, William R.
1996 *‘The Islamic turn in Indonesia; A political explanation’, The Journal of Asian Studies* 55-3:613-34.

Palmer, Blair

Pannell, Sandra

Purdey, Jemma

Ratnawati, Tri

Schulte Nordholt, Henk

Sidel, John T.

Singh, Bilveer
2003 *‘The 2004 presidential elections in Indonesia; Much ado about nothing?’, Contemporary Southeast Asia* 25-3:431-48.

Soselisa, Hermien L.

Tim Peneliti Universitas Indonesia

Tim Pengkajian