Birgit Bräuchler

The Cultural Dimension of Peace. Decentralization and Reconciliation in Indonesia.

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After violence broke out between Muslims and Christians in Ambon in December 1998, it rapidly spread all over the large archipelagic province of Maluku. More than 4,000 died. It took three years before peace returned. Exhausted by fighting that had achieved nothing beyond the ruination of the landscape, and largely left to their own devices by Jakarta, locals did most of the negotiating themselves. They made peace mainly on the basis of shared 'traditional' values known as *adat*. They restored to honour hereditary village chiefs (*raja*). They revived customary reconciliation rituals (*pela*) between related villages otherwise divided by religion. Local scholars elevated the Malukan philosophy of *siwalima* that, they said, embraced religious diversity within cultural unity. This book examines that process of indigenous peace-building. It argues that reviving the memory of cultural institutions transcending religious difference not only helped to save Maluku, but this practice has something to contribute to peace studies anywhere in the global south.

This is Birgit Bräuchler's synthetic statement of all the work on neo-traditionalist forms of post-conflict reconciliation in Maluku that she has been writing about for more than a decade. It is a ringing call for a new approach in peace studies: one that takes local culture seriously as a basis for both transitional justice and reconciliation. Bräuchler argues with passionate conviction that peace can only work if it runs with the grain of local practices, identities, and institutions. Rather than impose international norms of 'reconciliation' and 'justice', she wants post-conflict programs to ground themselves in the anthropological study of indigenous practices.

Bräuchler's book is a coherent, thoughtful argument that never falls into the trap of romanticizing some fixed idea of tradition. At the same time, she dismisses as inadequate the insistence on formal legal process as the only valid post-conflict resolution mechanism. Instead, she supports a rapprochement between formal state institutions and informal local cultural ones, the latter reinvented as necessary to achieve new forms of legitimacy. Reinvention is actually part of the argument, because it offers the potential for bottom-up participation by ordinary folk. An excellent chapter (4) traces the historical development of locally legitimate authority from colonial times to the present. That this authority is obviously a postcolonial construct evidently does nothing to detract from its genuine legitimacy.

The approach builds on other important work, including a 1997 intervention by Carolyn Nordstrom on peace-building in Mozambique and Sri Lanka, and on a book by Stover and Weinstein entitled *My Neighbor, My Enemy* (2004). Both argued that no post-conflict 'reconciliation' to reintegrate a riven community is possible without cultural legitimacy. The norms must be somehow familiar. Peace studies are incomplete without an anthropological perspective.

Attractive as this may sound, however, the thesis will also be controversial. After all, and unsurprisingly, rural Maluku's 'traditional' values are deeply illiberal. Even when reinterpreted by a younger generation, hierarchy remains the rule. Impunity for past crimes is part of the traditional reconciliation deal. 'Outsiders' are regarded with suspicion, not to say dismissed on dubious chauvinistic grounds. National law is seen as distant—the talk is of 'legal pluralism' and 'multiple citizenship'. The sense of rights-based citizenship, consequently, is weak. Nowhere does this become clearer than in the chapter on decentralization (2). Policy-makers in Jakarta thought of this as perfectly congruent with democracy and human rights. But in rural Indonesia, decentralization spelled a 'return' to deep-seated local(ist) values that had nothing to do with human rights.

Yet critics who accuse Bräuchler of overlooking the negatives would be missing the nuances of her argument. She has thought about these issues and taken a position on them. She engages in reasoned debate with a broad literature written from more conventional, western-universalist points of view. At all times she displays scrupulous honesty while deliberating every angle of this complex problem. It may not please us as westerners, but liberalism is simply not a strong tradition in the rural villages of Maluku. Nor is it in so many other war-ravaged villages in the global south, from Cambodia to South Sudan.

Critics may fault her, too, for ignoring the black economy that lay behind the Maluku fighting. The communalized predation on state funds that led to the conflict, the dark funding that fed it, and the criminal diversion of humanitarian assistance afterwards, make no appearance in the book (though economic destruction and reconstruction are prominent). This neglect is less excusable, and in my opinion represents the blind spot of the cultural turn in peace studies that the book champions. Carolyn Nordstrom went on to examine the shadow economy of such warfare (2004). There is a book on the same topic waiting to be written for Maluku.

No other book about Indonesia's post-conflict resolutions that I know of—and there are a number now—deals with this fundamental problem of universalist versus local culturalist perspectives as thoroughly as this one. The book is aimed at students of peace and conflict, at anthropologists of violence, as well

as at peace practitioners. It is an important agenda-setting work, which ought to stimulate healthy controversy.

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