

***Violence and Vengeance: Religious Conflict and Its Aftermath in Eastern Indonesia.* By Christopher R. Duncan. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013. Softcover: 239pp.**

Were the savage communal wars that broke out in the Moluccas after the resignation of President Soeharto in 1998 “about” religion, or about access to state resources for predatory local elites? Most studies have argued that it was the latter, but for the non-elite farmers and small-town folk who populate Christopher Duncan’s book, only religion mattered. As one Muslim man told the author “I personally think the conflict was definitely about religion ... If it was a political problem I would not have gotten involved. ... We opposed Christians and I consider it a jihad” (p. 119).

Violence and Vengeance is the best description we have of the post-New Order communal wars from the viewpoint of the participants. It focuses on the long-running fighting in northern Halmahera, part of the Moluccas. Sustained violence also took place in parts of Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and elsewhere in the Moluccas, but this was the bloodiest episode of the turbulent years after the collapse of the authoritarian New Order regime in 1998. Fuelled by narratives of revenge and retaliation, Christians and Muslims developed a “war-induced essentialism” (p. 170) about the other. This had no room for tragedy or guilt, and justified one’s own ferocity by the fact that “they started it”. Once the violence had ebbed to exhaustion, participants engaged only reluctantly in rituals of reconciliation. At home many taught their children never again to trust someone from the other faith. “A religious war is never over”, said a Christian refugee who had fled to another island, “You can have peace between countries, but between religions, never” (p. 119).

Violence erupted only after local elites — anxious to seize opportunities presented by the institutional chaos of fast-track democratization and decentralization — had continually upped the ante. But the weapons were seized by locals, who were moved by quite different concerns. They were engaged in a “global”, indeed a “cosmic” battle of the religions — even if that meant fighting neighbours and brothers. That is why the Christian villagers of Duma, near Tobelo, chose to stay and defend their historic church, at the cost of almost certain death. That is why young Muslim men from the comfortable town of Ternate signed up for dangerous *jihad* in the dry hills of northern Halmehera.

Chris Duncan has spent years in northern Halmahera. He rightly criticizes existing research on the conflicts for trivializing non-elite experiences. He pointedly tells us that the locals “don’t appreciate being told that they don’t understand their own experiences” (p. 176). Where the political scientists and sociologists — myself among them — have written about causal mechanisms and chronologies, it took an anthropologist to discover that the participants themselves used a totally different language to describe the war. Indeed, it is their version of the story that future generations will remember. Concrete funeral monuments that they built afterwards honour dead fighters as “martyrs” who died for religion, not for bigger decentralization budgets.

In aiming thus to “go beyond causation” (p. 7), Chris Duncan has done the field a service. Yet at the same time he has created a dilemma. Are we now condemned to have two irreconcilable interpretations of the same episode of violence? One sociological/political science, etic, and elitist, another anthropological, emic, and non-elite? One that describes the material causes of the episode, and another the immaterial religious motivations of the participants?

There is in fact a moment in the book when these two accounts meet. I want to focus on this moment, because it offers a way of bridging the two accounts. At the end of July 1999 a “letter” began to circulate in the region purporting to be from the Christian church and sketching a Christian plan to launch a pre-emptive war on Muslims. Although a patent forgery to those in the know, the letter was widely believed. It transformed what had, until then, been a local political scuffle about which ethnic group should have dominance within a newly created subdistrict (part of the decentralization programme). Afterwards, everyone suddenly believed the real issue was a looming religious war threatening the whole of society. In the resulting moral panic, the framing of the issue changed from a mildly interesting local dispute to a war that gripped everyone.

The notion of framing connects the interests of elites with the vague ideas in the heads of most ordinary folk. Here, too, framing does not simply explain why the storyline changed for those folk, but also what role elites had in promoting that change. Ethnic elites involved in the subdistrict dispute wished to expand their alliances by presenting it as a religious issue. Such ideological manipulation of public opinion was common in all the communal wars of that period. In this case, it was so successful (“frame alignment” occurred) that the issue ran away from those who thought up the

inflammatory provocation. Duncan's book is a graphic illustration of the dangers elites face when they try to serve their own interests by fanning the flames of popular anger. Pretty soon, urban elite interests became irrelevant as an increasingly savage war took its own course in rural areas. Highlighting the extent to which a runaway war can become decoupled from its initial conditions is Duncan's greatest contribution to this debate.

Tambiah's notions of focalization and transvaluation — which describe the way perceptions change during a conflict — help Duncan map the transformation. Still, framing potentially has more analytical power than these agent-less processes do, because it is a relational concept. It asks who does what to whom, where and when. It helps to reconnect the two accounts and makes it possible to write one coherent description of the entire course of the war, from its initial causation, through its transformation, to its de-escalation and demobilization. The later phases of a violent conflict are rarely researched and poorly understood in general terms. It seems to be important to pursue a coherent general understanding of such extremely violent episodes. The matter is too important to be abandoned at the level of a demarcation dispute between political scientists and anthropologists. Duncan's book is a major contribution to that dialogue — perhaps greater than even the author realizes.

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