

# Conspiracy Theories, Apocalyptic Narratives and the Discursive Construction of 'the Violence in Maluku'<sup>1</sup>

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The toughest test to the public sense of national unity in Post-Suharto Indonesia has arguably been the sectarian violence in Maluku and North Maluku. The spectre of a religious 'Balkanisation' has loomed large in the public mind in Indonesia for a long time, but seemed to many people to have been realised when fighting broke out in Ambon on 19 January 1999. Coined as a 'religious' conflict, Maluku came to represent the public fear of national disunity and disorder. Instead of 'balkanisasi', the media began to speak of 'ambonisasi' and of the danger of other areas being 'diambonkan' (see Bali Post 30 May 2000). Early in the conflict in 1999, a survey by a leading magazine—I believe it was *Tempo*—showed that 40 per cent of the readers feared

'religiously motivated' violence, a number far higher than that recorded for other possible causes of national disintegration. No doubt that index of national 'religious anxiety' has risen sharply since the conflict escalated into total mayhem after December 1999, the influx of outside *Laskar Jihad* troops since 6 May 2000, and culminating in the declaration of a state of civil emergency (*darurat sipil*) in Maluku and North Maluku on 26 June 2000.

In accounting for the horrific outbreak of violence in Maluku—a spate of violence that has killed between 4,000 and 10,000 people (see Aditjondro 2000b), progressively destroyed the physical infra-structure, and poisoned social life in most parts of Maluku and North Maluku—one type of explanation has been prevalent among academic commentators, media observers, and local Malukan people. This explanation, which I label 'instrumentalist', sees the violence as the result of a combination of political instigation and criminal provocation. The violence is thus interpreted as the result of deliberate staging by vulnerable incumbents and eager contenders within national and regional politics as well as within the military hierarchy for the purpose of turning attention away from the inadequacies of their rule or to generate an unstable climate in which the intensification of state power and military presence would be accepted, even demanded.

Providing somewhat of an outline of the dubious characters, shady deals and illicit relations that supposedly make up the background of the so-called 'disturbance' (*kerusuhan*) in North and Central Maluku, these explanations have offered a frightening and fascinating glimpse into the stochastic nature of *reformasi* politics, in which the centralised power which supposedly characterised New Order rule has been replaced by numerous 'small Suhartos' eager to seize the opportunities to economic gain or access to political influence left in the new social landscape of a decentralised and a slowly democratising Indonesia (see Aditjondro 2000a; Aditjondro 2000b; Human Rights Watch 1999; Tapol 2000; Tomagola 2000a; Tomagola 2000b).

I believe, however, that the instrumentalism in these and many other accounts—in which violence and ethno-religious opposition are seen as the result of political instrumentation—is problematic, since these explanations are unable to explain why violence took hold so tragically and expanded from Ambon to torch the whole province of Maluku as well as the newly established province of North Maluku. The instrumentalist explanations contain furthermore a number of problems in their understanding of social agency in general and of the complex dynamics of communal violence in particular. The continued occurrence of violent incidents in communities throughout Maluku and North Maluku for over two years, with the end to the year 2000 seeing only half-confident predictions that the fledgling **process of reconciliation** will result in sustained peace, suggests that violence has been perpetuating itself in these communities with

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a force, the origin of which cannot be explained merely in terms of elite politics.

While theories of political instigation and murky plots may explain some aspects of the origin of the violence, explanations inspired by a strictly political and instrumentalist theory of action tend to 'black-box' how elite machinations are made to resonate with local ideas and anxieties. What is left unexplained are the ways in which local ideas and anxieties come to function as both models of and model for the violence. As a result of this double nature as 'models of' and 'models for', **local explanations of past violence inscribe the violence with a narrative that also suggests possible avenues for future violent action.**

In order to capture the micro-social, but by no means merely local, processes that gives rise to violent clashes—processes of symbolic imagination and social practice—I will argue that a 'bottom-up', ethnographic approach is needed as a counter to purely instrumentalist accounts of the '*kerusuhan*' in Maluku. My tack on such an approach is to try to elucidate the motives, reasons and emotional narratives of those who witness, participate in or become the victims of violence. How do they conceptualise, narrate and provide explanations of the violent incidents they experience? And how do these narratives and explanations play into the reproduction of violence? If it remains aware of the dangers of primordialising violence as well as those of merely reducing violence to culture, such an approach could begin to sketch out the cultural and symbolic aspects of violence.

Based on examples from fieldwork on the North Malukan island of Halmahera in July-August 1999 as well as on examples gleaned from media accounts and the literature on the violence in Maluku, I focus on the narratives of violence as these were created and circulated by the media and by word-of-mouth. One of the narratives of violence was a millenarian narrative in which an up-coming apocalyptic battle between Christians and Muslims was envisaged. I argue that this narrative, though not the only one present, was involved in sustaining the violence in both Central and North Maluku.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> I thank the editors of ANTROPOLOGI INDONESIA, in particular Dr Yunita Winarto, for inviting me to present an earlier version of this argument at the AI international conference in Makassar, 1-4 August 2000. The presentation spawned a host of insightful and critical comments, some of which I hope to have integrated, others of which I am afraid I have been unable to give sufficient consideration here. I thank all the participants in the session '*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*': *Masih Mungkinkah?* for three days of stimulating discussion. I am extremely grateful for the financial support I received from the Ford Foundation, which allowed me to attend the conference and visit a number of refugee camps in North Sulawesi. In this respect, I thank Ibu Suzy Rahmani, Program Officer at IEF, and Bapak Semiarto Aji Purwanto of AI for all their help. Apart from two short stints of fieldwork in 1999 and 2000, I have conducted fieldwork in Halmahera for a total of some 28 months since 1991. Most of it has been carried out in mainly Christian villages but given the fact that relationships between Muslims and Christians in Halmahera—at least until August 1999—were close, interdependent and frequently

The millenarian narrative both fuelled and was fed by the conspiratorial tone to most media reports about the violence. It shared with the instrumentalist explanations the notion of unseen but powerful forces conspiring to destroy the 'peaceful' social climate that was being fantasised as characteristic of the past in Maluku and North Maluku. Though driven by different political imaginations, the instrumentalist explanations—circulated both locally and in the media—and the millenarian accounts of the origin of the violence shared the same conspiratorial tenor and helped cross-fertilise each other. Both narratives became actors in the violence by explaining past attacks on one's own group as the result of demonic intentions on the part of the enemy and thus providing moral sanction for counter-attacks on this enemy.

### **Instrumentalist explanations of violence and why they cannot stand alone**

The instrumentalist explanation of violence, in which violence is taken to be the instrument of political will, is by no means new. Seeing violence as the result of intentional instigation, as Brubaker and Laitin note, has been 'a classical theme in the sociology of conflict' since the 1950s (Brubaker 1998:433). As a conventional explanation for violence, instrumentalist theories have also become dominant within Indonesian sociology and anthropology, in particular in accounts of late- and post-New Order conflicts.

Though dominant in accounts of the fighting in North and Central Maluku, instrumentalist explanations are not alone in making up the academic explanatory landscape. Other approaches—concentrating mainly on the conflict in Central Maluku—have explored how the recent history of socio-economic differentiations played into ethnic and religious oppositions (Pelly 1999) or have attempted—with varying degrees of success—to elucidate how the break-down of local traditions such as *pela* and *gandong* during New Order rule or incompatibilities in the 'rules of engagement' between ethnic groups may have precipitated the conflict (Bartels 2000; Pattiselano 1999; Suparlan 1999a). Yet others have been tempted to see the violence as arising out of economic disparity and a general crisis of legitimacy in New Order institutions (Alqadrie 1999; Suparlan 1999b). The most cogent analyses have tried to avoid mono-causal explanations by distancing themselves equally from simplistic culturalist explanations and rational choice theory. Instead they have detailed the numerous ways in which state-society relations **created the conditions for violent opposition in Maluku** (see van Klinken 2000). Rizal Mallarangeng for instance makes a strong plea for detailed analyses of the mi-

familial, I have been able to follow over an extended period how Halmaherans—Muslim and Christian—have adapted their experience of the violence, whether direct or indirect, to pre-existing but changing local narratives.

cro-level social contexts of the violent incidents instead of the reliance on formulaic and repetitive explanations, which so far has characterised academic explanations of the Maluku conflict (Mallarangeng 2000). In a passage that closely resembles the argument I am making in this paper, Mallarangeng notes:

*Dari segi tanggung jawab keilmuan, kaum ilmuwan sosiallah yang sebenarnya harus tampil ke depan dan memberi jawaban-jawaban yang memuaskan. Tetapi sampai sekarang semua itu masih berupa harapan. Ironisnya, banyak di antara mereka malah mengambil jalan pintas dengan ikut-ikutan memakai teori konspirasi dan meyerukan adanya hantu-hantu provokator di balik segala perkara yang kita hadapi. Penjelasan seperti ini hanya mencerminkan kemalasan berpikir dan secara politik sebenarnya cukup berbahaya, sebab ia justru semakin mendorong terciptanya sebuah situasi di mana setiap orang akan saling menuduh dan mencurigai (Mallarangeng 2000).<sup>3</sup>*

In spite of Mallarangeng's reminder 'to bring society back in' and van Klinken's timely warning that 'Jakarta [is] not the master key to understanding Maluku' (van Klinken 2000:12), most explanations that grapple with the politics of the outbreak of violence in Maluku and North Maluku, including those by anthropologists, remain elitist. The overall tendency is thus to ignore the social context of local experiences and interpretations of the violence in favour of more 'real' but apparently hidden sociological factors, and most accounts tend to employ an 'instrumentalist logic' in explaining the political aspects of violence.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps there is good reason for this. Well-tested and intuitively appealing, instrumentalist accounts have formidable explanatory potential. That it may also be politically expedient to blame all instances of social unrest on the former, now formally defunct and effectively demonised regime, does not necessarily detract from its academic merits.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> 'Social scientists in fact have a scientific responsibility to step forward and provide satisfactory answers. However, until now the hope that this would happen has remained faint. Ironically, many social scientists have instead opted for the easy way out and queued up to use conspiracy theories that appeal to the existence of ghost-like provocateurs behind every instance [of violence] we come up against. Such a type of explanation merely reflects an indolent way of thinking that in fact in political terms is quite dangerous, precisely because it promotes the creation of a climate in which everyone increasingly accuses and suspects each other.'

<sup>4</sup> For other classifications of the representations of the violence, see Pradadimara 2000, van Klinken 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Spreading the word that the current violence is not religious but the result of political manoeuvring is an important tactic by moderate politicians and religious leaders to keep more radical political protagonists from using the violence to garner support. Thus many leading Islamic politicians in Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and the National Awakening Party (PKB), who support the rule of President Abdurrahman Wahid, use this moderate tactic. Choirol Anam, head of the East Java branch of PKB, is thus quoted as saying to the Far Eastern Economic Review: 'We tell them that the Moluccans are the victims of the political elite' (Cohen 2000). In this sense, instrumentalist theory may also come to serve the function of denying the idea that the conflict is religious and may

The instrumentalist explanations of the violence in Maluku and elsewhere in Indonesia are thus revealing that not all has changed in the Era Reformasi. As the 'Post New Order' wears on, the political explanations of the violence are coming to the daunting, if perhaps not surprising, realisation that Suharto-style cronyism was not abolished in May 1998 with Suharto's resignation. Instead the play for power is fragmented with numerous heirs to Suharto cronyism appearing everywhere as government commissions unveil ever more cases of KKN (*korupsi, kolusi, nepotisme*) and as NGOs struggle to explain the many instances of communal violence. Seemingly, the political beheading of the king did not cut his power: Suhartoism did not end with the formal end to Suharto. This entails a very important object lesson in the workings of power in Indonesia (as anywhere). Power, it is being realised, is not—perhaps never was—a centralised force emanating uniformly from the Presidential Palace. Rather it is replicated and reproduced in new ways in numerous localities in the periphery and the legacy of New Order rule entails a trenchant rethinking of the relationship between state and society and between politics and meaning.

However, an instrumentalist explanation, while highly illuminating when looking at the 'political organisation' of communal violence cannot stand alone, nor is it without its problems. The first problem is that an instrumentalist explanation tends to ascribe omnipotent power to those suspected of promoting, instigating, and controlling the violence. Although we might suspect that it is in someone's interest to promote the violence, how do we know they are able to do so? The will to act is not necessarily synonymous with the ability to act.

The second problem has to do with the consequences of action. Social actors, no matter how powerful, are rarely able to foresee the consequences of their actions. Michel Foucault has phrased this aptly, if somewhat awkwardly: 'People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do, but what they don't know is what what they do does'. (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982:187). Our actions may, in other words, have more unintended than intended consequences. There is therefore a danger in deducing a clear and unadulterated intention behind an event, since events emerge out of a complex set of reasons other than individual, willed action. Instrumentalist explanations thus run the danger of employing a simplified idea of power, in which events are the sole outcome of intended consequences by rational actors capable of organising future events at their whim.

While highlighting the actions of central—if often nebulous—political figures, instrumentalist explanations tend, furthermore, to ignore the experiences and actions of the

thus form the basis for a process of reconciliation by blaming all violence on 'outsiders' and 'provocateurs' and exonerating all locals. My argument, however, is that this tactic is unlikely to succeed and may in fact well have the opposite effect of creating a general climate of suspicion and uncertainty.

actors supposedly duped into participating in the violence. Violence is thereby reduced to being the mobilisation of 'primordial' identities, which actors supposedly carry in an unquestioned and unilateral manner. In short, violence becomes solely the result of 'social, economic, and political circumstances and calculations' by those 'in power' (see Tambiah 1996:30). Again, while accepting the necessity of exposing the political elite behind the violence, it is important not to accept *tout court* the implicit assumptions about power, actors and primordial identities that instrumentalist explanations tend to harbour, especially for an area as vast and varied as the 1,000-odd islands of Maluku and North Maluku.

An important aspect of a critique of the 'instrumentalist reason' at work in most account of the violence of Maluku and North Maluku is thus to counter the tendency to essentialise 'Maluku' and 'North Maluku' as homogenous regions in which 'violence' occurred in a mechanical and linear manner. Instead, we need to look at the way identities and antagonisms are established in varying ways locally. Identity never merely 'is'. It has to be produced and maintained. Identity is also never singular, but multiple and segmentary. Any claim to identity, say religious identity, therefore has to be aligned with other identities: gender-, kinship-, age-, or class-based identities might be important as might be identities based on language, profession, status, social competence and a sense of ethnic belonging. We therefore need to look at the circumstances under which one identity may rise to prominence over others rather than accepting 'identity' as a primordial fact, which is 'there' to be manipulated or 'stirred'.

It is important that my point here is not misunderstood. Clearly, political intentions are at work in all conflicts. The problem is how we weigh these against the actual events. Are the violent events to be explained solely by acts of instigation of those parties who have an interest in generating violence? As necessary as instrumentalist, sociological explanations and rational theory are in diagnosing the political organisation of violence, they need to be augmented by other approaches that try to get at all the varied experiences, meanings, symbols and narratives that go into violence; in short the 'cultures of violence' that assign horrible meanings to the myriad of brutal clashes that make up the conflict in Maluku and North Maluku.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The quotation marks around 'cultures of violence' are meant to indicate my reservations both toward the concept of 'culture' as a transparent, homogenous and synchronic entity—hence the awkward plural—as well as toward 'violence' as a unified, unproblematic phenomenon (for critiques of essentialising uses of these concepts, see Abu-Lughod 1991; Keesing 1994; Nordstrom 1997; Steedly 1999). I use the concept of 'cultures of violence' merely as a shorthand way of distinguishing an analysis focusing on the symbolic, performative, narrative and cultural aspects of local experience of violence—multifarious and particular as these are—from instrumentalist accounts of the 'political organisation of violence'.

Rather than unquestioningly taking politics to be the domain of the pragmatic and common-sensical, we also need to get at the meanings and patterns of symbolism out of which political strategies necessarily evolve. It is therefore not my aim to dichotomise political and cultural explanations. On the contrary, I suggest a broader approach that deals with the patterns of meaning in the political as well as the politics of meaning. Violence is clearly the result of a politics of meaning, but this politics is necessarily crafted and enacted with reference to specific ideas about what constitute 'the political'. As has been emphasised by a number of researchers, violence is not merely a tactic directed at political goals, but frequently assumes the form of drama or theatre in the sense of being 'dramatic events intended to impress for their symbolic significance. As such they can be analysed as one would any other symbol, ritual, or sacred drama' (Juergensmeyer 2000:123; see also Davis 1973; Feldman 1991; Kapferer 1997; Nordstrom 1997; Tambiah 1996). I wish to suggest accordingly that the violent clashes in Maluku and North Maluku achieved part of their social meaning and significance as 'religious' by being inscribed in many Malukan communities within a particular kind of symbolic discourse, namely a millenarian narrative that equated the violence with a divine transformation of the world. This inscription came to direct many of the local interpretations of the violence and in the end became 'constitutive' of its unfolding. The inscription inevitable centred—at least in many Christian communities—on encounters with God.

### Meeting God in the midst of violence

On 19 January 1999, at the end of the *Ramadhan*, violence with a complex set of antagonists broke out in Ambon, after an everyday clash between the driver of a passenger van, nicknamed Yopy, and two youth of Bugis origin by the names of Usman and Salim, had spiralled out of control into large-scale fighting. The fighting spanned at least two local oppositions, one between Muslim and Christian neighbourhoods in Batu Merah and Mardika; another between local Ambonese and immigrants, especially immigrants from the southern parts of Sulawesi, but also including immigrants of Javanese and Minangkabau origin (Human Rights Watch 1999).

As fighting escalated to include most central districts of Ambon town, many women, children and men sought refuge in military barracks. Among these was a young woman of Halmaheran origin, let us call her Ria. On the night of the 20<sup>th</sup> of January, Ria suddenly had a vision of God, and over the next 6 nights, the 16-year-old was visited by the Christian divine being. Taking her to see life after death in Heaven, God told Ria that the world was to experience much hardship, death and suffering during 1999, but that the year 2000 would mark a time of transformation, in which the world, after a great blood-letting, would change for the better. Seeing this vision as part of the violence that over the next many

months would engulf the whole province of Maluku as well as the new province of North Maluku (that was established by decree No 46/1999 on 12 October 1999), Ria spent the next weeks touring the Christian communities on Ambon island telling of her encounter with God. Ria also recorded the story of her encounter on audiotape, which circulated the congregations of Maluku in poorly copied versions for months.

This is also how Ria's account came to my attention in August 1999. Rumours about 'a tape telling of the end of the world' had circulated for days before I finally managed to borrow the tape from a minister in a neighbouring village and listen to it. Several other villagers were eager to listen to the tape, too, and each playing of the tape attracted a small crowd of people who would in turn relay the story to their friends and kin.

Although many people in the Christian villages with which I was acquainted had heard the tape and many more had heard of it, there is no way of knowing the overall effect of Ria's visits and taped testimony. It is my distinct impression, however, that her testimony, and other testimonies like hers (for Ria's was only one of many testimonies that were disseminated throughout the two provinces of Maluku - on cassettes, in letters, and by word-of mouth), had the function of providing a grand narrative for the violence. By suggesting divine knowledge and possible guidance of the violence, the conflict that changed the life-world of all communities in Maluku and North Maluku became part of a larger, possibly global, divine plan. The presence of God seemed to confirm to Christians in Maluku that they were engaged in a cosmic battle as part of the prelude to doomsday (*dunia kiamat*). The linking of *kekerasan* (violence) and *kiamat* (doom) was, I think, prevalent throughout much of Maluku in 1999, and certainly I experienced it first-hand during fieldwork on Halmahera during July and August. God was thus sighted by several people independently during my fieldwork in Halmahera, and there have been reports of other sightings of the Christian God in other places of Maluku affected by the violence (see e.g. Ecip 1999:50; van Klinken 2000:15-16). In the months leading up to the first wave of violence on Halmahera in August 1999, rumours of and media reports from the violence in Ambon had thus convinced many people on Halmahera that the end of the world was at hand, and that the violence was intimately implicated in bringing about the Judgement Day which both frightened and fascinated many people.

Most of my direct observations on this stem from Christian communities in North Maluku, but it is my impression that similar sorts of associations between the Maluku violence and Judgement Day were made in Muslim communities. While this impression needs to be confirmed by detailed ethnographic analyses of the various forms 'Muslim imaginaries' have taken in North and Central Maluku, there is little doubt that the topic of the end of the world in the year 2000 was a major source of debate and gossip in both prov-

inces and indeed throughout Indonesia (and the rest of the world) towards the end of the year 1999 (see Bubandt 1998). The financial and political crisis that had dogged Indonesia since late 1997 as well as the large forest fires of 1997 and 1998 convinced many people in Maluku with whom I spoke that something in the world was serious awry, and it seemed that only a cosmic reordering of the universe could rectify the worldly problems that people experienced.

To the people in the village where I did fieldwork, this was certainly the case, and in making their assessment of the catastrophic proportions of the Ambon violence they were not against drawing on all the mishaps that they saw globally, nationally as well as locally. Sharply on the heels of the escalation of the violence in Ambon in July 1999, which the villagers could follow in detail every night on television, thanks to a new spirit of journalistic freedom since the fall of Suharto, and in conjunctions with the many local sightings of God, a young boy, working as a surveyor for the national mining company, *Aneka Tambang*, disappeared in the jungle behind the village. Lost in the vast forests of Halmahera, the boy was never found again despite several days of searching, and while the villagers speculated as to the possible involvement of local spirits in his disappearance, it was also evident that this was another sign that the world was in the process of being turned upside-down.

#### SARA and the production of 'religious identity'

I believe, then, that the inscription of the violence within a story of the end of the world was part of a narrative, which progressively convinced many people that the violence was of a religious nature. Interpreting the violence as religious was not a foregone conclusion in the middle of 1999, when newspapers only hinted that the violence in Ambon was '*bernuansa SARA*' (had nuances of SARA).

The acronym SARA describes, of course, the socio-political markers that New Order rule had made illegal as the basis for political campaigning: *suku*, *agama*, *ras*, *antargolongan* (ethnicity, religion, race and social division). During New Order rule, SARA was the acronym for the topics tabooed in public discourse—a name naming what could not be said. The freedom of the press that accompanied the fall of Suharto's regime changed SARA into a descriptive term employed by the media to describe supposedly long-repressed, primordial forces being stirred by political *dalang* or puppeteers. Foremost amongst these 'primeval' forces of SARA, at least in accounts of the Malukan conflict, was religion.

But what exactly made religion the publicly acknowledged antagonism of the Maluku violence, when even precursory surveys of the violence show that the individual riots often played on many other local oppositions than religion (Bubandt 2000; Tomagola 2000a)? Although religious identity was definitely an important part of the identity of all Malukans, following 25 years of New Order propaganda to

get all Malukans to convert to either Islam, Protestantism or Catholicism by asserting that to have an affiliation to one of these world religions was the equivalent to being modern, progressive (*maju*) and enlightened (*sadar*), religion was not in all contexts the social identity of most importance in Maluku, and often local clashes turned on ethnic or traditional oppositions rather than religion. What gave religion the monopoly on explaining and furthering the violence in Maluku and North Maluku was not, as some have suggested, that a colonially created opposition between Muslims and Christians were stirred deliberately by members of the local and national elite. Maluku was thus neither a hotbed of religious animosity nor a paradise of religious tolerance before January 1999. It was a place where being Christian or Muslim was at times made into an occasion for local conflict, while at others it was differences in ethnic origin, in traditional affiliation, in occupation or in place of habitation that was seen as the cause of trouble. Religious affiliation was simply one among many social identities carried by people in Maluku, the source of pride, co-operation, **and** conflict, just as all other identities. Religion, in short, did not have a monopoly on 'identity'. Ethnic differences, traditional enmities, village differences or class differences could in various situations just as well be called upon to act as the basis and explanation for individual conflicts.

How religious identity was produced as the overshadowing identity in connection with the flaring of violence after January 1999—according to some reports the roots should be sought in minor outbreaks of violence in Dobo on Aru island already in November 1998 (e.g. Ecip 1999)—is what concerns me here. For religion to become **the** marker of one's identity and the source of violent behaviour, it had to achieve hegemonic status and this hegemonic status had to be **produced**.

I argue that this production of identity took place locally in many different ways throughout Maluku and drew from a number of sources: news reports, local hearsay, rumour, and gossip. I think that the millenarian narrative connected the Maluku violence to notions of doomsday and thereby made the violence part of a final, cosmic battle. There were no doubt other narratives that helped construct the violence in Maluku as religious, but the millenarian narrative was, I argue, one of the most important.

### **Coding, cascading and the production of religious antagonism**

Of course, many different factors went into producing religious identity as the encompassing identity in Maluku, and a variety of concepts may have been called upon to explain why and how one identity became 'overdetermined' as the main one.

I have here chosen a discursive approach, arguing that we have to look at the way reality is produced by speaking about it in certain ways. Other approaches would highlight

different aspects of the way the violence in Maluku came to be conceived of as religious above all. A behaviouristic analysis would perhaps focus on the way the activities of people who experience a crisis they see as religious in nature will shift from behaviour, ways of dress, and modes of consumption that are 'religiously neutral' to behaviour that is religiously charged. Introducing the symbols of religion into part of everyday life where they formerly had no place makes religious antagonism visible and thus promotes the overdetermination of religious identity. Such a process of religious 'cascading' (see Brubaker 1998:440; Laitin 1995), is for example discernible in Maluku and North Maluku by the wearing of red and white head-dress by the two warring fractions; by the introduction of words like 'Acang' to signify Muslim people and 'Obet' to signify Christians; and by the segregation of transport, restaurants, markets into those belonging to 'Acang' and those belonging to 'Obet'.

One might also look at the way the borders of religious difference, once established, are 'policed' by in-group sanctions; or one could look at the way the violence changes status relations and social intercourse in the affected communities (Hansen 1996; Peteet 1994). For instance, it appears that a preponderant majority of both perpetrators and victims of the violence in Maluku and North Maluku, up until the introduction of modern weapons—many seemingly of military issue—and the indiscriminate killings by snipers, were young men. The changes in the social fabric of the Malukan communities that so many deaths among young people will inevitable bring has already been noted as a matter of concern. It will also be important to investigate the ways in which the violence is interpreted and internalised in the communities, just as it will be a crucial, if tragic, task to look at how the trauma of the violence will affect social interaction in Malukan communities in the future.

Looking at the processes of religious cascading, understanding the mechanisms of 'coding' and analysing the discourses on the violence, such as the millenarian narratives that linked the violence to a doomsday conceived in both religious and magic terms, are all part of understanding how the violence came to be interpreted as 'religious' by the Malukan participants, by the media, by the general public in Indonesia and by the world at large. We thus need to understand the process through which 'the religious violence in Maluku' was established as 'fact' (see also Brass 1997).

This entails, I believe, paying attention to the processes of the imaginary at work in the conflict, in particular the ways in which coding occurs. While coding may be the result of both practice and discourse (see Bubandt 2000), I am in this paper interested mainly in the discursive or narrative aspects of coding. The narratives of violence that were circulated through the media and word of mouth had the effect of casting the violence in a particular mould, namely an apocalyptic mould circulating around the themes of demonic conspiracy, apocalyptic show-down and millennial redemption,

thereby setting the religious agenda for its continuation. This reading of the violence re-mythologised the theme of religious opposition—a theme already laden with historical significance and political anxiety—in order to fit the new socio-political conditions in Indonesia and Maluku. The narratives, though constructed upon a both local and national symbolic imaginary, were thus ‘real’ and they had the potential to create ‘real’ identities.

### From symbolic violence to real violence: when talking shapes doing

I think there are two implications of my argument that a millenarian narrative was part of the reason why the violence in Maluku was established as being ‘in fact’ about religion. One is that the narrative not only helped **establish** the violence as religious; it also **promoted** further violence on religious grounds. The millenarian narrative was thus constitutive of the violence and its unfolding in Maluku, since it helped produce further violence (Bubandt 2000; see also Kapferer 1997).

An instance in which further violence was promoted by millenarian interpretations was when Silo Church in Ambon was razed during an intensification of fighting in late December 1999. The emotions generated by seeing the burnt church were recounted in a Christian Internet report that also relayed a millenarian approach to the violence.

At this moment, as the Church members and other Christians helplessly watched the church burn down, many could not control their emotions and wept unashamedly. The Christians were swept by emotions and resolved there and then that they would continue to wage war until the time of Jesus’ second coming.<sup>7</sup>

Another instance in which violence became the political praxis of millenarianism was at the outbreak of violence on Tidore island on 3-4 November 1999. The attack on the Christian community began after a letter—from the Protestant Synod in Ambon supposedly stating that all Muslims should be annihilated—was brought to the attention of a village administrator in the *lurah* of Indonesiana in Soa Sio. In an attempt to prevent violence the *lurah* called a village meeting, but when the local minister, Ari Riskotta, failed to show up to explain the content of the letter, he was attacked and killed in his home. During the ensuing fighting another nine people were hacked to death.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Yayasan Sagu: ‘Silo (Protestant) Church ceases to exist’ (30 December 1999, accessed at [www.maluku.org/hain/bahasa](http://www.maluku.org/hain/bahasa)).

<sup>8</sup> See Yayasan Sagu: ‘Maluku Report 28: Kronologi Pembantaian Umat Kristen di Soasiu’ (14 January 2000 accessed at [www.maluku.org/hain/bahasa](http://www.maluku.org/hain/bahasa)). The Protestant Synod denied any knowledge of such a letter and blamed ‘poison-pen’ writers for using such letters to deliberately cause havoc (see Sydney Morning Herald 20 May 2000: ‘Indonesia’s secret civil war’ at [www.smh.com.au](http://www.smh.com.au)). The Muslim Jihad Force Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah has similarly accused the Protestant Church in Maluku of forging letters and attributing them to the Muslim association

These instances show that among both Christians and Muslims the violence was feared as part of an all-out cosmic war that was to transform the world. Both feared total annihilation at the hands of the other, and often this was imagined as part of a greater plan. The divine sanction of one’s own actions seemed, on both sides, to be opposed by the demonic machinations of those of the other group. Among the Christians, but I believe also in the Muslim communities in Maluku, the violence thereby became closely linked with the notion of *dunia kiamat* (doomsday). What these instances also show is that millenarian interpretations acted to promote further violence or to legitimise pre-emptive strikes against the other by **establishing** either Christians or Muslims as the opponent group and assigning to this group a sinister, demonic role or motive.

There is also a second aspect of my argument that a millenarian narrative was part of the reason why the violence in Maluku was established as being ‘in fact’ about religion that I would like to briefly touch upon. This aspect concerns the interplay between rumour and news reports in creating a millenarian aura to the violence. Instrumentalist explanations are thus not restricted to academic accounts. Activist accounts, partisan analysis and media reports of the various violent incidents that make up the ‘Maluku violence’ also tend toward seeing violence as the deliberate result of political instigation.<sup>9</sup> These accounts more often than not take the conspiratorial logic that is latent in instrumentalist explanations to its extreme conclusion, seeing dark forces at home and abroad at play behind the violence. Conspiracy theory thereby comes to resemble millenarian narratives more than a little.

A conspiratorial logic infuses for instance the analyses linking the violence in Ambon to a supposed RMS plot to Christianise the whole of Maluku (see Kastor 2000a and the debate following the publication of his book, Kastor 2000b). The ghost of the RMS (*Republik Maluku Selatan*, or, as it has been renamed in some Muslim quarters, *Republik Maluku Serani*) is also raised by other commentators who see a separatist conspiracy behind the violence linked to prominent Christians in the government and the army. The goal of this conspiracy is supposedly to establish Maluku as a Christian nation and is supported, according to some, by expatriate Malukan groups in Holland (see Ecip 1999; Putuhena 1999. See also the official home page of the Laskar Jihad Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah at [www.laskarjihad.or.id](http://www.laskarjihad.or.id) or the news website [www.al-bunyan.net](http://www.al-bunyan.net)).

MUI in an attempt to blame it for staging the violence in Ambon (see Memorandum No. 2000.05 at [www.laskarjihad.or.id/bantu/memoeng.htm](http://www.laskarjihad.or.id/bantu/memoeng.htm)).

<sup>9</sup> See for instance Surat kabarCom: ‘Provokator Ambon dari Cendana dan General’ (27 May 2000 at [www.surat kabar.com](http://www.surat kabar.com)) for one of many media examples.

Christian commentators have their own conspiracy theories. Some see the Maluku violence as masterminded by 'certain Islamist military officers and organisations' in Indonesia in an attempt to 'Islamicise' the country (Jubilee Campaign 1999:1). And just as their Muslim counterparts, Christian observers suspect the violence as being staged in a deliberate attempt to effect a religious cleansing of Maluku.<sup>10</sup>

These partisan accounts that are being produced at a fast pace by both sides are made available to local Malukans through the media and added to their already abundant register of conspiracy theories. Accounts of abductions, drugged attackers, horrific mutilations and deceitful murder on the part of the opponent side fill everyday conversation in all Malukan communities, whether they are areas directly affected by the violence, refugee camps or relatively unaffected villages. My own visit to a number of refugee camps in North Sulawesi in August 2000 harbouring mainly Christian refugees from Halmahera, Ternate and Tidore confirmed that there is only a short step from theories of political conspiracy to apocalyptic narratives of doom: both feature a shadowy, demonic enemy; a deliberately staged battle between good and evil; and an unprecedented level of devastation.

Instead, then, of seeing apocalyptic scenarios as local expressions of a misrecognised political reality, it is in my view more fruitful to see them as part of a particular discourse on violence that is endemic in most accounts about events of the last two years in Central and North Maluku, whether they are academic explanations, media releases, activist and government reports, or local narratives. The millenarian narratives are not evidence of a particular kind of Christianity preached from the pulpit or a special type of Islam taught by the *imam*, but the reflection of a millenarian and conspiratorial political discourse that has been evident in Indonesia both before and after the fall of Suharto (see Bubandt 1998; Bubandt forthcoming). The game of searching for the political '*dalang*' behind the many cases of communal violence is thus in striking accordance with the notions of power described for Indonesian society by Benedict Anderson (Anderson 1990) and shows a pattern similar to the scapegoating of 'The Old Order' after 1965. Without implying a similarity in political morality or intent, there are, I think, some parallels between the media's and political analysts' search for the *dalang* behind the violence that has plagued the early Era Reformasi and the political scapegoating of the communist party that installed the New Order rule. Both conform to Anderson's analysis of the characteristics of cosmo-political renewal entailed by the Javanese conception of power (Anderson 1990). They seem to present, in other words, variations on a narrative theme of political

change, in which the demonic and chaotic characteristics of the previous regime are invoked as obstacles to the re-establishment of cosmos and order by the incumbent. The *dalang* is by nature nebulous and the precise identification therefore presents a never-ending interpretative problem. I contend that a conspiratorial social theory has evolved to address this problem (see Marcus 1999). These conspiracy theories are, I would argue, in form similar to apocalyptic explanations. For this reason, local Malukans have little difficulty translating from one narrative to the other and in many cases even fusing them.

When newspapers and the electronic media relay conspiratorial theories and rumours on a constant basis, when these news reports in turn are circulated by word of mouth and are exacerbated as part of village gossip, the line between fact and fiction becomes blurred. In the instance of the Maluku violence, this has a direct bearing on the unfolding of the violence, since news reports of one incident of violence frequently engenders new acts of violence in revenge to the reported—often enough exaggerated—outrages. We saw this happen for instance in the creation of the *Laskar Jihad* movement. The movement was launched in early January 2000, apparently after the ICMI-affiliated newspaper *Republika* had published a series of accounts which stated that more than 2000 people had been killed in Christian attacks on Muslim communities in Galela and Tobelo during the last days of December 1999.<sup>11</sup> In Maluku the exaggerated reports—based on exaggerated or partisan rumour—were received as confirmation of the cataclysmic proportions of the violence and thereby helped support local millenarian ideas that linked the violence to the end of the world. Ironically, then, media reports—supposedly the tools for promoting a democratic, rationalist and just society—have helped confirm the millenarian interpretations of the violence among local Malukans who are avid consumers of news reports. This, in turn, set the stage for further violence.

Part of the process of reconciliation in Maluku—aside from putting the political *dalangs* on trial (for I am not denying that they indeed exist), reforming the role of the army, rebuilding mutual tolerance and trust in Maluku and making local government more transparent and accountable—is thus also for the media (and here the international media is as

<sup>10</sup> See Sydney Morning Herald: 'Conflicting views' (8 January 2000) and 'Indonesia's secret civil war' (20 May 2000) at [www.smh.com.au](http://www.smh.com.au).

<sup>11</sup> At least according to an article in CNN On-Line: 'Indonesian Muslims continue anti-Christian protests in Jakarta' (7 January 2000 at [www.cnn.com/2000/Asianow](http://www.cnn.com/2000/Asianow)); see also The Jakarta Post: 'Editorial and Opinion. Partisan media in danger of violation' (16 February 2000 at [www.thejakartapost.com:8890](http://www.thejakartapost.com:8890)). Another instance is the adoption of the names 'Obet' and 'Acang' from a national TV spot aimed at promoting reconciliation between Christians and Muslims in Ambon. Instead of effecting reconciliation, the adoption of these names both as labels for the in-group and the opponent meant that the media became actively involved in providing a particular understanding of the violence as well as the contours of a reason to continue it (see Bubandt 2000).



guilty as the national media) to adopt a more self-critical and balanced stance.

## Conclusion

The clashes that make up 'the violence in Maluku' arise from a complex amalgam of reasons that are not amenable to one explanation or one type of explanation. Each of the hundreds of incidents and riots had their own political agendas, involved their own specific enmities and had their own social and cultural history.

In order to understand the dynamics of the individual instances of violence, I therefore advocate a broad approach in which we spread or 'disaggregate' our explanations across several disciplinary and theoretical approaches (see Brubaker 1998:446). We need instrumentalist explanations to provide us with a list of the *personae dramatis* in the political elite who promoted, maintained or deliberately refrained from quelling the violence. As has been documented by Dr. Thamrin Tomagola and his team, by Kontras, by Dr. George Aditjondro and by international NGOs like The Human Rights Watch, the myriad of violent clashes in Maluku and North Maluku hide a complex array of political operators from local elites, through military officers to Jakartan politicians and old regime die-hards—all with an interest and a manifest will to promote violent events in Maluku.

However, an instrumentalist explanation with its powerful 'movers-and-shakers' and a population portrayed as passive spectators or victims without their own interests or transformative capabilities has its dangers. In addition to remaining alert to the meta-narratives of instrumentalist explanations in a climate in which the need to exorcise the political past forms the only political common ground, we also need to supplement them with other explanations. The list of political actors in the violence should thus go beyond the political elite—whether national or local. We also need to understand the motives, emotions and agendas of those actively partaking in the violence as perpetrators, spectators, or victims. The devastating effects of the violence on the Malukan communities need to be investigated. How is the violence perceived and represented in the communities? What are the social effects of the local internalisation of the violence? What, for instance, will be the effect of the overrepresentation of young men, both as participants in riots and as their victims, within the overall 'demographics of violence' (see Aditjondro 2000b:2-3)? What kind of new status positions and masculine discourses are being generated by the 'jago-jagoan' of the violence? What role does the renewal or reinvention of tradition and traditional enmities—which we saw, for example, in the formation of the 'pasukan adat' in Ternate and Tidore (see Bubandt 2000; Tomagola 2000a)—have in the unfolding and local legitimisation of the violence? To fully answer these and other questions concerned with the local experience, meaning and po-

litical significance of the violence, I believe other approaches than the instrumentalist are called for.

In this paper I have outlined a 'culturalist' or 'discursive' approach that has tried to understand how the religious character of the violence came to be discursively established as fact. One of the ways this happened, I have argued, was by the inscription of the violence within a millenarian narrative that linked the violence to ideas about the end of the world, 'kerusuhan' to 'kiamat'. The millenarian narrative was a local narrative that was present in many Malukan communities already before violence began in January 1999, but the violence was fitted into the narrative along with the general political, financial and ecological crises in Indonesia after 1997. The narrative, I believe, is important in this regard because it fused with conspiratorial theories about the violence and thereby came to be constitutive of the unfolding of the violence by promoting and legitimising further attacks on the opposition. Fuelled in part by national media reports, the linking of the violence with scenarios of the end of the world and hidden political actors became, I argue, a major factor in explaining and promoting violence among both Christians and Muslims.

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