

Can Central Sulawesi Christians and Muslims get along ? An Analysis of Indonesian Regional Conflict¹

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Introduction

The goal of this article is to examine twentieth-century conflicts in Central Sulawesi for issues related to the Indonesian archipelago's challenges to achieve 'Unity in Diversity' (*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*). This paper was researched largely prior to the recent (April-June 2000) outbreaks of violence in Poso, so the main discussion concerns earlier events. Yet, there is understanding to be gained from

viewing contemporary provincial problems not only as unique historical events, but also as the latest in a sequence of divisive incidents.

Located between Muslim-majority South Sulawesi and Christian-majority North Sulawesi, Central Sulawesi often is envisioned as a logical place for religious conflict. Yet, indigenous peoples who were closely related in the precolonial era became increasingly separated along ethnic and religious lines only during the twentieth-century. Dutch colonists sought to divide animist highlanders, who were potential Christian converts, from incipient Muslim lowlanders. The Japanese occupation of the highlands expedited an indigenous Christianity there by removing the European missionaries. After World War II, the region experienced overflows of religiously framed rebellions from South and North Sulawesi. President Suharto's army suppressed religious and ethnic tensions in the province, but did not eliminate them. Rather, government policies increased migration, economic competition, and alienation between Muslim and Christian groups.

Central Sulawesi's history will be discussed here primarily from the standpoint of the western highlands (Kecamatan Kulawi), where I concentrated my fieldwork, and secondarily from the standpoint of the lowlands. By the 1980s and early 1990s, there were increasing religious rivalries for government favor, and competition for jobs and land between longtime residents and newcomers in urban or transmigration areas. Despite occasional expressions of jealousy or perceptions of discrimination, however, there also was a noticeable amount of tolerance and even intermarriage in the Donggala Regency (Kabupaten Donggala), this suggests that recent conflicts, which appear to be religious disputes, actually involve more historically-complicated resentments concerning the allocation of local resources.

In western Central Sulawesi at least, evidence about precolonial (pre-twentieth century) social relations indicates the routine existence of small-scale warfare, but no persistent division between lowland (now Muslim) and highland (now Christian) groups, until the split was envisioned and enforced by the Dutch administration. Indigenous concepts of 'ethnicity' were extremely localized, relating mainly to a kin-based community's current farmlands. Lowlanders and highlanders traded goods, contracted war alliances, and intermarried strategically. The concept of 'religion', in the sense of a scriptural religion or *agama*, did not yet exist in the highlands, nor probably for many in the lowlands. The major languages of Central Sulawesi, now referred to as Kaili-Pamona (Barr, Barr, and Salombe 1979; Noorduyn 1991), are a mosaic of chain dialects likely formed as early swiddening communities fragmented and spread along river drainages. In sum, there are no 'natural' cultural or linguistic divisions between all highlanders and all lowlanders although they are each economically specialized to their mountain or coastal

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environments.²

Historical background

Even ethnohistorical data on western Central Sulawesi indicate that, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, animist highlanders in the Kulawi District did not have a consistently adversarial relationship to lowland Muslim Kaili kingdoms such as Sigi, but rather were their trade partners and military allies, sometimes even against other highland groups (Aragon 1966a, 2000a). Moreover some recent missionary-linguists, instead of dividing the Kaili-Pamona language family neatly between Muslim lowlanders and Christian highlanders, have concluded that the Moma language of (Christian) Kulawi people is an outlier dialect of Kaili, the language spoken by coastal Muslims (Barr, Bra, and Salombe 1979). Therefore, in western Central Sulawesi at least, the early twentieth century social distance between lowland Muslims and highland animists was never as large as portrayed by the Dutch colonists.

Dutch administrators introduced missionaries to the highlands and disrupted economic and political ties between lowland Muslims and the 'pagan' highlanders generically called

'Toraja', who were their targets for Christian conversion. The Dutch Indies government also forbade what they called 'tribute' exchanges between the highlands and lowlands, thereby severing economic reciprocity between the regions (Aragon 1996a, 2000b; Kruyt 1938). While undermining precolonial economic ties, the Dutch government restructured the fluctuating local political system with a linear hierarchy of newly appointed 'chiefs' or '*raja-raja*' and began introducing imported goods into the regional economy. Missionized highlanders were drawn into new economic, educational, and political alliances with the Dutch, who aimed to separate the potential Christian converts from all external and unwanted, that is Muslim, influences.

Despite colonial government and missionary efforts, Islam also gained followers after Dutch conquest for a variety of practical and ideological reasons. Islamic revivalism in the lowlands and urban centers of Indonesia became an early twentieth century symbol of opposition against Dutch rule. Even missionary writings indicate that Islam increased in popularity (Kruiy 1938). Roads were made more secure for Muslim merchants to migrate into the highlands, and Muslim coastal residents—who were more apt to know the Malay language employed by colonists—often were hired as middlemen to help the Dutch administer and collect taxes from the highland 'tribes'. As in most European-conquered nations that had received prior exposure to Islam (cf. Lawrence 1998), Muslim calls for social justice inspired many Muslim-based nationalist groups interested in independence (Ricklefs 1981).

In 1942, Japanese soldiers forcibly removed most European missionaries from the Central Sulawesi highlands and moved them to internment camps near Makassar. Until the war's end in 1945, Japanese soldiers enslaved highlanders to mine mica for their wartime electronics industry (Aragon 1996b). During their captivity, highlanders looked back upon Dutch missionaries and their teachings with relative fondness. The Japanese rulers seemed to have no real religion except the worship of their national flag, as the Japanese soldiers always required highland villagers to bow to the ground before the rising sun banner.

After World War II, when local social and economic goals did not readily become fulfilled, regional rebellions arose in both South and North Sulawesi (Harvey 1977). Although the two rebellions united briefly, they were organized largely around diverging religious symbolism, by Christians in North Sulawesi and Muslims in South Sulawesi. Many rural highlanders in western Central Sulawesi became confused as they were caught between three sets of soldiers: the national Republican army of President Sukarno and the two rebel groups, one Christian and one Muslim.

Many highland villagers thought that the Christian rebels from North Sulawesi had come to save them from prior attacks by Muslim rebels who had demanded that they convert anew to Islam. A few villages in western Central Sulawesi were forcibly converted from Protestantism to Islam, but most

² By contrast, one of the truisms of scholarship on Southeast Asia is the distinction between decentralized highland and centralized lowland societies (cf. Bowie 1998). Leach (1959) demonstrated in the late 1950s how Southeast Asian highland populations can move in and out of political hierarchies, and other scholars (e.g. Lehman 1979; Moerman 1965) in the 1960s and '70s explained the situational mutability of ethnic identity. Yet, there still have been dramatic real-world consequences resulting from state policies that were based on the concepts of a highland versus lowland cultural distance, as it was perceived in the early 1900s.

On result, a hundred years later, is that today's political conflicts invoke seemingly 'natural' differences between Muslims and Christians, or between coastal and interior ethnic groups, rather than recognizing the cultural continuities and historically shifting regional alliances that often united lowlanders and highlanders in the precolonial era. Evidence both from the early Dutch writers themselves (Adriani and Kruiy 1912; Kruiy 1938) and from local oral histories I collected in western Central Sulawesi indicate that, before the Dutch conquests, highland communities in southern Kuali district were engaged in extensive trade, marriage, and military alliances with lowland Muslim kingdoms such as Sigi Kaili (Aragon 1996a).

Early European observers seemingly mistook ecological adaptations to maritime coasts or interior mountains for essential ethnic differences, and they skewed apart allied highland and lowland groups to fit their own European models of religions and nations. They then use the tools of linguistics to scientifically justify their bureaucratic classifications, as well as to support the missionization process through biblical translations (Aragon 2000b). It is likely that colonial Europeans made the decisions they did not only to further a divide-and-rule strategy (Lev 1985; Schrauwers 1998), but also because the nineteenth century religious debates in the Netherlands assumed that religion was the ultimate foundation for public moral order in society (van Rooden 1999). The late Dutch Indies state worked with the same assumption, and passed it on to the postcolonial Indonesian regime. The late 1800s also was a time when Western views of national identities generally were focused on ideas of natural concordances between race, language, and culture (Borofsky 2000).

voluntarily converted back to Christianity once the rebellions ended.

Some Christian highlanders were tortured or killed by Muslim rebels, and some claimed that they too killed some of their Muslim attackers. A few highland leaders were jailed for their purported participation in the rebellions, but generally their sentences were brief in recognition of the confusion caused by the various outside groups who entered the highland region before the Indonesian Republic restored order. That chaotic period in Sulawesi history, known as the 'ear of gangs' (*zaman gerombolan*), remains a sensitive memory and a significant precedent for the contemporary violence between Muslims and Christians in Central Sulawesi. In both cases, outsiders have promoted religious polarization and locals have been caught in fighting that they hardly comprehend.

President Suharto's army finally ended the regional chaos, and officially forbade ethnic and religious conflicts. The governments of President Sukarno and Suharto echoed colonial policies when the promotion of *Pancasila* philosophy declared a selected set of religions as the foundation of the nation's social order. *Pancasila* made five foreign world religions (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Protestantism, and Catholicism) legally equal, while indigenous religions were denied an official status, being identified as mere 'beliefs' or 'superstitions' (*kepercayaan*). Therefore, indigenous worldviews became stored and relabeled as 'tradition' or *adat*, while world religious organizations continued to expand and foreign religious institutions assisted the government with its economic development plans.

President Suharto's regime

During President Suharto's regime, dissention concerning the relative status of Muslims and Christians grew despite the legal equality of world religions. A major difference from the colonial period was that Islam now became favored as the nation's majority religion. The Indonesian government was concerned with satisfying the demands of Muslim leaders, yet did not want to disenfranchise important non-Muslim minorities, such as the Hindu Balinese or Chinese. President Suharto thus also allowed Western Christian missionaries to work in areas such as Central Sulawesi as long as they provided useful contributions to national economic development goals.

By the 1970s, friction emerged between Muslim and Christian groups about the meaning of religious freedom under the *Pancasila* philosophy. Christian groups gained new converts among animists ('*yang belum beragama*'), and some Muslims considered Christian proselytization practices unfair. New state decrees issued by the Ministry of Religion in 1978 (no. 70 and no. 77) sought to restrict Christian proselytization, but some disagreements between Muslim and Christian leaders continued (Kim 1998). By the 1980s, the Ministry of Religion was dominated by Muslims and, in

western Central Sulawesi at least; Christians felt that they were disadvantaged in obtaining higher education and government jobs. President Suharto's government also continued the Dutch practice of using religion as an organizational and educational tool to promote economic development and state ideals of 'modernity' (Aragon 2000a). This seemingly incited further rivalry between Muslims and Christians for government favor.

Despite official pronouncements against religious or ethnic conflicts (*SARA* or *sukubangsa, agama, ras dan antargolongan*), inter-group tensions increased as newly gained wealth did not become proportionally distributed, and those migrating with government support, or through government-created economic pressures, did not share views of social hierarchy and land use with their new neighbors (Aragon 2001).

By the 1980s more Central Sulawesi people than ever were moving away from the areas where they were born. Muslim and Chinese traders established new stores in the Christian-majority highlands to collect cash crops and to sell merchandise that the cash-croppers of coffee, cacao, and cloves could now afford. Highland Christian people also came to the lowland, Muslim-majority cities seeking higher education and jobs other than rice farming.

At one transmigration program I visited, Muslim Kaili imagined their community held priority because the project lands once were affiliated with a precolonial Kaili kingdom. By contrast, Christian highlanders thought that the Indonesian government had opened the transmigration project, as if it were a primary forest or '*tanah liar*', for all groups equally. Because the highland Christians had arrived at the project site before many Muslim Kaili migrants, they thought they deserved respect as the 'first' or 'older' ones. From what I saw in Central Sulawesi, ethnic conflicts initially concern rights over resources such as land use, not religious doctrines per se. Without a trusted and common *adat* tradition or government legal system to resolve such disputes, resentments fester.

As national solutions for equitable economic gains seemed to fall short, community groups became more entrenched in local, religiously based alliances to solve their daily problems. Ethnic and religious minorities in Central Sulawesi sensed an unaccepted inequality, and the stereotyping of others increased. Some Indonesian 'sons of the soil' (*pribumi*) resented those Chinese citizens who, while arriving more recently in the archipelago, had become wealthier. Many Chinese Indonesians are Christians and, in some areas, Muslim resentment against foreign or Chinese wealth spread to include indigenous Christian groups.

From the standpoint of Western missionaries I interviewed, their goal is to help their congregations reach a healthy standard of living. In ethnically mixed regions, mission hospitals are open to all populations, serving Muslims as well. Yet, the perception remains among some that mis-

sionaries offer wealth to attract new converts. The fact that many new and expensive churches (as well as mosques) were built in urban areas during the 1980s and 1990s may have supported the idea that foreign wealth was making Christianity more attractive as a religious choice.

I sometimes also heard about the discrimination that Christians believed they encountered in Muslim-majority areas. Christian high school or college students stated that they would never have the money or connections to get hired for government jobs, even if they were educated and qualified. Sometimes they said that Christian holidays were not fully considered when the academic calendar was designed.

In the late 1980s, all highland village leaders such as the headman (*kepala kampung*, *sekretaris desa*, etc.) received metal signs similar to motor vehicle license plates announcing their official position. This was designed to help visiting government administrators locate local officials' homes. Protestant ministers in all the highland villages received signs that read, 'Imam', which they felt was inappropriate. This sign, they suggested, indicated that the government did not acknowledge the existence of non-Muslim religious leaders in that area.³

Both the *Pancasila* philosophy that made all world religions legally equal and President Suharto's 'security approach' preserved social stability for most local citizens and foreign investors. Yet, it also taught citizens that violence was an effective solution to social problems, and that the political and justice systems were not reliable avenues of change for ordinary citizens (Suparlan 2000). These factors kept communal dissent in check but did not help citizens negotiate and solve underlying problems. The issue of Indonesian citizens' perceptions of inequality and their lack of confidence in the legal system seems correlated to the way violent acts have moved so quickly from personal disputes to communal fighting that becomes polarized along ethnic and religious lines.⁴

A 1998 incident in Palu

Even before the Asian financial crisis and the political crisis of 1998, small communal conflicts were erupting in Central Sulawesi. On March 29th, 1998, I returned to Palu from a fieldwork trip in the highlands. A few days later (April 5th), a missionary from the New Tribes Mission (*Yayasan*

Misi Suku Terasing) visited my home and described a series of recent religious and ethnic attacks. He said that two weeks earlier, there had been an attempted firebombing of the New Tribes Mission Guest House. Then, on the previous day (April 4th) in the largest outdoor Palu market (*pasar Impres*), some Bugis merchants and a Toraja policeman became involved in a dispute that set off more vandalism.

The story, as I heard it told by several Palu residents, went as follows.

A Bugis man and his companions were selling religious writings on Islam at the market. A Toraja policeman asked him to move some books to the side, out of the market's walkway. The Bugis merchant became angry and during the following dispute the Toraja policeman accidentally stepped back onto a Qur'an laid on the ground. This act of sacrilege enraged the Bugis men further, and they chased the Toraja policeman out of the marketplace until he fled to the nearest police post.

During the night following this dispute, the Toraja church school in Palu was burned down and some Chinese stores and houses were stoned. My recollection is that the home of at least one Western missionary was stoned too. Most of the missionaries in Palu were very concerned and one contacted me to see if I was alright. When I asked if she knew who was responsible, all she replied was 'the Muslims'—as if this was a sufficient answer, which of course it is not.⁵

Although one missionary placed responsibility for the anti-Christian violence with the simple term 'Muslims', the chain of incidents began with a specific fight between two men, both seemingly immigrants to the province. The following nighttime attacks, however, targeted not only Toraja migrants, but also other Christians including Chinese, who had nothing to do with the market dispute. Religious and ethnic tensions were being mixed and easily confused.

So, did these initially uninvolved people become targets of violence because they were members of a disliked religious community, or because they were ethnic minorities disliked for other reasons, such as their perceived social advantages of wealth? This basic question haunts many recent incidents of violence in Indonesia, and it is not a simple issue to untangle when the religious and ethnic differences are overlapping or concordant.

When I once described the Palu market dispute to some American scholars of Iran, they said,

Well, you see it is a religious argument because it began with the Christian's desecration of the Qur'an and the upset that this caused.

But I would argue that religion, or more specifically dif-

³ Perhaps a general term such as 'religious leader' (*pemimpin agama*) would have satisfied all religious communities.

⁴ As an American, I note similarities with recent U.S. disputes between white and black citizens where audience groups concluded before the legal trial concluded that the other side was in the wrong, or that the other side would win the case no matter what the evidence was. In those American cases too, the minority ethnic group feels it is not treated equally by the government and will never receive a fair trial. Thus, people lose confidence in the political and legal system, and threaten street violence.

⁵ When I travelled later that day, April 5th, through downtown Palu, I saw army troops with rifles guarding every street corner. Almost all the shops, most owned by Chinese merchants, were closed. We heard from another missionary that the army also had entered the Toraja Neighborhood of Palu early that morning to guarantee order. The missionary noted that some people in Palu were saying the incident was just a case of outsiders fighting outsiders (*selatan dengan selatan*), meaning that Bugis immigrants from South Sulawesi were quarreling with Toraja immigrants from South Sulawesi, carrying old ethnic disputes into their new provincial homeland.

ferences in religious doctrines and rituals, too easily have become the substitute for deeper and more precise explanations. The news media often imply that, without the strong military regime of President Suharto, Indonesia has descended into ancient religious and tribal hatreds. Even social scientists note that without a strong state, other institutions such as religion become more active to fill the vacuum of power and social authority. Yet, religious differences and identities have become simple emblems for more complicated problems, such as those related to uneven resource allocations, perceived group privileges, and distrust of the available legal system.

These brief clashes occurred at a hectic moment in my fieldwork and I regret that I did not pay more attention and seek more interpretations. But, at the time, the attacks appeared anomalous and unlikely to reoccur. Having lived in Central Sulawesi, in both Muslim-majority Palu and the Christian-majority highlands for two years, it seemed that people of different faiths got along rather well. While neighborhoods tended to be segregated by voluntary settlement patterns, people of all groups interacted regularly and pleasantly in the work place and market.

Christians visited and brought gifts to Muslims at Lebaran, while Muslims visited and bought similar gifts to Christians at Christmas. Both groups had begun using loudspeakers to broadcast their sermons, and even in their criticisms of each other, I saw parallels. Christians would speak of unclean goats the way Muslim would speak of unclean pigs. They seemed to be becoming as alike as many people told me they were '*orang sama saja*', they said. I knew of several mixed marriages and, although these marriages were not initiated by the families involved, the couples and their children were not ostracized. Religious resentments remained manageable until conditions deteriorated.

The recent conflicts in Poso

The Asian and then Indonesian financial crisis beginning in late 1997 worsened living conditions for most citizens and created a desperation for political change. Citizen protests and military responses became increasingly violent, a situation which led to political change but could not immediately solve regional problems. The resignation of President Suharto in May 1998 left a political crisis where chaos could be triggered by provocateurs inciting street violence that required military control and served their own political goals.

In Central Sulawesi, as in so many other regions, personal disputes between young men of different ethnic groups quickly transformed into religious strife. The episodes of violence in Poso and Palu must be considered as parallel to similar problems that began during late 1998 in Jakarta (the Ketapang incident), Kupang, Makassar, Medan, Maluku, and many other regions.

There is no opportunity to present all the details here, but the religiously polarized events began in Poso during late December 1998 with youth brawls related to a power struggle between Muslim and Christian candidates for *bupati* (district mayor). On April 17, 2000, when a verdict in the prior case was due, Christian neighborhoods were attacked again (Toronto Star 2000). New attacks and vicious mob reprisals against Muslims occurred from May to June, 2000 (McBeth and Murphy 2000). In total, an estimated 200 persons were killed, over 7,000 homes, two schools, and nine houses of worships were destroyed, and thousands of Christians and Muslims were forced to flee their ruined homes.

Each act of violence incites the desire for revenge on the part of the injured groups, especially if they do not trust the judicial system to prevent or punish criminal acts. Community disorder also leads to looting, as hatred against the government or other richer groups becomes confused with anger about poverty or social helplessness (Suparlan 2000). The proportionally large participation of teenagers or young men in the communal conflicts suggests that, in Indonesia as in the Middle East, it is the frustration of urban unemployment and a bleak future that lets simple, fundamentalist solutions to complex social problems seem attractive (Lawrence 1998:80, 122, 129).

In situations of political uncertainty and limited news reports, it becomes easier for outsiders who have a stake in the outcome of a local dispute to spread rumors or begin attacks that polarize segregated neighborhoods. When personal disputes then become recast symbolically as religious or 'holy' wars, they become especially dangerous because participants believe they are 'fighting for God' against 'infidels', rather than fighting as humans against other humans who equally deserve to live (Suparlan 2000). Through violent attacks, rival groups try to claim or reclaim territories that they feel they deserve because of ancient control or more recent legal claims (Aragon 2001). When local police forces or army battalions take sides with members of their own religions, the establishment of a neutral order is even more difficult (McBeth and Murphy 2000).

Conclusion

I return finally to the symposium question of whether unity in diversity is still possible in Central Sulawesi. Despite the dire circumstances of the regional conflicts, there appears to be a broader, one might even say 'national', pattern to the problems. That structural pattern is what creates the 'domino effect' where troubles pattern is spread readily to neighboring regions. Yet, that same pattern holds out the hope that, if ethnic and religious conflicts could be relieved in one region, other neighboring regions too could be calmed. I would argue on the basis of long term historical evidence that it is possible for Muslim and Christian groups to live harmoniously in Central Sulawesi, if the acute violence inciting vengeance can be stabilized by neutral security forces,

and progress is made to cope with jealousies inspired by financial desperation.

Several sensible but challenging suggestions for stopping regional bloodshed have been made by both Indonesians and foreign human rights groups, such as the deployment of neutral forces using non-lethal methods of crowd control, mediation through local community leaders, fair or balanced press reports, and the swift restraint of all outside agitators and vandals (Human Rights Watch 2000).

Other factors that beg for research and attention are local communities' views of ancestral and recent land rights, regional perceptions of discrimination, increased national education concerning religious tolerance and respect for life, and lawful avenues to negotiate and resolve community disputes. Perhaps foreign as well as local missionaries of all faiths who work in Indonesia should be given a tutorial about national goals for religious peace and cultural tolerance.

The anger and sorrow of those who have recently lost family members is truly terrible. Yet it is human politics not the God of Christianity and Islam that propels wanton violence. The immediate challenge for Indonesia is to calm fighting groups quickly enough that economic stability and political reform can begin to relieve the financial scarcity and social problems that further communal feuding.

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