

CONFLICT AND ANTHROPOLOGY: Some notes on doing consultancy work in Malukan battlegrounds (Eastern Indonesia)¹

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INTRODUCTION

In the conclusion to a collection of articles titled *Fieldwork under fire* which appeared when the anthropology of violence and terror became a burgeoning area, Jeffrey Sluka (1995) reflects upon the management of danger by drawing on his experiences in the Catholic ghettos of Belfast, Northern Ireland, in 1981-2 and 1991. He discusses some of the practical methodological sensitivities of doing fieldwork among members of a liberation organisation that has many enemies and is under threat from the security forces. Sluka reminds us of ethical matters concerning the 'bargaining' with participants in a conflict about the expected results of the research. In that respect, he also remarks on the risks of becoming partisan in a conflict area. His main advice to anthropologists doing fieldwork in hazardous conditions is, however, confined to such issues as mediating threats through foresight, planning, and skilful manoeuvre (ibid.:277). Sluka does not push this point further by asking whether mediating danger and negotiating the safety of anthropologists and informants who work in distressing battlefields warrants a critical reflection on the conventional ethics of the discipline.

The volume properly explores the everyday experiences of people who are the victims and perpetrators of violence and the experiences and problems of ethnographers who study situations of violence (Robben and Nordstrom 1995:3-4). The studies demonstrate that violence is a dimension of living and confirm what is argued

¹ An earlier version of this article was presented at the Fifth European Society for Oceanists Conference in Vienna, 4-6 July 2002. Grateful acknowledgement is made to my friends in the provinces of Maluku and Maluku Utara, in particular the staff and volunteers of the NGOs of the Baileo Maluku network in Maluku and the Konsorsium LSM in Maluku Utara. They all supported my work and changed my perspective on the complex and threatening power relationships among anthropologists, consultants, NGO activists, informants and the many different actors in the Malukan battlegrounds. I thank Chris Ballard and Hank Nelson for their comments on a previous version of this paper.

by others, such as Feldman (1991) studying the formations of violence in Northern Ireland, Tambiah (1996) bringing to life passionately the intricate realities of riots and collective violence in South Asia, Malkki (1995) exploring refugees in Africa, and Taussig (1987) exploring the nuances of terror in Colombia. Violence is a cultural phenomenon, taught, remembered, transferred, exchanged, and mimicked within groups and across boundaries and hence is dynamic and linked to power, status and gender.² But with respect to the practice of doing anthropology or being engaged in processing anthropological knowledge amid extreme animosities during which hatred becomes extreme, revenge comes in cycles, and hostilities have devastating consequences, these works leave unanswered some fundamental questions about the methodology and ethics of doing fieldwork under fire. The ethnographer is presented as someone who, with a bit of skilful tacking between truth and lies, right and wrong, and safe and dangerous, is unquestionably able to extract untainted and representative data from fields that are tainted with violence.³

In the introduction, Robben and Nordstrom (*ibid.*:4) remark that anthropology on the level of doing fieldwork under fire involves:

a number of responsibilities above and beyond those associated with more traditional ethnography: responsibilities to the field-worker's safety, to the safety of his or her informants, and to the theories that help to forge attitudes toward the reality of violence, both expressed and experienced (*op. cit.*).

Some of the contributors discuss those responsibilities and allude to the ethics of fieldwork but do not engage in a discussion of the methodology of the anthropological discipline. Pieke (1995), for example, talks about responsibilities and personal safety in his description of unexpected ethical dilemmas when he engaged in the protests in Tian'anmen Square in Beijing in May 1989. The protests kept him from executing his initial research plan. After having decided to switch attention to the protests, he was

² In a review of four recent works on violence, Nordstrom and Giraldo (2002) show that the contemporary anthropology of violence is in fact successfully coming to grips with the ways in which violence weaves through the whole of people's lives.

³ In an earlier volume also co-edited by Nordstrom, the anthropologist is even more boldly presented as a researcher who is, by virtue of the incredibly powerful methods of ethnography, able to capture experience and to write from a position privileged by the way theory is drawn into the process of reflecting the rich experiences of violence (Nordstrom and Martin 1992:5).

likely to put his hosts — his colleagues at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences — in a vulnerable situation. When he finally felt free to do research among the rallying students, he was asked to become a human shield. Pieke shows that the exercise of discussing and conveying the haphazard conditions under which fieldwork in locations under siege is conducted is intriguing. However, his account fails to take notice of the practical issues that emerge from doing fieldwork under fire and that challenge the conventional ethics of fieldwork under fire.

Obviously, the ethnography of violence should not only be concerned with building scrupulous theories about violence but should also be engaged in critical reflection on the methodological problems of conducting research under violent conflict.⁴ Robben (1995) discusses the risks of seduction in high-conflict research because the informants, both victims and perpetrators of violence, have a personal and political stake in making the ethnographer adopt their interpretations of the cause and dynamics of the violence. This is not only part of what Robben suggests to be a kind of impression management, but, as Feldman (1995:243) points out, also belongs to memory management, the skilful editing out of painful truths about one's own or one's group's behaviour. As with rumours, we are dealing here with practices of eulogising one's own reason for being engaged in violence and negating the existence of the victims or the enemy. Being such a major part of the fieldwork process, seduction and the danger of taking sides should lead us to ask what kind of methodological measures should be taken in order to prevent partisan accounts from entering into the reassuring information disseminations of the anthropological discipline. Indeed, working in conflict areas involves ethical responsibilities which 'raises the question of where research ends and personal involvement begins' (ibid.:19) and thus demands a reflection on ethnographic ethics and the methods of processing knowledge.

In this article, I reflect on such methodological considerations by drawing on my experiences as a consultant for international and local non-governmental organisations (INGOs and LNGOs respectively) that were providing emergency aid to the victims of the Malukan conflicts and attempting to provide service in the field of peace-building

⁴ The development of the theoretical ethnography of violence and conflict also demands ethical and moral judgements about representation and textual production. An interesting volume edited by Das et al. (1997) offers reflections on appropriate practices in ethnographic fieldwork and textual production, but does not tackle the kind of methodological issues that I deal with in this paper.

and conflict transformation. In regions where security and trust allowed refugees to return I also worked on so-called reconstruction and rehabilitation programs. In all these situations, I was dealing with pain, suffering, and rapidly changing realities, from belligerent to exile identities and the evolution of new ideas about community among returning refugees. I processed anthropological knowledge to make sense of what was going on in order to find solutions to distressing situations and to think through approaches that would foster a better future for the Malukus. Below I reflect on the limited control over reliable information and the extent to which 'truths' have to be continuously assessed. Such situations, as Simons (1995) points out, are difficult for anthropologists who try to sift fact from fiction and truth from disinformation. Questions about the origin, meaning and effects of rumours become compelling for ethnographers who have to decide on the spot where to direct their limited time and research attention. Under such circumstances it is easy to be led astray or become paralysed by the sheer amount of confusing unclear 'facts' and unknowns.

I ponder to what extent careful assessments are realistic in quickly changing and continuously tense conflict situations in which the anthropologist is by default never fully familiar with the circumstances (in contrast to 'traditional' ethnographical settings in which the researcher is suggested to be able to report that she or he had acquired ethnographic immediacy with the study group). How can one manoeuvre skilfully when one often has to deal with information that never seems to be fixed, and when false predictions are legitimate tactics, and false interpretations a necessary part of the propaganda of groups in desperate struggles? In such a situation ethnographic immediacies bring danger as the 'terrorists' and the 'wild men' situate a foreign consultant as partisan in local disagreement. Below I will illustrate some of the dangers of having to make quick decisions in unknown areas. I will also discuss the virtues of ethnographies of conflicts and violence and suggest that anthropologists can play a distinctive role by bringing not over-sensational or over-erotic accounts of violence to the reader, and deconstructing myths about terrorists, Indonesian Special Forces (Kopassus), Muslim fighters, Sikh militants, Irish Republican Army (IRA) activists, Euzkadi ta Azkatasuna [Basque Homeland and Liberty] (ETA) bombers, al-Qaeda terrorists, and others who engage in acts of political violence.

THE MALUKAN WARS

The events that I discuss happened in the Maluku, Eastern Indonesia, while I was working there for some fourteen months from November 2000 until February 2002. In order to give a sense of the scale of the tragedy it is necessary to say that the amount of suffering and destruction was astounding. Thousands were cruelly slaughtered and hundreds of thousands sought refuge in safer areas, and mosques, churches, whole villages and large parts of urban centres were destroyed during the clashes. The conflicts in Maluku started in early 1999 and continue to the present in Ambon and surrounding islands, while most other areas of the Malukus are enjoying gradual conflict transformation, allowing refugees to return home and the reconstruction of property to take place.⁵ Gruesome acts of collective violence revealed the historical seeds of tension, in particular the effects of more than three decades of New Order politics, but also from roots that go back to the colonial period and age-old tensions between groups. After the first clashes, outsiders were soon successful in provoking people to attack those who were allegedly threatening them; it quickly appeared that the area was ripe for strife.

There are many factors that can be identified in order to explain the highly volatile situation in the Malukus and here I am not going to try to present a concise analysis. However, some background information is necessary to sketch the complexity of the conflicts and the risks involved in attempts to reconcile people. A crucial point in understanding the sources and dynamics of the conflicts in the Malukus is the comprehension of the fact that Malukans are involved in a variety of social, political and cultural changes. The most significant among these changes relate to the economic situation of Indonesia since the late 1990s and to shifts in power at the centre of the state before and after the end of the New Order regime in May 1998. As a result of changes in the outlook of society in general, alongside exposure to different forms of

⁵ There is a large amount of articles, reports and books in Indonesian about the conflicts in the Malukus. Ahmad and Oesman (2000), Al-Jakartaty (2000), Andrianto (2000), Gani (2002), Mahmada et al. (2000), Nanere (2000), Pakkana and Abbas (2000), Pattiradjawane and Abel (2000), Salampessy and Husain (2001), Tim Peneliti LIPI (2001), Tim Penulis MUI (2000), Tim Penyusun al-Mukmin (1999), and Trijono (2002), to name the most significant contributions so far. All these works consider, in separate articles or enmeshed in larger monographs, the origins, goals, and to some extent the effects of the conflicts in the provinces of Maluku and Maluku Utara. Analysis and reports in English include two reports by the International Crisis Group (2000, 2002), Aditjondro (2001), Bertrand (2002), Bubandt (2000, 2001), van Klinken (2001), Laksono (2002), and Tomagola (2000). More information, chronologies, archives of news reports and links to other web sites can be found at <http://www.infomaluku.net> and <http://www.malra.org/posko>.

modernity, Malukans have been going through changes of identity. These identity changes have taken place increasingly fast during the last few decades.

In general, Malukans began to feel ever more marginalised in their own regions due to New Order politics that linked most resource extraction directly to the elite in Jakarta. Local people, in particular those not engaged in sizeable business ventures or the bureaucracy, became increasingly disappointed in the promises of New Order development. After decades of denial of Malukans' competence in learning and performing in modern contexts, Malukans became more concerned with denied identities and lost certainties. After the fall of Suharto, a good number of Malukans became progressively more inclined to focus on political struggles instead of organising their communities for economic and social development. Many started praying a lot, and people became engaged in lengthy discussions on the future of their country. In particular, youths began to seek quick money through gambling, often illegal commercial ventures, compensations for land or resources exploited by outsiders, or to join fanatic groups who promised a better future. The intellectual elite began to put more effort into advocating their struggle and describing the violations of their rights to a larger public, to foreign governments, the United Nations and to critical national and international NGOs.

Around such basic issues as lack of access to resources, business opportunities, and jobs, people began seeking scapegoats for the cause of their difficulties. For example, Muslims accused Christians of limiting their freedom of movement and Christians started blaming immigrants for taking jobs from autochthonous Malukans. Categories relating to differences in religious faith and precedence were increasingly used in the process of distinguishing between 'the other' and 'us'. Since colonial times, the population of the Maluku have been divided fairly evenly in numbers between Muslims and Christians and this has been reflected in many fields of social, cultural and political life; the central parts of the province, in particular the city of Ambon, were separated into groups that had, for decades, been labelled 'Christian' and 'Muslim'. There was also a growing consciousness of ethnic and cultural differences between native Ambonese and people from South Sulawesi (Butonese, Buginese, Makassarese), Java, and Sumatra. Christians have played a much more significant role in the bureaucracy from colonial times and they stayed in control of the service sector and dominated provincial politics from Indonesian independence until the 1990s.

This social and economic status quo changed radically when Islamic military officers and organisations such as ICMI (Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim se-Indonesia or All-Indonesia League of Muslim Intellectuals) gained more influence at both the national and the regional levels in the 1990s. ICMI, sponsored by Soeharto, has been an important instrument in harnessing Islamic support for the government, often in controversial ways (see Hefner 1999 and Kingsbury 2002). Established in late 1990 and headed by the then Minister for Research and Technology, B. J. Habibie, this organisation aims to counter the economic marginalisation of the Islamic community. It derives its popularity from the feeling that the devout Islamic community has lost out in the competition with rich (Chinese) businesspeople and foreign investors. The rise of power of ICMI also led to the division of the military into the so-called nationalist 'red and white officers', opposed to 'green' Islamist officers. Abdurrachman Wahid (Gus Dur), then the leader of the largest and moderate national Muslim organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (Revival of Religious Scholars) and a firm believer in keeping mosque and state separate, consistently refused to play along with ICMI whose main purpose seemed, to Wahid anyway, to be to drum up political support for Soeharto among the leading Indonesian Muslims.

In the Malukus, Muslims gained increasing control of the governor's offices and other posts in the mid-1990s. As a result, bitter jealousy arose in places such as Ambon. Resentment and jealousy, in particular among youths, were also part of a much larger picture that cannot be fully sketched here. I want to stress that a crucial point in understanding the sources and the dynamics of the conflicts in the Malukus is the comprehension of the fact that tensions began to rise due to shifts in power at the centre of the state and augmented concerns over access to resources as a result of decentralisation at the regional level, as well as a revival of optimism about *demokrasi* (mainly in its understanding as a more equal sharing of resource exploitation benefits and more equality between different religious and ethnic groups). A final spark came when Jakarta's governor shipped a few hundred Ambonese *preman* (freeman, 'proxies') from Jakarta to Maluku just after a riot in the notorious Ketapang scene of narcotics, prostitution, gambling and crime in North Jakarta in November 1998 during which *pribumi* (autochthonous) Muslims and Christians clashed after an incident. These *preman* joined frustrated groups in Ambon and inflamed existing sentiments related to the political economy of being Christian and Muslim. They unleashed their

aggression, mainly against youths who had been preparing for violent clashes since late 1998, following rumours of planned attacks by those of the opposing religious camp.

In a situation with a virtual absence of law, a low presence of security forces, and an inclination by some in the military and the police to take sides and profit from conflict, local communities began to draw their own battle lines, using a spate of different symbols ranging from ethnic characteristics and traditional boundaries to religious labels and arguments that relate to conflict and struggles elsewhere in the world, such as the Israel-Palestine conflict. Extreme bellicose identities developed quickly and took on a radical outlook, colouring the battlefields with graffiti, headbands, flags, signs, banners, and so on. In such a setting, passions run high and fear of retaliation becomes a main motivation to remobilise and arm one's neighbourhood. On both sides, fierce militias and warlords established positions and were able to secure financial, moral and material support from the military, the police, and from Malukans outside the province and abroad. Competing business interests, operated by genuine parties, rogue elements of the military and the police, local politicians, local and national elites, led to clashes between competing parties and opportunistic mobilisation of frustrated and traumatised groups. On top of that, Christian *laskars* (guerilla-fighters) enjoyed limited support from family members in the Netherlands and the United States while Muslim *laskars* were gaining strength in the course of the conflicts due to the effective mobilisation of Javanese who, in mid-2000, launched a Laskar Jihad mission in order to defend Islam in Maluku. The arrival of thousands of *jihad* fighters led to a devastating increase in violent attacks and put an end to the processes of reconciliation which had continued to take place after every incident.

Tragically, the islanders of Central Maluku, in particular Ambon, continue to experience horrific acts of violence. Ongoing tensions, bomb explosions, mortar launches, church burnings and brutal killings of innocent people, woefully illustrate the limited success of the peace agreement between Muslims and Christians that had been signed in February 2002. Shortly after the so-called Malino II agreement was endorsed in South Sulawesi, the returning Muslim delegation was attacked by Muslim fanatics who felt that their interests had not been represented and who had been mobilised in order to prevent successful reconciliation. This was soon followed by the raising of the flag of the allegedly separatist RMS movement (Republik Maluku Selatan

or South Maluku Republic, locally also represented by the Front Kedaulatan Maluku or Maluku Sovereignty Front). The attack and continuing opposition to Malino II by fanatical Muslims and Christians relates not so much to local Ambonese sentiments but more to military and elite interests and the fear among local groups that they will lose support and see their sources of income drying up.

CONSULTANCY UNDER FIRE

As a consultant and liaison officer for two Dutch donor agencies (Novib/Oxfam Netherlands and CORDAID), I worked together with LNGOs who were committed to assisting the victims of the conflicts, to reconciling the warring parties, and to stimulating discussions about prejudices, racism, human rights, gender relations, and civil society. Through extensive travelling and visiting of numerous refugee communities and other victims, discussions with guerrilla-fighters, warlords, government officials, militaries, church and mosque leaders, and LNGO activists, I often felt myself confronted with issues that were hard to reconcile.

Most of my work consisted of evaluating proposals, managing bureaucratic matters concerning funding and contracts between LNGOs and donor and relief organisations, assessing the needs of refugee communities and other conflict victims, organising training on community management and appraisal methods. Consequently, I researched the dynamics of the conflicts mostly while travelling in speedboats, cars, and planes, in the course of discussions about proposals and programs with LNGOs, and during the often very limited periods that I spent with the beneficiary communities. My interest in studying the Malukan conflicts arose from seeing that the world was largely unaware of the human suffering in the area and that most donor organisations did not hold clear views on how to intervene in the complex situation. These observations challenged me to translate the cultural realities of the conflicts into Western NGO program vernaculars without over-familiarising or over-exoticising them (cf. Mahmood 2001). At times this was a frustrating endeavour as most donor and relief organisations as well as governments which contribute funds for the victims and are in a position to lobby for neutral intervention, are reluctant to read and hear thorough accounts of the situation. I felt competent to make sense of the conflicts because I could draw on my experiences of working as an anthropologist in other parts of Eastern Indonesia, in particular in the province of Papua (Irian Jaya), and I could draw flexibly

and critically on information from informants, my own observations, and the relevant literature to assess the situation in the Maluku.

As mentioned above, during my travels through the Maluku I had many things to worry about other than carefully researching and documenting the dynamics of the conflicts. Much of the information I gathered on the background and the reality of the war was forced on me, in the sense that I simply could not evade it. Horrifying events intruded on me more often than I thought I could handle and, like most people living under almost daily threats for nearly three years, frustrated me, as people were brutally killed and houses torched, seemingly under the blind eye of the security forces. Most nights in Ambon, for example, were characterised by bomb blasts and shootings and often sleep came only in brief lulls. But after a while one gets used to it, and often I only woke up when bullets hit the corrugated iron roof or when a mortar exploded just a hundred metres away from my bed. Locals referred to the sound of machine-guns, the buzzing of bullets and the blasts of grenade strikes, as the obligatory nocturnal songs.

Although I knew that the violence in the Maluku took place amid shifting state and military policies, I still could not understand the sudden eruption of massive and extremely brutal fighting among Malukans. What were the historical antecedents and to what extent are the conflicts instigated by outsiders? What are the current social tensions? What is the influence of external pressures? To what extent can brutal murders, rape, intimidation and the massive destruction of property be related to the force of religious adherence, cultural and ethnic inclinations, and the search for identity in modern times? What are the outside interests and what are the human limits of sacrificing innocent people's lives for the purpose of guaranteeing power and access to natural, trade and industry resources? What about the role of the military and the police about whom most Malukans talk as having significant business interests, particularly in the field of resource extraction?⁶ And, perhaps most difficult to answer, how to speak about the horror of the wars that took the lives of friends and at times threatened my own life? All these questions haunted me during my stay in the Maluku.

⁶ Some NGOs in Ambon were actually able to collect data and convey a reasonable analysis about the history and the current needs and facts of the involvement of the armed forces in the politics and the conflicts. Some of the informed reflections of the Baileo Ambon foundation are published in Salampessy and Husain (2001). See Aditjondro (2001), Liong (2002), and Robinson (1998, 2002) for discussions of business interests of the armed forces, its 'culture of violence' and its links with militia repertoires seen throughout the country since the fall of Suharto.

In Ambon and other parts of the Maluku, it was easy to categorise and discuss seemingly rational choices of leaders and their followers, both in 'Jakarta' and among local communities. Dealing with these issues was largely a matter of trying to disconnect far-fetched conspiracy theories ranging from international Judeo-Christian conspiracies that intend to 'Balkanise' Indonesia so that Western power can grab Indonesia's wealth, to a military operation aimed at obliterating all Malukans by having them killing each other so that Java could take over the resource-rich region. Much more difficult was trying to rationalise the irrational effect of the conspiracies, presumed impact. As politics in Indonesia are shrouded in mystery largely because elites make and announce sophisticated plans without looking closely at the effect on situations that are more complex than they imagine, local people are very wary of any promised peacemaking process announced in Jakarta.

At a more local level, I have heard stories about cannibalism and I remember vividly a doctor telling how she had to cut human meat from the teeth of male warriors. I also noticed lingering ethnic hatred that Christians held for Muslims and Muslims for Christians. The Christian variety suggests that Muslims are primordially aggressive because of the tradition and the lore of Islam. Muslims on the other hand say that Christians with their stress on 'charity' are intrinsic hypocrites. A second level of bigotry comes from outsiders, in particular Javanese, who believe that all Malukans are by nature hard-line, unsophisticated, and aggressive.⁷

At the beginning of my work in the Maluku, I felt that the moral intelligence of most Malukans would eventually prevail over the ignorance and malevolence of a few. But when I started hearing NGO activists putting forward immoderate stories about the religious 'other' and Catholic priests and nuns voicing extremist theories about Muslims and Islam, I lost much of that hope. I began to realise the power of the force within the anxious and anguished to cling to their own religion, a result of the priests, ministers, Islamic prayer leaders (*imam*), Islamic teachers (*ustad*), and parents teaching for decades that theirs is the only true religion. That power and process spread and reproduced powerful labels which proved to have a devastating effect once

⁷ The latter thoughts may play a role in the strategies developed by the Indonesian intelligence, just as the military expected to be able to win the hearts of the 'backward' East Timorese just before the referendum (see Moore 2001).

transformed into bellicose identities which grew to extremes in the course of the ever more serious fighting.

THE NAIVETY OF THE OUTSIDE WORLD

In this situation there was not much to be done except to assist local organisations to provide any possible form of support for those suffering from the conflict. Even more frustrating was to realise how poorly the world read the situation. This became clear when, in May 2001, the Dutch Ambassador and his retinue paid a visit to Ambon to talk to leaders and representatives of all parties in Ambon. The Embassy was obviously out of touch with reality. It thought that the regional government would welcome the delegation, when it had not formally announced the visit and had failed to grasp the sensitivity of the arrival of representatives of the former coloniser who was widely rumoured to be backing the RMS struggle for a Christian, independent South Malukan Republic. Moreover, tensions were very high due to intensifying rumours of an upcoming attack.

After their visit to Papua (Irian Jaya), the delegation arrived in Ambon to find that the top-level of government there did not want to meet them. For almost one week before the visit there were rumours that Muslim fighters were planning to attack the Christian areas of the town of Ambon. The fear of these attacks was mounting as the regular shooting between the Muslim area of Galunggung and the urban Christian area of Karang Panjang had suddenly stopped, leading people to think that serious preparations for more severe attacks were in the making. While not knowing what form they would take — as of Thursday, three days before the arrival of the Ambassador — people were on high alert. When nothing happened, they were convinced that the attack would be launched either on Friday or on Saturday night, but nothing happened until the Dutch delegation arrived on Sunday.

When the delegation arrived LNGO activists, INGO colleagues and I quickly informed them about the situation, but the Ambassador did not recognise that his arrival had made things worse and might be the reason behind the delay in the attacks. That night, while representatives of local and international NGOs updated the Embassy delegation on the situation in the Maluku, all hell broke loose in Karang Panjang and Soya. Some fourteen so-called Ninja fighters drove around in black, armoured cars, broke into people's houses, raped and killed the inhabitants and threw hand-grenades

into the residences before taking off in search of other victims. The attacks slowly mobilised the military into moving some of its armoured vehicles in the direction of the border facing the Muslim area. This surprised and frustrated many Christians as it was clear that no Muslims were trying to cross the border. Some bombs exploded near the 'neutral' Hotel Amans in Mardika Pantai where the Ambassador was having his meeting. The military wanted to evacuate the Dutch delegation together with other expatriates to a safer area, but the Ambassador insisted on continuing the meeting. After an hour of increasing tensions, serious gunfire and loud bomb-explosions, the Dutch delegation finally followed the advice of the military commander and allowed the military to transport it through a dangerous area to the safer Hotel Mutiara.

The next day, after a horrible night during which a number of people were brutally killed, some Muslims analysed the events as follows: *preman* had been holding off with their assault until the Dutch delegation arrived in order to draw attention to the beleaguered cause of the Christians' attempt to establish an independent Christian RMS state. On the other side, Christians said that Muslims wanted to scare away the Dutch delegation because they thought the Ambassador had come to review the progress of the RMS state which is supported by the Netherlands Government. A picture closer to the truth was that a cleverly instigated strategy was played out involving both Christian and Muslim *preman* trained at a Laskar Jihad training camp.

Evidence for this third explanation came after the police arrested two of the Ninja fighters who revealed their identities and religious backgrounds. Both were Ambonese, one Christian and the other Muslim. They said that they had undergone terrorist training by the Laskar Jihad in a camp near Solo and that they received money for killing people. Who was behind the attacks was never publicised but rumours suggested the Special Forces (Kopassus) of the Indonesian military. It became clear, however, that this had been just another carefully planned attack launched to frustrate the two warring parties by killing people and further fuelling existing sentiments and radicalising bellicose identities. The timing was effectively adjusted to accommodate the visit of the Dutch delegation and if the Ambassador had been sensitive to the existing tensions and the opportunities provided to instigators to feed RMS-sentiments by misusing his visit, he might have decided to postpone his visit. The attacks, however, would have happened anyway. In fact, after the Ambassador left, frustrated,

on the next day, the Ninja attacks continued for another few days. The military and the police refused to search cars or to undertake any other preventive action.

Delegations from governments, human rights organisations, aid donors, and journalists seemed also to suggest that no real desire in the outside world existed to understand the conflicts in the Maluku. Or perhaps the situation was too confusing and too demanding, as most locals who spoke to the observers readily pointed to the military and Jakarta as the root causes of the conflicts. Many outsiders did not see that most of the local militias did not possess the logistics to continue the increasingly sophisticated attacks. Few of the Malukans had firearms other than those handed out or sold by the military and the police. Most of the fighters in the early stages of the conflict were unemployed or underemployed teenage and adolescent males armed with machetes and imbued with the assurance they were defending their communities.⁸ The local fighting gangs could have been neutralised easily by the Indonesian military with little or no loss of life on the part of the army. On the contrary, what happened is that the gangs received support from elements of the armed forces and from Muslim *jihads*, Christian fighters, and (often Ambonese) thugs from Jakarta, particularly after the above-mentioned gang war between young Malukan migrants in Ketapang, Jakarta. Most delegations only incidentally asked why there was no clear action from the well-equipped Indonesian intervention force, the local security forces and the police.

More unsettling than the oblivion to the dynamics of the conflicts, was the tendency of outsiders to believe, alongside the general stance among Indonesian authorities, that Malukans engage in acts of violence because they are fierce by nature, and often behave irrationally and barbarically. This kind of 'wild man' notion of Malukans would not turn up in mission reports but, during discussions in the field, regular allusions were made to these kind of explanations for the continuation of the conflict. In that sense, foreign observers did not differ much from local people. Most of the foreign observers were Western Christians and would have the Christian area of Ambon as their base camp. As a result, they collected more information on the

⁸ Their war spirit was sometimes heightened through 'traditional' rituals associated with *cakalele*, a stylised performance of martial movements that is linked to warfare and is known throughout the region. The use of *cakalele* magic seems to have been largely motivated by a search for strength and protection. I have heard numerous accounts of sharp knives and machetes failing to cut through the skin and bullets bouncing back from bodies.

situation among Christians than among Muslims. Considering that in the contemporary Western imagination Muslims are quickly associated with terrorism, it is not surprising that many of these observers were soon convinced by local people that they and the foreigners could not safely venture among Muslims because they are all fierce warriors. That a similar notion about Christian Malukuans is held among Muslims was less often noticed. Frequently when I returned to the Christian areas after long visits to Muslim communities, Christians could not understand how a White foreigner's life could be safeguarded by Muslims. They would agree that there are also hostile people in their midst, but they were sure that most, if not all, Muslims were barely suppressed berserk warriors. Because most Muslims suspect Westerners, and the Dutch in particular, of supporting the Christian struggle it was sometimes very hard for me to focus on both sides' stories and to make sure that both communities would receive the necessary attention from LNGOs. In order to sketch these limitations let me recount the threatening state of affairs in West Seram where I formed a religiously mixed team of LNGO activists to investigate the possibilities of bringing the separated parties together.

ATTEMPTS AT CONCILIATION AND THREATS IN WEST SERAM

In August 2001, after running a week-long NGO training program on community management in Manado, North Sulawesi, I rushed back to Ambon to investigate a new attack on a village in western Seram. While in Manado I was called by friends in western Seram saying that the village of Alang Asaude was again being attacked by Muslims and I wanted to find out what was going on, because I had been dealing with the region earlier, in April that same year. This was the fourth attack and, just after the third attack, I had visited the area and discussed the possibilities of reconciliation or support for activities that would stimulate the getting together of Muslims and Christians. I noticed enthusiasm for conflict transformation but because of mutual distrust some persuasion and coordination from outside was necessary.

The problem, however, was that the only NGO active in the area was a very inexperienced organisation based in Ambon, ignorant of the history and the details of the relations between the Christian community of Alang Asaude and its neighbouring Muslim villages such as Waessala. Even more unsettling was that the NGO did not dare visit the Muslims let alone discuss programs and reconciliation with them as the

staff considered Muslims to be treacherously aggressive people. With financial support from several uncritical donor organisations, they did nothing more than hand out pots, pans, kitchen utensils and rice to the Christian community. In the meantime, the many refugees in the neighbouring Muslim villages did not receive any attention. Despite my warnings, the NGO did not change its policy and the frustration among the Muslims increased and came to a head when, a few months later, Laskar Jihad fighters from a base in or near Luhu came to Waessala to plan an attack.

The August attack appeared to be well organised. The military post in Alang Asaude was regularly contacted by the smaller post in Waessala which was armed by four soldiers, including one Papuan from Nabire. During these conversations, the Alang Asaude post provided information to Muslims who were ready to attack. In the meantime, the people of Alang Asaude did not know what was going on. A few nights before the attack one man who heard voices near his house, got up and saw that people from Waessala were being guided around the village by the military. Astonished and scared, he ran to the military post to ask the commander to do something about what he thought was an invasion. The commander was not at the post but a Papuan soldier from Merauke acted immediately upon the report. He took his machine gun, walked into the bushes and pointed his rifle at anything that was moving. Because of fear he almost shot his superior who, caught in the very act of exploring the village with the Muslim attackers, told him not to talk about this with anyone or he would kill him.

Three days later, the village was attacked and when the Papuan learned that the Muslim Jihad had murdered his Papuan friend from Nabire because he resisted the attack, he wanted to burn the military post and kill his colleagues. Later, while drinking palm wine with him he told me in detail about the nightly conversations through walkie-talkies between the commander and the war-leaders in the two neighbouring Muslim villages. The Papuan soldier suggested that all the attacks are orchestrated; I think he was right.

I was rather frustrated by these insights and annoyed by the continuing insulting behaviour of Javanese soldiers who wanted the Islamic female members of my mixed team to wear headscarves otherwise they threatened to rape them. The subsequent visit to Wassaela the next day was much more relaxed and there we found that only a very few young men had joined the forces from outside during the last attack on the Christians. The *adat*-leader told us that it would be a good idea to talk with the *raja*

(customary leader) in Luhu who, according to tradition, should be able to settle the problems and bring all parties in the customary region of Hoamoal together again. Though I knew that due to the concerns of the military any attempt at reconciliation would be pointless, my team and I found that we had to collect as much information as possible in order to develop a sensible intervention strategy under whatever circumstances. So we decided to travel to Luhu the next day.

Due to high tension among the people of the Islamic village of Luhu we were not able to collect much information. In fact, fanatical Muslims who wanted to clear their territory of 'dirty Christian pigs' and RMS supporters from the Netherlands held us in custody for one whole night. Around us, tense and frightening debates as well as violent clashes between the many factions in the village broke out. Almost every hour a new faction took over command in the house and pointed guns at our heads and threatened to kill us. In the meantime, the other factions were throwing stones at the building and exploding bombs.

The gangs consisted largely of youths who did not want to join forces in Ambon town anymore but did not know what to do back home. Their choices included leading a life as a fisherman or a farmer taking care of a family, joining the moderate Muslim faction that wanted to rehabilitate relations with Christians, or taking up arms with one of the many gangs in the village that was either supported by the Laskar Jundullah, Laskar Mujahidin, Laskar Hitu, Laskar Jihad, Mujadin Kompak or another local fanatical group. Most of these different fanatical Muslim groups have their roots in Java and established bases in the Maluku after early 1999. Their aims range from moral and religious support to Malukan Muslims, to destruction of churches, assassination of priests, Christian political leaders and Christian business people, and attacks on Christian villages and speedboats. Some of them, like Laskar Jihad and Laskar Mujahidin, have links to the army in Maluku. Soldiers of certain battalions fought on their side and many soldiers were willing to rent out their guns and sell bullets. Local youths following ethnic or descent lines would organise themselves in opposition or in competition with the existing *laskars* and often it was not very hard for them to get access to weapons. All these groups, with different backgrounds and a variety of styles of leadership, presented different political and religious agendas to the villagers of Luhu.

In a state of confusion and stress, the different factions of outside fighters and their ideologies wormed their way into the fibre of the public psyche and disrupted the whole community. Suddenly, people wanted to kill the *raja* who had always been a symbol for the unity and identity of the people of Luhu, who in the eighteenth century fought against the Portuguese to keep Catholicism out and who had effectively resisted the Dutch.⁹ Now, these xenophobic ideologies were related to the United States and Israel, while the first Dutchman to enter their village since the beginning of the communal wars was accused of spying for the Jewish-Christian-Western conspiracy. We had come to Luhu at an awkward time when most of the villagers were listening to too many instigating voices that, in fact, everybody feared. Bigotry had set this village up against itself. My mind raced for hours and my body trembled and was seized with cramp. I tried to be invisible but couldn't. We tried to disappear and run to the beach but were afraid of being trapped and shot.

Finally, in the morning, when everybody was exhausted and the *raja* had cooled the heads of the fanatics by saying that he would solve the problem the next day, things went quiet. Fortunately, there were more level heads among the leaders which could still prevail and resolve crises without bloodshed, but it should be noted that due to internal struggles more than twenty people have died in Luhu since the beginning of the riots in the Maluku. In the early morning, I was able to walk around the village and sit down with some of the boys who had pointed their guns at my head just a few hours before. By having tea with them and taking time to hear their stories, they eventually opened up. They wanted me to understand they were all very vulnerable because of the many opposing factions in the village. They said that, in fact, they did not want to engage in violent conflict but that they were frustrated because Ambon was still experiencing attacks from Christians who were supported by the Dutch and Americans.

Back in Ambon, the team started reflecting on what had happened. After contacting people and organisations which could detail the social and cultural situation

⁹ In the sixteenth century, the Luhu region was among the first powerful strongholds of the organised armies of the East Indies Company (VOC) in the islands. During the Great Ambonese or Hoamoalese War, 1651-1658, during which sultans and other local leaders rose against the VOC, the people of the Luhu region opposed the Dutch, but became allies again when the Dutch assisted them in rebuilding their village which was destroyed during the war. Before their hesitant and often violent relationship with the Dutch, the people of Luhu were involved in violent clashes between the North Maluku sultans, the VOC and the Portuguese. See Knaap (1987).

in Luhu, a Muslim NGO returned. It was received very well and many of those who had threatened my life conveyed their apologies. Following several visits and careful assessments, the NGO started sporting and economic activities in Luhu and has reportedly been able to reduce much of the internal tensions.

CONCLUSION

As the amount of anthropological writings and analysis on communal conflicts, violence and terror grows, there is also more discussion on the anthropologist's experience of violence in the field. As I indicated in the introduction, many of the existing reflections on the role of the anthropologists in areas which are violent suggest that, despite unsettling circumstances, the anthropologist can still work in ways which are considered normal, that is, once the potential risks are negotiated the reward will be significant knowledge. Many authors discuss the problems and strategies of survival, but at the same time put forward the possibility of engaging effectively with informants to illicit impartial data.

This is, in fact, the way I initially approached the situation in the Maluku, thinking that by doing the kind of anthropological fieldwork that was taught during my anthropology studies and which I had previously applied during fieldwork in Papua New Guinea and Papua (Irian Jaya), I would be able to gain objective insights into the backgrounds, dynamics and effects of the violence in order to develop, in collaboration with local organisations, sensible intervention strategies. Moreover, besides being very careful not to end up in violent situations, not putting my interlocutors and my local NGO colleagues in vulnerable situations, my main approach was showing the aggressors and the victims that my colleagues and I were as vulnerable as they were. I thought that by showing one's vulnerability and not by becoming a hero or in any other way an outside observer, I would be able to get the true story. In most situations that worked very well.

For example, realising that much of the instability in the region related to Dutch colonial politics in which, broadly stated, Christians had better access to the bureaucracy, business, and the armed forces, I usually went to great lengths discussing rumours about the Netherlands Government supporting the Christians and being in favour of the RMS. Among belligerent Christians who thought of Muslims as primordially aggressive and intolerant, I often tried to make people understand what

certain Muslims groups were fighting for, however difficult that was in the complex situation of shifting identities, shifting alliances and fluctuating fanaticisms. The 'real story' was inherently elusive in this context. In the Luhu case which I described above this did not work, as all the parties that intimidated us were convinced that the only reason somebody from the Netherlands would visit their village was to spy for the Western Christian anti-Muslim conspiracy. My team and I were thought to be collecting data in support of the Ambonese Christians' attempt to wipe out the Muslims from the Maluku, or at least to revitalise the Christian hegemony in the bureaucracy, education and business. Being transparent with them did not work, and it became clear that the team and I had not seen all the risks involved in going to Luhu. We thought we had made a good assessment but it appeared that we should have taken even more time talking with knowledgeable people about the foreseeable risks involved in working in conflict areas. Going to Luhu was perhaps not a good idea and I would argue that in some cases not doing research at all is the best option.

What helped in the Luhu case was keeping silent, which is a technique that is not part of anthropology's methodological strategies (cf. Green 1995:118-19). Being very threatening, the situation demanded some very clever posturing in order to survive and the women on the team advised me to 'shut my mouth' and let them do the talking. With respect to the Christian Ambonese on our team, we successfully disguised their identity. I avoided misrepresenting myself in order to safeguard my well-being and, in fact, in most instances people were received well who were liaison officers for donor organisations collecting information to develop programs which would assist people in vulnerable situations. At times, however, those in refugee camps were reluctant to talk because we were the umpteenth NGO coming along collecting data for programs, never actually materialising anything in support of local initiatives.

The Luhu case also indicates that doing research or consultancy work in a war zone can have grave consequences for assistants or local NGO workers. It is normal in ethnographic fieldwork to come across information which cannot be revealed because it would increase the chances of the informant or someone else being physically attacked or sent to jail. It is also obvious that in times of shared danger, tension and excitement – or soon afterwards – people are going to tell the researcher things that are different from the things they are telling as an informant. This means that the social scientist as researcher and consultant has to know enough about the context in which

information is collected and about the possible consequences of what he or she makes public. This increases obligations on those collecting data under fire. Given the limited responsibility that a consultant for a donor organisation can take for local NGO activists eager to run programs to assist victims of conflicts or to reconcile warring parties, there is an additional issue. This relates partly to the fact that local NGOs can be overly enthusiastic and optimistic and sometimes strive to outdo their rivals in competing for the attention of donors. Risks also increase because many local NGOs are eager to convince potential donors that their proposed intervention strategy is worth funding, inclining them to present situations as safer and more workable than they in fact are. Because I found it crucial to assess local circumstances myself, some NGO activists and community representatives would take the risk of venturing into dangerous areas for the sake of satisfying the donor. Kovats-Bernat stresses the important ethical point that assistants and informants in dangerous fields 'are entitled to negotiate equally and *exclusively* with ethnographers concerning matters of exposure to risk and research priorities' (2002:215), but I would add that with respect to humanitarian aid work the situation is more complex.

Both the Luhu and the Dutch delegation cases show that however difficult situations may have been, the data they provided and the critical reflection they stimulated were invaluable. Through such experiences and the stories gathered, the researcher and the consultant are eventually able to disclose crucial aspects of the complex nature of the violence, and its perpetrators and victims. Anthropologists can contribute significantly as they are used to hearing and taking seriously people's stories, which prevent them from concluding that militant groups or parts of the military such as Kopassus are necessarily 'irrational', 'twisted', 'dangerous' or 'wicked'. As outsiders to conflicts, anthropologists can carefully assess what violence means and why people engage in aggressive deeds. It is equally important to know how those in governments, international organisations and INGOs think. With respect to the Malukan conflicts, international donors generally wanted to hear about peace without carefully reading reports from the battlegrounds and without carefully listening to radical voices and powers which do not see peace as something positive. To understand what they want and how to comply with their wishes requires thorough ethnographic insight and a strong will to get one's message across to the bureaucrats in governments, LNGOs and donor agencies. In order to establish what all parties wish, it is not only important

to work through the right channels and do the right things, but also to fight against prejudices among other outsiders in order to prevent dangerous interventions. Though dangerous, and emotionally and physically exhausting, I found it rewarding to be relevant in a world fraught with violence and not to decide hastily to depart when things were getting rough.

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