REFLECTIONS ON INDONESIAN VIOLENCE:
TWO TALES AND THREE SILENCES

TANIA MURRAY LI

TWO TALES

In June 2001 I visited the Napu highlands of the Indonesian island of Sulawesi together with colleagues from a local NGO advocating recognition of customary land rights. We were attempting to understand why land held by indigenous, Christian highlanders under customary tenure was falling rapidly into the hands of migrants. The migrants were mainly Muslim, members of the Bugis ethno-linguistic group that predominates in the southern part of Sulawesi. The atmosphere we encountered was very tense: every day, truckloads of Christian refugees arrived from the coast, while Muslim/Bugis families fled to the coast from the hills, leaving their houses, stores, farms and mosques behind them. In the coastal town of Poso, and the surrounding countryside, less than a hundred kilometres away by road from our study site, Muslims and Christians were in the midst of a violent confrontation that left about 1,000 dead, 4,000 houses destroyed and at least 90,000 people displaced.¹

In subsequent months, news reports described Poso as a ghost town. Barracks built to house returning refugees were repeatedly torched. Muslims moved about with some security, but Christian government officials could report for work only by paying for armed guards. Both sides organised militias for attack, retribution, and ‘religious cleansing’, and received support from rogue elements in the army and militias outside Sulawesi. Military forces were eventually increased, and a peace accord brokered which included the disarmament of both sides, and the expulsion of non-Sulawesi militias. Yet the accord did not stop the violence. There were ‘mysterious shootings’ of pedestrians on city streets and farmers in their fields, assassinations of religious leaders, and more than 47 bombings in the next five years. A new militia arrived from Java and operated for several years before the police dislodged it. By 2008, the segregation of territory along religious
lines was entrenched, as refugees from both sides, unable to return to their formerly mixed towns and villages, were obliged to settle where they were. Sadly, the Sulawesi case was not unique: violence and mass evictions along ethnic or religious lines broke out in five provinces in the period following President Suharto’s ouster in 1998, after 32 years of military-inflected rule.²

How can such violence be explained? In 2001, a young man from one of the highland villages we were studying, a university graduate with responsibility for village ‘peace and security’, offered this account of the crisis. In 1998 Habibie, a national figure closely identified with the organisation of Islamic intellectuals (ICMI), had replaced Suharto as president. Soon thereafter, Muslim migrants started to arrive in large numbers, buying up land in the hills with money supplied to them by Habibie through various state-linked religious foundations. In his view, the Muslim Bugis influx was part of a plot, the purpose of which was a Muslim takeover of the largely Christian highlands. So what, he asked me, was the western (Christian) world going to do about their situation? Surely they had some responsibilities? If not for the Dutch missionaries who Christianised the highlands in the colonial period, this conflict would not be occurring, as the highlands would be Muslim too. Meanwhile, he was concentrating his efforts on calming the Muslims still remaining in the village, organising a ‘communications’ committee to intercept and counter inflammatory rumours, and preparing for village defence.

Preoccupied by different questions, but highlighting the same dates, I offered a different explanation for the migrant influx. In 1998, Indonesia’s currency collapsed, and producers of world market crops priced in dollars enjoyed a massive windfall of cash. Bugis farmers from the south with already established cocoa stands poured into highlands, renting buses to tour the countryside looking for additional land on which to grow this ‘brown gold’. Thousands more would-be cocoa farmers followed suit, supplying labour to Bugis patrons while saving to make their own land purchases. Enticed by cash offers greatly exceeding normal land prices, and intimidated by local authorities which refused to recognise their customary land rights, many villagers had sold up. As the new cocoa went into production, they found themselves looking with envy at new Bugis houses, complete with satellite TVs. In my tale, religious and ethnic tensions were grounded in a major agrarian transformation in which land was becoming commoditised and new classes of landowners and landless wage labourers were emerging. So what, I asked my interlocutor, could the highlanders do to hold onto their remaining land in the face of this migrant influx?

The numbers were indeed striking. A survey conducted in 2001 found that, in the Napu village of my interlocutor, Bugis outnumbered highland-
ers and comprised 63 per cent of the total village population, and about 30 per cent of the subdistrict as a whole. About 40 per cent of local households had sold land to incoming migrants within the last five years. The arrival of Muslim foundations linked to President Habibie was also confirmed. In 2000 the three senior executive positions in Poso District were occupied by prominent members of the Habibie-linked association for Muslim intellectuals, ICMI. Not confirmed was the link my interlocutor drew between Muslim foundations, and the rapid and recent arrival of a large number of Muslims buying up land in his village.

The land issue was not, of course, news to villagers. Although they lacked aggregate numbers, they were aware of the trend. I knew from my reading that the Sulawesi cocoa boom echoed the trajectory of previous booms (and busts) in West Africa and elsewhere. The displacement of indigenous populations by migrants, the sequence of crop diseases, dependence on chemical inputs, indebtedness and continuing expansion into new forest zones to profit from ‘forest rent’, were wholly anticipated by agricultural historians, although they took the Sulawesi highlanders by surprise. Conspiracy scenarios were not news to me. Tales in which prominent figures in the political, administrative and military machine manipulate people to further their own ends – be it profit, or a religious cause – are common in Indonesia, continuously circulated through, and generated by, the local rumour mill. Note also that both our tales included regional, national and transnational elements, making connections across time and space. It was not the case that I invoked global processes, while my interlocutor focused on local ones.

The main difference between our two explanations was their affective load, and the consequences that follow from them. For the highlanders, feeling besieged and vulnerable, it was crucial at that moment to recognise proximate enemies and potential allies. Their analysis of the role of Islamic foundations in sponsoring the migrant influx enabled them to identify at least one concrete mechanism behind their social and economic marginalisation. The idea that these foundations were directly linked to the new president confirmed their worst fears: behind the talk of economic development for the highlands lurked an Islamist agenda, of which Bugis migrants were both the instruments and the intended beneficiaries. For me, on the other hand, a political-economic emphasis was vastly more acceptable, more attuned to my academic and political sensibilities, than one which reduced the problem to a dualistic divide (Christians versus Muslims), or limited it to the exposure of a conspiracy. I was concerned that he and his village security committee might identify conspirators, and violently expel them, while leaving the broad, systemic, class-forming processes directly connected to land tenure
unaddressed. He shared a concern to avoid violence: although he expressed his suspicions to me, and was monitoring the Bugis as closely as he could, he did not organise an attack.

More generally, I would argue, accounts of violence need political economy to counter the simplifying culturalism of so much popular analysis. Describing Indonesia, journalists readily elaborate on the impossibility of peace and unity across ‘13,000 islands, roiling with an untamed mix of cultures, ethnic groups, rivalries, gods and spoken tongues’. Anthropologists have sometimes fuelled popular stereotypes of exotic tribal practices, mob mentalities, or an Indonesian proclivity to run amuk – not least when their analysis is reduced to media sound bites. Thus Clifford Geertz in an interview with the New York Times on the eve of Suharto’s fall stated that Javanese people seem polite, deferent and controlled until ‘all hell breaks loose’. What a reader might take away from this comment is a generalising, ahistorical model of Javanese culture which begs the questions why here? why now? why these targets? why these forms? why not everyone? – and so on. This is the gap that a historically-grounded, political-economic analysis helps to fill.

An emphasis on culture and meaning, on the other hand, is needed to counter the crude materialism of neo-Malthusian accounts, both popular and academic, that attribute conflict to the pressure of people on resources, radically under-specifying the diverse forms and mechanisms of this ‘pressure’, and failing to account for populations under extreme economic stress who nevertheless establish conditions of tolerance and peace. Similarly, an emphasis on culture modifies the hasty turn to economic globalisation to explain the increased prominence of religious or ethnic identifications, a turn which psychologises a presumed ‘need’ for community and begs the question of why economic insecurity should not be addressed through other forms of mobilisation, such as unions or political parties.

While polemical encounters sometimes require a simplifying emphasis on the cultural or the material, the risk of such polemics is to re-establish a dichotomy that scholars building on the legacy of cultural Marxism have worked hard to dissolve. In a conflict zone such as highland Sulawesi, a form of analysis which attempts to grasp the materiality of cultural understandings, and the simultaneity of material and symbolic struggles seems especially important. The causes of violence are unlikely to be reducible to either material or cultural, and much is obscured by a crude binary framing. To delve deeper, we need to break three silences which cloud popular understandings of violence: a silence about history, about geography, and about agency.
HISTORY

The phrase ‘divide and rule’ captures a prominent element of colonial practice. But the creation and maintenance of the social boundaries upon which colonial rule depended was not a seamless or mechanistic process: it was hard work. We need to account for the conditions under which particular racial, ethnic or religious divides inscribed by colonial regimes became popular. To do this, we must explain how they were able to make use of ideas already present in society, including residual histories and memories, to form the kind of unspoken common sense sometimes described as hegemonic.

In Indonesia, in contrast to many other (post)colonies, ethnic identities have never been legally inscribed. The Dutch instituted a racialised legal and administrative system based on three categories: European, Foreign Oriental (mainly Chinese), and Native. They did not further divide the Native population in the way the British did in India, with long lists of castes and tribes, or in Africa, where indirect rule through African chiefs meant that individuals carried an ethnic/tribal label on their identity card. To this day, the Indonesian national census does not collect data on ethnic identity, although in various years it has recorded rough proxies such as home language and province of birth. Ethnic prejudice and stereotyping do exist, of course, both within and outside the state machinery, but they have not been institutionalised in legal or administrative codes. Religion, in contrast, was an axis of divide-and-rule deliberately used by the Dutch when they attempted to limit the gathering strength of Islam as a unifying, anti-colonial force, by sending Christian missionaries into the highlands of Indonesia’s many islands to create loyal, Christian bastions. In the Sulawesi conflict, the highland town of Tentena, which was the headquarters of the colonial mission, became the centre for Christian militias and refugees and expelled its Muslim population, while the coastal zone and the city of Poso became identified with Islam as the Christian population fled to the hills.

In the Napu highlands, my interlocutor was tasked with maintaining a fragile peace among indigenous Christians and the migrant Muslim population. He also had to restrain his fellow villagers from their desire to go to Poso to help defend Christians and take revenge. In Napu, at a moment of extreme tension, religion became a short-hand for two overlapping divides: Christian/indigenous versus Muslim/migrant. In other parts of Indonesia, the divides do not align so neatly: migrants and locals might all be Muslim, for example. Coincidentally, the divide highlighted by my interlocutor lined up with the emerging class divide between successful migrant farmers busy acquiring land for cocoa, and local farmers who sold up and lost out. On inspection, the overlap turned out to be less than complete: there were
Christian highlanders with significant landholdings, often village officials, who had not sold their own land, but profited by acting as brokers for incoming migrants. There were poor Bugis migrants who arrived with no money, looking for work with Bugis patrons, knowing it would take years to acquire land. Yet my interlocutor was not interested in these details. He was convinced the Bugis migrants came with money from Muslim foundations, and land for cacao was incidental to their agenda.

GEOGRAPHY

Village homelands

The central and agreed fact in both the tales with which I began is the influx of Muslim migrants into the Sulawesi highlands. The effects of this influx on the spatial organisation of daily life were stark. When we asked the headmen of villages in Napu and neighbouring sub-districts to provide us with their lists of current residents, a standard instrument of village administration, they admitted that their records were hugely inaccurate. So many new people had moved into the area in the past two years, they were unable to keep track. Very few of the newcomers had reported to the headman with details of their household membership, their place of origin, and their intention to take up permanent residence in the village. One village secretary had just completed the pre-count for the national census, and found that the village population had doubled, with the new ‘half’ comprising Bugis migrants, few of whom he had ever seen before. Many of them, he noted, spoke only the Bugis language so he could not communicate with them in Indonesian. They were living in barracks or crammed into the houses of relatives, three or four households per unit. Most of them were concentrated in a separate hamlet on the periphery of the main village settlement, building their houses on farm land acquired by a Bugis broker and sold off to clients recruited through kinship and place-based networks. In one village, where the Bugis population was still small, a large new mosque had been built: that, said a resident, is for all the new people who are about to move in to start planting cocoa on the thirty hectare plot recently acquired by their leader.

A sense of belonging in the village was not so obvious for the highland population either. Sulawesi’s highland villages should not be imagined as intact tribe-like communities, fixed in their current locations since time immemorial. They were formed through the forced resettlement of diverse groups from the surrounding hills to a river valley or plateau where colonial and contemporary rules could monitor, tax and ‘improve’ them. Depending on when and where they converted, villagers belong to several distinct Christian congregations. They speak multiple languages. There are
often tensions between earlier and later settlers over issues such as land and village leadership. People have kin in other villages, and sometimes also in the original hill-top settlements which were never completely emptied. The unintended consequences of this imposed historical mobility have played out in land dealings between highlanders and Bugis migrants: individuals who had sold their valley land to migrants were looking to their ancestral lands on the hill slopes as a refuge, a place to which they could withdraw and start their economic enterprises, and their communities, over again.

A few Muslim Bugis, mainly traders, were resident in the highlands for decades before the conflict erupted, living peacefully among the Christian population. In 2001 most of these old time Muslim residents left their homes in the Napu highlands, a departure their Christian neighbours found insulting. My interlocutor, responsible for village security, set great store by his ability to reassure Muslim residents that Christian villagers had no violent intentions towards them, and were committed to peace and mutual respect. Thus he was hurt when his next door neighbour, a small-time Bugis merchant with whom he had grown up and attended elementary school, left one night with his wife and children, without even saying goodbye. ‘It makes you wonder’, he said, ‘what is really in their hearts’. In saying this, he repositioned his neighbour from a distinct individual, whose personal history he knew, to a member of a group. All Muslims became duplicitous, not just the newcomers he thought had been sent by the Muslim foundations.

A place in the nation

From the perspective of Indonesia’s coastal and urban zones, the highlands are unruly frontiers, marginal to national life. Their imputed marginality is rooted in a set of place-myths that serve to exaggerate the social distance between the highlanders and the coastal and urban populations among whom they aspire to live and work. Once again the example of my young interlocutor is instructive. Why was he, a university graduate, back in his home village underemployed, busying himself with the local defence committee, and dreaming of making a fortune in cocoa? He was there only because he had been unable to find a government job in the city of Poso. The Christian population of the highlands, although often well educated as the result of several generations of mission schooling, is still despised and excluded by urban and coastal Muslims who associate them with the heathen past, and with practices such as headhunting.

In recent years Christianity itself has come to be defined as increasingly marginal to national life. In the latter decade of President Suharto’s rule and continuing with his replacement, Habibie, the neutral stance towards
diverse organised religions promised by the constitution was undermined by an intensified connection between Islam and state power. Suharto’s answer to the criticism of the urban middle classes angered by the corruption and greed of his family and cronies was to offer support to some of the more strident Islamist groups in return for their political loyalty. He also used state funds to support missionary efforts directed mainly towards secular Muslims, and inflicted all state institutions with a more assertive Islam, demonstrated in practices such as the use of Muslim blessings to begin and end official events.

These shifts in central government policy and practice towards different religious groups resonated loudly in Poso town, and also in the surrounding hills. The three major rounds of violence in Sulawesi in 1998–2001 all began in Poso town, and involved struggles over Poso District senior political or administrative positions in which Christian and Muslim candidates were in competition. At the time, Poso District had a relatively even split in its population: 57% Muslim, 40% Christian. The Suharto regime had managed mixed districts such as this by deliberately engineering a balance: if the district head was Christian, the deputy would be Muslim, and in the next round of appointments they would switch. Post-Suharto democratisation meant that senior politicians would be elected, not appointed, and candidates in many parts of Indonesia responded by mobilising constituencies along ethno-religious lines. Further, the economic stakes of public office became much higher when legislation for administrative decentralisation went into effect in 2001, giving the regions more autonomy, more control over local assets (minerals, forests), and direct access to central government funds that they could spread among their clients and allies. In all the islands where violence broke out in 1998–2001, the cities were heavily dependent on government spending, with 20–30 per cent of the working population employed by the government. Young men like my interlocutor saw their chances of government jobs diminish as a Muslim-dominated district administration reconfigured patronage networks to favour Muslims. The tight links binding Islam, the ruling regime, and the administrative apparatus at every level also affects rural matters such as development contracts, licences and land allocation. Muslim foundations funded by President Habibie to take over the hills in which Christians predominate were, for my interlocutor, the outcome of this hostile plot.

Indonesia’s radical Islamist groups draw the spatial boundaries of their struggle quite differently from the Christian minorities. For them, Christians are representatives and reminders of the colonial power which prevented the emergence of an Islamic state a century ago, blocked it at independence,
and still stand in its way. Christians are tainted by their association with the colonial power, and are seen as alien Others. Worse, foreigners are still interfering: Islamists see the mission planes that fly into remote highland areas as a massive Christianisation project. They accuse Christians of harbouring plans to declare independence for their islands and enclaves, with the support of international forces: my interlocutor’s assumption that I would have Christian loyalties hinted in this direction. But while he identified his enemy in the militant Muslim foundations, brotherhoods and militias infiltrating his neighbourhood, radical Islamists interpret the entire apparatus of international aid and finance as evidence of a very powerful conspiracy supporting Christian interests. US military action in Afghanistan, and the search for terrorists networks allegedly lurking in Indonesia and the Philippines, heighten the sense that both Islam and national sovereignty are threatened by the white/Christian/Zionist ‘West’. Presented as a unified package, and declaimed at Friday prayers across the nation, the threat to Indonesia’s Muslims can be made to seem very grave, despite the fact that they make up 86 per cent of the population. Yet most Indonesian Muslims, who practice a moderate form of Islam, do not subscribe to a view of the West as alien and hostile. Their sense of the nation, and their own place within it, also has global coordinates. In 2001, 10,000 Indonesians of all faiths signed a petition opposing religious extremism and defending ‘the Indonesian way of life, which is to live together in tolerance’. The organisers hoped to dispel negative images of Indonesia that circulated in global media during the street rallies protesting US bombing in Afghanistan. Their vision of modernity rejects violence, and the shame of living in a violent land.

AGENCY

Locating agents

To understand communal violence, one has to be able to account for its popularity – why, that is, large numbers of ordinary people become involved as perpetrators or supporters. The view of Indonesian government officials and activists alike is that people become involved because they are manipulated by political elites who use ethnicity or religion as tools to divide and mobilise people, inciting them to commit violent acts. They label the perpetrators puppets, and the ‘intellectual leaders’ puppeteers. I find this approach problematic, because it treats ordinary people as dupes, incapable of acting on the basis of their own critical assessments. In my experience, these assessments include cynicism about the greed, corruption and self-serving ambition of political and other elites, and detailed knowledge of their misdeeds. Thus it seems unlikely to me that they would be so easily led. More
important is the role of the actual and aspiring middle classes – people like my interlocutor – who are often overlooked in studies of violence, especially when it is assumed to reflect economic duress. It is lower level professionals, or the would-be professional classes, excluded from power and advancement, who have been leaders on both sides of the conflict in Poso and in the other islands: religious leaders, parliamentarians, businessmen, bureaucrats, retired soldiers, academics, NGO activists, and students.18

A unique feature of the conflict in Sulawesi was the resonance between the concerns of would-be urban elites and struggles over land taking place in the countryside. The cocoa boom set up an unusually acute tension among the aspiring middle classes in rural areas: among people who had been unable to obtain government jobs, or who recognised that export oriented agriculture offered much better returns, especially in the context of high export prices designated in dollars, inflation in the cost of basic goods, and low government salaries. The new crop offered, for the first time, an opportunity to make serious money and attain a comfortable middle-class lifestyle in the mountainous hinterlands that coastal Muslims had hitherto despised, and that educated Christians routinely left behind. But the potential of cocoa was discovered and monopolised by Bugis migrants who bought up land at low prices before the highlanders caught on. It was expanding opportunity, not a Malthusian resource crunch, which made tensions in the countryside so very high, and helped to supply the conflict’s popular base.

Cruelty
To explain the context of violence, we must recognise the political economic tensions, and the material stakes of high office, government jobs, and access to land for cocoa. But there is more work to be done before we can make any sense of the intimate agency of direct personal attack. At this point, it is useful to draw a distinction between conflict, which we can understand as being ‘about’ or ‘over’ valued material or symbolic goods, including high ideals and contending visions of the good life, and the phenomenon of cruelty: forms and degrees of violence which are excessive, savage, sadistic and which we tend to label, at the risk of tautology, irrational. A striking example of such cruelty and excess occurred in another Indonesian island, Kalimantan, in March 2000, when the indigenous Dayak population set about evicting migrants on a massive scale. In one incident, 118 terrified refugees on a bus leaving the province were stopped and massacred in a field.19 In the logic of a conflict over resources and the reclaiming of place, the perpetrators had already achieved their goal – the migrants were leaving. Why make the decision – because decision it was – to stop the bus and kill
them? Note that cruelty is not only a phenomenon of hinterlands and forest frontiers, witness the frequent lynch-mob killings of petty thieves in the capital city Jakarta, some of them extracted from police stations and taken out to be burned alive.

In all Indonesia conflict zones in 1998–2001, the violence included dismemberment, the tearing of foetuses from pregnant women, the disembowelling of children, mutilation and torture, horrors so intimate that the term cruelty cannot be avoided. In the Sulawesi highlands during my visit, the talk circled endlessly around acts of cruelty reported to be taking place in Poso town: the rape and murder of two young girls by their next-door neighbour, and so on.

Although the motivation that leads one person to disembowel another, or even just shoot him in the back, exceeds the logic of conflict and defies analysis in economistic terms, it is possible to make some sense of its forms and effects. The French scholar Etienne Balibar offers a hint when he points to the role of ‘residues’ of history returning, decontextualised, as distorted or exaggerated memories, and deployed in the condensed and truncated form of a fetish or exhibited as an emblem. Such an emblem capable of expressing extraordinary, polyvalent power was reported in Poso, where a pig was found pinned to a wall in crucified form, under the caption ‘Jesus is a pig’. This may well have been an urban legend. I find it unlikely that Muslims, the presumed perpetrators, would be prepared to grapple with this (to them) unclean animal in order to create this fetish. Moreover, while Christians would indeed be insulted by the charge that the son of god is an animal, the emblem of the pig is much more poignant to Muslims. Whether or not the pig existed, the image of its crucified form together with the caption presented an impossible conundrum, an overdetermined and highly potent sign. This sign took its meaning from the long history of religious identity formation I have described, but it took its peculiar force from the absurdity and distortion of the fetish itself. Without reading a motive into the sign, we can examine its effects: to communicate that the world you most feared, one characterised by the impossible and unthinkable, has come to pass. This is the message that circulated in the hills, as people discussed the crucified pig.

Other condensed and fetishised symbols deployed in the Sulawesi conflict included hills and forests as places of disorder; mutilation and decapitation of weak and defenceless people; and the communist party (PKI). All three appeared in a report in Kompas, the most respected national daily newspaper, about one horrific incident. There were thirteen Muslim victims, including the elderly imam of the local mosque, a pregnant woman and young
children. They were living in a mountain village in the Poso interior. Their attackers disappeared into the forest, an area so vast and inaccessible that the police could not hope to apprehend them or offer protection. The police chief described the action as ‘extremely sadistic, even more so than the PKI’. The incarnation of the communist party as a fetish symbolising extreme violence was the deliberate work of the Suharto regime, which engineered the massacre of half a million alleged communists in 1965 yet insisted that the violence was the work of the ‘communists’ themselves. Note that communists were assumed to be godless and at home in the hills, like the savage headhunters whose memory the reporter simultaneously invoked. To the police, the reporter, and the newsreading public, these associations are not deliberate manipulations – they simply confirm the reality of the phenomenon they have learned to suspect and fear.

The burning of houses and public buildings, and the cutting and burning of cocoa trees, also merits this kind of scrutiny. At one level, the destruction of cocoa trees can be seen as the reclaiming of territory. If the expelled population has no more trees, they will be less tempted to return, and someone more deserving can occupy the vacated space. But there is a problem with this logic: Indonesia’s national and customary law recognise that a person who has planted trees has a legitimate claim on the land, and sooner or later the person who destroys the trees will have to pay compensation. It would be more rational, in the short run at least, to leave the trees standing and harvest the fruit, worth a fortune in the local farm economy. In 2001, journalists reported that some trees are indeed being harvested by ‘thieves’. But tens of thousands of productive trees, as well as houses, schools and other buildings of high value were also destroyed, sending a powerful message: economic logic of the kind that might be thought of as shared did not apply.

Retrospectively, the violence looked different. By the time I interviewed Muslim and Christian refugees in 2003, they were much less ready to point fingers at ‘proximate enemies’, individual or collective. Indeed, they did the opposite: they echoed the official view, that they had been manipulated by unknown forces. ‘We always got on fine with our neighbours, there was nothing between us’ was one refrain, followed by ‘we don’t know who the perpetrators were, or how this could happen’. This kind of statement could be interpreted as a rhetorical device to deflect blame and avoid future reprisals – we are not violent, these acts of cruelty were not committed by us, it was other people. Certainly, this version of events is less terrifying than the recognition that neighbours turned on each other. Yet in the period 1998–2001, thousands of ‘ordinary’ people – Christians and Muslims – were involved in direct confrontations, usually in the form of a mobilised mob,
enraged at news of atrocities committed by the other side. The militias that formed had assistance from outside the region, but they recruited locally. When police launched an attack on a well-entrenched militia in 2008, allies and sympathisers from across the province mobilised in its support.\textsuperscript{23}

\section*{AGAINST VIOLENCE}

In the highlands of Napu, my interlocutor and his colleagues in the village security committee creatively revised the task of looking out for stray ‘communists’, their official remit in the Suharto period, and carried out a twenty-four hour watch for miscreants of either faith. They adopted the Suharto-era rhetoric which described combatants as youthful hotheads, using this fiction to draw together a coalition of Muslim and Christian elders with the common task of keeping their respective hotheads under control. During my visit, when a rumour emerged that the members of a Muslim prayer group had gone home after their evening worship to fetch their weapons, the communication committee sprang into action to verify that this collective arming had not occurred, and thus prevented a pre-emptive strike. Even at the height of the Poso conflict, the Suharto-era proscription of the mobilisation of people along the lines of SARA – an acronym that stands for ethnicity, religion, race or class (\textit{suku, agama, ras, antargolongan}) – still had a great deal of resonance in the hills, where many people agreed that SARA was a bad thing, and a disruption of peace and development.

Ironically, but unsurprisingly, violence and its control may also strengthen ruling regimes. The populist President Sukarno was obliged to form an alliance with the army in order to suppress the separatist and religiously-oriented rebellions that threatened to break up Indonesia in the 1950s. Memories of this violent and disrupted period encouraged many Sulawesi villagers to favour a firm, controlling state. As I noted earlier, the Suharto regime helped to engineer violence on a massive scale (half a million alleged communists killed) and then based its legitimacy on its capacity to prevent violence among the ignorant masses (who were cynically blamed for \textit{their} excesses!).\textsuperscript{24}

In the 1998–2001 period, a series of post-Suharto presidents were ineffective in preventing violence, but they were active in brokering peace agreements between warring groups, lecturing citizens about how to behave, managing flows of refugees and providing for their needs.

In the wake of the violence, the field of ‘conflict management’ took the place of economic development in amplifying and consolidating the role of government at every level. Government officials pontificated on the psychological deficiencies of the masses who run \textit{amuk}, and need ‘mental guidance’ (\textit{pembinaan mental}), especially the youth, who were said to be easily led.
International aid donors located the cause of the violence in the weak development of ‘civil society’, a problem they sought to rectify by lavishing funds on NGOs, and creating a new industry in mediation and ‘conflict transformation’. I find the donors’ diagnosis inaccurate. Indonesia has a ‘thick’ civil society, with dense sets of social relations connecting individuals beyond the household, and thousands of more or less formal groups dedicated to culture, sports, religion, etc. Sadly, some of these groups were involved in the violence, when youth clubs doubled as militias. But there is nothing wrong with Indonesian capacities for organising a rich social life, or for analysing the world around them. The deficiency, in my view, lies elsewhere: in the lost art of engaging in critique, and working out differences by non-violent means, i.e. the practice of politics.

The practice of politics

For thirty-two years of Suharto’s rule the regime suppressed the practice of politics in favour of the obsessive logic of development. It curtailed party organisation, elections, claims for regional autonomy, and unions; it banned popular mobilisations over matters such as land reform. It defined politics negatively, as a disruption of progress. It urged the people who did not benefit from development to await their turn. Suharto presented himself as the Father of Development, and this image had some traction. In 1996 I was struck, watching TV news in the home of a member of the Sulawesi village elite, by the emotion expressed on the death of Suharto’s wife Ibu Tien, ‘She was the mother of the nation, the mother of us all’. No talk there of the scandals, corruption and greed of Ibu Tien, matters which the cynics in Java, rich and poor alike, endlessly discussed. In 1998, the year Suharto was deposed, I was again surprised at reactions to scenes of protestors in Jakarta setting fire to shopping centres and destroying bank machines. ‘Why do those people in Jakarta want to spoil their nice things – if we had those things here, we would take better care of them’. Yet uneven development did produce some trenchant critiques, in Sulawesi and elsewhere, and a renewed demand for political engagement.

A young man in the Sulawesi hills – not the one I cited but another, similarly educated, also back home in his village – described to me how he had ‘learned to conduct politics’ (belajar berpolitik). By this he meant learning to figure out for himself what was wrong and right in the world, and how to carry that assessment forward to bring about change. His epiphany occurred a few years earlier, when an NGO began helping the people of his village resist the construction of a hydro-electric dam that would flood their land and force them to leave. Home from Java where he had worked and studied
for some years, he was sent by the village headman to observe the activities of this NGO, and report back on what kinds of trouble they were fomenting. So he started to attend their meetings, listening from the back, and came to the gradual realisation that much of what they said about the importance of livelihoods, the environment, and the legitimacy of customary land rights made perfect sense. In contrast, the more he listened to government officials promoting the dam as a step towards ‘development’ in the province as well as a better future for the villagers, the less credible he found them.

The campaign against the dam occurred under the Suharto regime, when individuals who had critical insights shared them frequently in the form of cynical jokes and asides, but not in more systematic forms directed towards collective action. NGOs defending villagers’ rights to land and livelihood were threatened by the authorities, and accused of being communist. But seeing the dedication of the NGO’s young staff, and absorbing some of their intellectual energy, this young man became convinced that learning to conduct politics was a positive step. He described his feeling as one of awakening from a long and lazy sleep. He began to look with new eyes at the people around him in his village and in the provincial government who did not understand, or were too afraid to engage in, political process. When I met him in 2001, after the fall of Suharto, he felt the possibilities for ‘learning to conduct politics’ had opened up, but people were very slow to grasp them. They had to unlearn habits of quiescence cultivated through three decades of Suharto-era double-think and double-talk, and start to think of politics positively, as an entitlement.

Throughout the struggle for independence and especially in the period 1945-65, until the army-led coup which ushered in Suharto’s rule, many Indonesians had been active in the practice of politics, and vigorous in debating the shape of the nation. There were mass mobilisations of workers, peasants, women, youth, regional and religious communities, all engaged in struggles over the distribution of resources and the recognition of differences (cultural, historical, regional, religious) that linked and cross-cut each other in complex ways. But the first president, Sukarno, retreated into the paternalism of ‘Guided Democracy’, and the Suharto regime referred to the populace as a ‘floating mass’ incapable of politics, for whom the moment of political maturity was indefinitely postponed. Conjuring up the spectre of a communist threat, the regime enjoined this ‘mass’ to support the Suharto regime since it alone could secure a stable state of non-politics in which nothing ‘untoward’ or ‘excessive’ would happen.

Some Sulawesi highlanders wish for a return to those quiet days, and believe that the post-Suharto violence was caused by an excess of ‘politics’,
understood as intrinsically disruptive. Others now recognise the eerie stillness created by the absence of politics as the key problem to be redressed. Suharto-era mal-development, and the greed of Suharto’s cronies and corrupt officials, have been exposed, but they were obvious enough and easy targets. The much harder task of (re)learning how to live with differences between groups has only just begun. This requires more than democratic elections and the rule of law. It requires the strengthening of situated individual and collective practices of reaching settlements under conditions in which conflict, dissension, and pluralism must be regarded as permanent. Cultural and religious identifications, whatever the processes through which they were formed and embedded, cannot be wished away, and they are especially intractable in situations where people have acted violently in their name. Procedures for living together in difference are the best that can be achieved. From this perspective, the most significant element in the genealogy of the current violence is not primordial identity or religious persuasion, nor the failure to reach some imagined end-point of mutual understanding and consensus, nor is it the existence of conspiracies or even material inequalities but the surprisingly effective anti-politics of the Suharto regime. It is the loss of capacity in the practice of politics which fosters the shift from conflict, a normal condition of human life, to cruelty and excess.

NOTES


11 In the period 1971–1982, the ratio of Christian to Muslim members of the ruling Golkar party in Poso District was 29:24. In 1997–2004 it was 29:43. See Sangaji, ‘Rumput Kering’, p. 17.

12 Klinken, ‘Communal Conflict’.

13 Many Christians assessed the government’s official transmigration program that moved a predominantly Muslim population from Java into Christian areas as a plot to make them a minority in their own homeland. See Sangaji, ‘Rumput Kering’, p. 17.

14 Ibid., p. 22.


16 Hefner, *Civil Islam*.

17 An NGO identified twenty-four senior regional government officials who were involved as ‘puppeteers’ and ‘provokers’, and documented the role of rogue elements in the army who set one group against another by, for example, placing a mutilated Muslim corpse where an already-heated mob would find it and become enraged. See WALHI, ‘Kronologi Kejadian Poso’, Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia, 11 June 2001. See also Sangaji, ‘Rumput Kering’.


22 See James Siegel, *A New Criminal Type in Jakarta: Counter-Revolution Today*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1998. He offers striking insights into the mass-mediated process through which murder, fraud and
other crimes come to shape a distorted public sphere. He describes how monstrous, shocking and unnatural actions, including those labelled sadistic and inhuman, serve to concentrate an otherwise amorphous, alien power, and reinscribe the state as the guarantor of security.


24 The main killings, concentrated on the island Java, were coordinated by the army but perpetrated by Muslim youth groups, and experienced by Java’s highlanders as a Muslim attack. The consolidation of separate political streams or pillars (Islam, nationalism, communism) in the Sukarno period made these identities strong enough to command the loyalty, and evoke the killing power, of their members. See Hefner, Civil Islam. He describes the distress still experienced by Muslim youth group members when they reflect on their role.