

From Communal War to Peaceful Coexistence: The Influence of Adat Culture in North Maluku, Indonesia

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This article examines how adat culture influenced peace-building and reconciliation efforts in North Maluku Province (NMP), Indonesia. This province was plagued by communal conflict from 1999 to 2000 following the fall of President Suharto's regime. Nonetheless, NMP stands out as a rare success story for its comparatively quick consolidation of peace and its bottom-up efforts to reconcile the community, which was divided along ethno-religious lines. In-depth interviews were conducted with local elite and expert actors, and the Reality Check Approach (RCA) was used to explore the emic perspective of villagers at the grassroots level. An important key to the successful peace-building was that both the elite actors in regency government and most people at the grassroots level were united in their efforts to use a reinvigorated adat culture to reconcile the communities. In addition, minority groups and migrants were largely included and standard top-down attempts at reconciliation were absent, as most international organisations also promoted the local initiatives. The level of reconciliation does not, however, extend further than peaceful coexistence, partly because issues of culpability remain taboo in NMP. To achieve thorough reconciliation, the former conflicting parties would need to assume responsibility for wrongdoing and follow it up with forgiveness.

Keywords: Peace-building, reconciliation, Adat, North Maluku Province, Reality Check Approach

Under President Suharto's regime (1967–1998), any resistance within Indonesia was swiftly met with the iron fist of the military. Consequently, tensions simmered or remained dormant until the fall of the autocracy (Brown, Wilson, & Hadi, 2005). With Suharto out, Indonesia inaugurated a highly ambitious reform and democratisation

(Wilson, 2015); on the other hand, the reform process has also encountered significant resistance. In five provinces, large-scale violence erupted that pitted citizen against citizen. The most intense violence plagued the newly established North Maluku Province (NMP) (see Figure 1), with 3,257 killed from August 1999 until June 2000 (Barron et al., 2012, p.



Figure 1: North Maluku and Maluku provinces within the Moluccan archipelago (Lencer, 2013).

process, including political and economic decentralisation and major reforms of the judiciary, security forces, and corporate governance structures. On the one hand, these highly complex and extensive reforms have so far made considerable progress

10). This was *communal violence*, which is ‘organised violence between non-state actors’ (Öberg & Strøm, 2007, p. 3). Although this violence divided local society along ethno-religious lines, its roots and drivers were more multi-faceted and often involved

economic and political elite incentives (see e.g., Bertrand, 2004; Van Klinken, 2008; Wilson, 2008). However, as Christopher Duncan (2014) notes, the grassroots perceived the violence as more linked to religious identity (i.e., Christian vs. Muslim). According to Brown, Wilson & Hadi (2005), both structural and proximate causes affected the conflict in NMP.

The structural causes included: firstly, a lack of strong state institutions to cope with and mediate conflict; secondly, severe horizontal inequalities between Christians and Muslims dating back to Dutch colonialism; Suharto's 'Islamic turn' in the last decade of his rule further contributed to rising tensions between the two communities and the gradual erosion of traditional social structures up to the



Figure 2: North Halmahera Regency in North Maluku Province (Tourism and Cultural Office North Halmahera Regency, 2014).

eruption of the violence is a third structural cause. The proximate causes included: firstly, swift decentralisation and democratisation policies, which meant that considerable funding was up for grabs in local elections, and this led to an increase in the incentive to mobilise along ethnic and religious lines among local elites; secondly, the 1997 Asian finan-

to corrupt local elites loyal to the GoI) eliminated much of the *uncertainty* and *fear* between Christians and Muslims. Some of the violence had indeed been triggered by a security dilemma resulting in pre-emptive attacks by both sides, which were convinced (often by rumours) of imminent attacks from their opponents (Wilson, 2008). In addition,



Figure 3. My interpreter and I are about to accompany some village women to their gardens to harvest vegetables during the reality check in the Tobelo area, where many people are subsistence farmers. The village and gardens are mixed between Muslims and Christians, though most other NMP villages are segregated by religion.

cial crisis, which exacerbated existing divides between several groups (Brown, Wilson & Hadi 2005).

National government incentives

Christopher Duncan contends that ‘the Indonesian government never implemented any conflict resolution strategies in North Maluku’ (2016, p. 464). However, Claire Smith (2014) stresses that the government of Indonesia (GoI) deserves some credit, as its illiberal security approach (e.g., imposing curfews, halting elections, and granting impunity

the provincial government provided an incentive for peace-building by releasing a statement that Tobelo Town would not become the capital of the future *North Halmahera Regency* (NHR) unless calm was restored and local government facilitated the safe return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Duncan, 2016, p. 464).

Exploring peace-building and reconciliation

Previous comparative studies have described NMP

as a rare success story for its rapid, yet still sustained, peace process, compared with the other provinces affected by communal violence, as mentioned above (Barron et al., 2012; Van Klinken, 2007). This article draws on data collected through fieldwork in NMP in 2015. As opposed to most previous research, this article analyses how, and to what extent, former divided communities have managed to reconcile in the aftermath of the communal war, NMP being treated as a single case. I do this by employing Bhargava's (2012) two notions of reconciliation, which will be further conceptualised below. Given the multiple negative social and economic impacts inherent in the conflict - development nexus (for a detailed discussion see World Bank, 2011, p. 4), peace-building and reconciliation deserve further attention. Reconciliation efforts in

local ethnic and cultural bonds (Duncan, 2009, p. 1078).

The reality check approach

To grasp why most people in NMP chose to actively or tacitly support the peace and reconciliation process, it is vital to include voices from the grassroots. Therefore, the Reality Check Approach (RCA) was adopted to explore this perspective. The core of RCA is field immersion during which a researcher stays in a household in the research area for around four days and nights. I selected the household and area using purposive sampling, as this was the most effective technique given the research design and time frame of the study. The criterion was that household members should have lived in the area throughout both the conflict and the peace-build-

Interview date	Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Religion	Occupation	Location
18.02.15	Ibrahim	M	34	Muslim	Journalist	Ternate
28.02.15	Wiwin	F	38	Muslim	Lecturer/ former INGO staff	Ternate
09.03.15	Emmanuel	M	68	Christian	Civil servant/one of the conflict leaders	Tobelo
10.03.15	Fikri	M	53	Muslim	Civil servant	Tobelo
29.03.15	Yosef	M	30	Christian	Entrepreneur	Ternate

Figure 4: In-depth interview schedule. Most interviewees are Muslim, mirroring NMP's majority Muslim population. Pseudonyms and general descriptions of the interviewees' occupations are precautions taken to ensure anonymity.

NMP mainly centred on revitalising traditional *adat* culture, to bridge the religious divide between Muslims and Christians (Duncan, 2009). *Adat* refers to a group of customary laws or the unwritten traditional code that can regulate social, political, and economic practices (Bräuchler, 2009). Although *adat* culture and traditions are diverse within NMP, the aim during the reconciliation process was generally to downplay religious animosities by reinvigorating

ing eras. I conducted one immersion in a village in the Kao-Malifut area, and another in a village outside Tobelo Town. These locations are in NHR (see Figure 2), the regency most heavily affected by the violence and that subsequently became an important place during the reconciliation process (Barron et al., 2012, pp. 12, 124). My interpreter and I stayed at one host household in each location, but interacted with several neighbouring households and

many people in the village area (i.e., youths, elderly, service providers, and religious and traditional *adat* leaders).

Several methodological principles in RCA are intended to guide the fieldwork, to better capture grassroots' voices (Arvidson, 2013; EDG, 2014). One important principle is that RCA researchers should strive to informally experience the ordinary life of household members, and trying to avoid guest status. As such, attention must be paid to building rapport and maintaining good relationships that involve sharing, self-disclosure, and self-examination (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2006, p. 856). Correspondingly, having informal conversations instead of formal interviews creates a more relaxed atmosphere and reduces power distances. RCA is sometimes linked to 'listening studies' and the notion of giving voice (Narayan et al., 1999). RCA is often employed to understand longitudinal change, where researchers return to the same households annually for several years. Yet, an RCA study can also be used as a single 'pulse-taking' study, as is the case here (Palladium Group, 2017a, p. 2). Though each RCA project has a certain focus, all RCAs should embrace a cross-sectoral view, 'making sure the enquiry is situated within the context of everyday life rather than looking at one aspect of people's lives' (Palladium Group, 2017b, p. 1). (See Figure 3). For a more comprehensive discussion of RCA, see Arvidson 2013, pp. 279–293).

Interviews with elite and local experts

As members of the local elite were involved in both the violence and the peace-building process, it is necessary to include their perspective. Five in-depth interviews were conducted with local experts and NMP elite respondents, most of whom were identified using snowball sampling, as the respondents' networks were used to find additional respondents. Aliases are used to protect the identities of the respondents (see Figure 4). Ternate City is where the local elite and experts primarily reside, thus most interviews were conducted there, while

the remaining interviews took place in NHR's capital, Tobelo. An interpreter was used during both the RCA studies and in-depth interviews.

Conceptualising reconciliation

When episodes of violence come to an end, 'negative emotional residues' often linger, which might reignite violence if not alleviated (Jeong, 2009). Though every conflict is different, very few violent conflicts do not result in physical and emotional separations among the involved communities, and the foundations of such divisions feed on ongoing uncertainty, anger, and fear (ibid.). If widespread, these divisions present serious challenges to building sustainable peace in a post-conflict era. Several scholars agree that coexistence is a vital first objective of reconciliation (Bhargava, 2012; Jeong, 2009; Sampson, 2003). Bhargava (2012) describes peaceful coexistence as the thin notion of reconciliation, which could be characterised as reconciliation as resignation. A concrete example of this is when a conflict ends in a stalemate, forcing the adversaries to adapt to each other. A stronger notion of reconciliation is characterised as 'a condition that must be realised by a collective effort of two or more groups' (Bhargava, 2012, p. 371) and refers to the 'cancellation of enmity or estrangement, via the owning-up of responsibility for wrongdoing followed by forgiveness' (ibid.). This stronger notion of reconciliation is usually associated with accountability, apologising/forgiveness, and shared truth (Duncan, 2016). In reaction to strong criticism of the marginal achievements of top-down approaches to reconciliation, grassroots approaches have gained momentum (Bräuchler, 2009). Many such efforts focus on local cultural, traditional, and indigenous practices (Babo-Soares, 2004; Baines, 2007; Bräuchler, 2009). Apart from generally being bottom-up, these practices differ from the universally cloaked approaches, as they are argued to better capture grassroots agency and relevant socio-cultural peace-building contexts (Bräuchler, 2009; Duncan, 2016).

Critics claim that approaches based on local

traditions also involve risks. For example, a dominant ethnic group's traditional way of reconciling the community could exclude migrants or force them to assimilate to the dominant group's customary rules (Duncan, 2009). Furthermore, *adat* could be manipulated by elites to gain power and resources (Davidson & Henley, 2007). However, Bräuchler (2009) contends that *adat* also possesses great reconciliatory potential, a key to its success often being cooperation between the grassroots and political leaders.

Explaining the peace-building and reconciliation process

In the following sections, the empirical findings from the RCAs and interviews will be analysed in light of the above conceptual framework. Most quotations derive from the interviews, as the RCA methodology does not result in direct quotations. Nonetheless, if a finding was supported by data from an RCA study, it is indicated in the text. Secondary sources are used for triangulation and to put the findings in context.

Elite and grassroots cooperation

An example of strong *adat* culture, prior to the conflict, is the *adat* oath of unity in 1999 among the various sub-groups constituting the Kao ethnic group. The oath kept Christian and Muslim Kao united throughout the communal violence, because, according to local cosmology, one breaking an *adat* oath would suffer illness and death (Duncan, 2014, p. 113). In a few areas of NMP, *adat* had thus managed to prevent violence from erupting.

Thus, after the conflict, this came to be considered the approach with the best potential to bridge the religious divide (Duncan, 2014). During the immersion fieldwork in Kao and Tobelo areas in (2015), many villagers relayed that the *adat* reconciliation efforts were initiated by the local elite, but had received considerable grassroots support. This happened amidst widespread conflict fatigue and the general realisation that the communal violence

had chiefly brought death and destruction (ibid.). It emerged from interviews I conducted in 2015 that similar opinions were also manifest among all elite and expert respondents. It seems that the theoretical arguments favouring a localised approach best fit the process in NMP. Local leaders took a leading role based on notions of the *adat* culture originating from NMP, as opposed to cookie-cutter approaches imposed by central government (interviews, 2015).

Local expert and elite members' perceptions of *adat*

The use of *adat* in NMP was, and still is, articulated in various ways, as some communities have their own local *adat* culture. In NHR, the *adat* notion of *hibualamo* became most important for the reconciliation process (Duncan, 2016). For example, in Tobelo and on Kakara Island, the traditional long house or *hibualamo* has been rebuilt. Yet, in many other areas these traditional meeting places, which served as mediation spaces for communal conflicts, have only been revived in spirit. Journalist Ibrahim explained the concept to me during an interview in February 2015:

The *hibualamo* exists as a result of our ancient local wisdom found in North and West Halmahera. In West Halmahera it is called *sasadu* even though it has a house shape similar to that of the *hibualamo*. Physically, it is a house, but philosophically, it means a meeting place for diverse people and communities. Immigrants can also visit the *hibualamo*.

Former conflict leader, Emmanuel, agreed as well:

Even though we have many newcomers here from different areas in Indonesia, with different ethnicities, we decided that we must try to gather all the different groups within the *hibualamo* [in Tobelo], though these groups should still keep their diversity (interview, March 2015).

Emmanuel reflected further on the fact that the notions of *adat* used to reconcile the communities after the communal violence were not, in fact, very conservative:

On special occasions [in the past] when many ethnic groups from around Indonesia were gathered, it was a bit ironic, because it was only the Tobelos who did not have special traditional clothing ... we just have a traditional hat. But now we have got inspiration from outside and we have modernised our tradition. Now, on every Thursday, all students and civil servants wear 'traditional Tobelo batik' (interview, March 2015).

Another aspect was stressed by civil servant, Fikri:

Civil society, but especially the people, had the biggest role compared with the government. You can see that, up to today, we do not have conflict, because the peace came from the people, and it started with self-awareness ... People also realised that they would like to die in the places where they came from (interview, March 2015).

These accounts reveal certain important aspects of the notion of *adat* that I believe are integral to the successful consolidation of peace in NMP, besides the actions of the Gol. For example, most communities seem to downplay their religious identities by rearticulating an *adat* discourse focused on their common descent or culture, as was the view of most elite and expert respondents, as well as many people at the grassroots level with whom I had informal conversations during the fieldwork.

A pragmatic revitalisation

The above findings show that pragmatism was one of the keys to the success. Even though a common ethnicity was often part of the focus, that notion was not exclusive: both locals and migrants were encouraged to be part of this community-based traditional reconciliation, that aimed to prevent the

recurrence of ethno-religious provocations. According to Acciaioli (2001), an exclusionary character is a major pitfall of cultural reconciliation approaches in general. By keeping the *adat* approach inclusive of migrants and minority groups, NMP has generally avoided this common pitfall (interviews, 2015). This aspect also became very clear during the immersion fieldwork, in which the majority of the local people considered the *adat* approach to be inclusive of everyone and to be more important for peace-building than the Gol's actions.

Nonetheless, during informal conversations, some villagers in the Kao area argued that other actors also deserve credit for contributing to the absence of new conflicts against the backdrop of the *adat* approach, for example, religious leaders who have generally supported, and at times actively promoted, the notion of *adat*. As religious leaders often possess considerable authority in their communities in NMP (Duncan, 2014), their cooperation with *adat* leaders should be considered one of the keys to the consolidation of peace, according to many villagers in the Kao area (fieldwork, 2015). Their pragmatic amenability in this case is significant, because historically there have been considerable frictions between religion and *adat*, some religious leaders having argued that certain *adat* traditions are incompatible with strict Islam or Christianity (Bräuchler, 2009). Furthermore, both during the immersion fieldwork and in many elite and expert interviews, people mentioned positive impacts in their communities relating to programmes implemented by local NGOs or INGOs. Lecturer and former aid worker Wiwin explained:

We [the UNDP] used to involve important leaders such as religious leaders, youth leaders, and *adat* leaders in our programmes because they could help bring people together. We had programmes with football, sports, and the arts to bring the communities together ... and my team included both Christians and Muslims and we were a very solid team (interview, February 2015).

These religiously mixed working teams are an example of inter-faith collaboration for peace. Many people at the grassroots level, moreover, give credit to several NGOs for benefitting their communities. Some examples include physical reconstruction and mental rehabilitation projects, as was stressed by interviewee Wiwin in February 2015, and similar views later surfaced during the fieldwork in the Tobelo area; A philanthropic initiative that involved a man called 'Pak Thomas' (alias), who had emigrated to Germany before the communal violence was regarded as very successful. He returned in 2003 and wanted to help reconcile his former home village. Apart from donating construction material for houses, he purchased a fishing boat and founded a fishing cooperative. He required workers to work together with people from different religions, as the village included both Christians and Muslims. Villagers said this was great for reconciliation, and helped the suffering local economy.

Another finding from the fieldwork in this area was the 'provocateur narrative' advocated by a few people. Although this narrative is more or less a conspiracy theory (Van Klinken, 2007), it advances unification by suggesting that much of the violence had been driven by 'outsiders', such as national political elites, military units, and sometimes people from elsewhere in NMP. This strategy is common in post-conflict scenarios, as it helps reduce in-group feelings of collective guilt. On the one hand, this narrative may make it easier for perpetrators to avoid admitting guilt; on the other, it can promote reconciliation by bridging the divisions in local communities. This narrative has helped reduce incentives for post-conflict violence in parts of the Moluccas (Björkhagen, 2013).

Lingering peace vulnerabilities

In NMP, the issue of culpability has been largely absent from the peace and reconciliation process (Duncan, 2016). Unsurprisingly, the local elite stressed the importance of moving on and forgetting the violence, as is evident in the local peace

agreement (Duncan, 2014). Government officials maintained that assigning blame to individuals or groups could spark new violence, as the Christian and Muslim narratives were seldom identical, and the justice system is incapable of prosecuting the many people involved in the communal conflicts (Duncan, 2014 p. 114). Yet, if you are a victim of violence and have lost family members, it might take longer to move on. During informal interactions, local people privately expressed anger at the fact that people responsible for killing their family members had not faced any legal consequences. Nonetheless, the same people had themselves chosen to return to the same mixed-faith villages after the conflict, which indicates a desire to move on.

Yosef, a Christian entrepreneur in Ternate, stressed that relations were 'back to normal', though he also mentioned ongoing discrimination towards the minority Christian community (e.g., difficulty obtaining permits to build a church), which he relayed during our interview in March (2015). Regrettably, weak rule of law, the inaction of the security forces, and the fact that some leaders of the conflict now enjoy high positions in local and provincial governments perpetuate institutional weakness. This sends the message that the use of violence can pay off (Wilson, 2015). In NMP, anti-corruption measures have not been completely fruitless, however, as the former governor Thaib Armaiyn was incarcerated for embezzling funds earmarked for IDPs in NMP (CNN, 2015). Still, NMP remains largely religiously segregated, a situation exacerbated by the many mono-faith schools. Underlying religious tensions are also still present in local politics in the form of religious patronage and lingering fears of Christianisation or Islamisation (Duncan, 2016). Horizontal inequalities between the former conflicting communities still remain a problem in need of serious action from the local government, in order to strengthen social cohesion (Brown et al., 2005).

Conclusion

I argue that the above efforts, that is, a focus on

a common descent by revitalising *adat* culture, being inclusive to migrants, and the pragmatic cooperation between the elite and the grassroots, have contributed to the successful peace and reconciliation process. The findings suggest that the efforts fulfil the first important objective of reconciliation, namely, *peaceful coexistence* (Sampson, 2003) as both sides shared a desire to reconcile by emphasising their commonalities rather than differences. As the violence in NMP ended in a stalemate in NHR, both sides realised that they had to adapt and work towards respecting each other's identities and emphasise their common humanity, thus setting aside the dehumanisation of the 'religious other'. As the vast majority of local people had suffered significantly from the violence, the majority wanted to end hostilities. In fact, attitudes and behaviours did change, which was essential for the framework. Nonetheless, I would not argue that the strongest level of reconciliation has been fully realised in NHR or in Ternate, as theorised by Bhargava (2014). In Ternate, many Christians never returned for various reasons: many had resettled in majority Christian areas elsewhere, and for some, there was continued distrust of the majority Muslim community. In addition, I argue that NMP and NHR have not realised strong reconciliation in the sense of 'owning-up of responsibility for wrongdoing followed by forgiveness' as Bhargava (2012, p. 371) suggest.

To conclude, the reasons behind the success of the *adat* approach are multifaceted and include widespread conflict fatigue; incentives created by the GoI; a history of peaceful coexistence; (inter-religious) kinship ties; inclusiveness; and the outsider 'provocateur' narrative. These factors have contributed to today's peaceful coexistence, mirroring the thin notion of reconciliation. This study indicates that people were not reconciled just because of *adat*, but the notion of *adat* was successfully revitalised and rearticulated because many people had a motivation to work for peace and reconciliation. This is of course reasonable, given the conflict's level of death and destruction for both communities.

Adat became a strong unifying factor, by providing a framework for reconciliation that indeed unified local society at various levels, which created a synergy effect. In addition, where *adat* was insufficient (such as for rebuilding infrastructure), support was provided by local NGOs and INGOs, which generally managed to avoid sponsoring cookie-cutter approaches.

Although the *adat* approach has contributed to today's peaceful coexistence, political attention must be directed towards strengthening weak local governance, further improving inter-religious collaboration, and reducing longstanding horizontal inequalities to erase the lingering vulnerabilities of the current peace. It would be fruitful for future research to further explore how local culture has been used in other areas affected by communal violence and thereby assessing its reconciliatory potential in a wider context, e.g., by employing yearly RCA immersions combined with quantitative methods, to better understand the complexities that are intrinsic in processes of peacebuilding, reconciliation and development over time.

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