

powerful contribution that solid, unpretentious ethnography can make to scholarly understandings of 'ordinary' Southeast Asian lives. And at a time when anthropology — and much of academe — is increasingly characterised by theoretical posturing, this can only be a good thing.

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*Violence and vengeance: Religious conflict and its aftermath in eastern Indonesia*

By CHRISTOPHER R. DUNCAN

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*Violence and vengeance* joins a large literature on the violent communal conflicts which exploded in Indonesia fifteen years ago. Christopher R. Duncan aims to bring to the fore the voices and understandings of the ordinary people involved. He asserts that for most, the defining feature of the violence was religious difference. Having written a book on the same conflict, this is a difficult review for me to write. I will therefore focus on the analytical approach taken by Duncan, only referring to specifics on which we disagree when necessary to illustrate my concerns.

Some aspects of Duncan's book make it a welcome addition to the scholarship on North Maluku and conflict in Indonesia. Not only is his study based on extensive fieldwork, something too often missing in studies of conflict, but this occurred before, during and after the fighting, giving him an almost unique perspective. Scholars will find his discussion of the post-conflict era useful as this period has largely been missing from the literature. The book is well written despite regular jarring spelling errors ('casual' factor, p. 172; 'affect' of religious framing, p. 173; 'tenants' of Islam, p. 166) although some were amusing ('marital' prowess, p. 34). More vexingly, large sections discuss information that has already been published but are unreferenced.

Duncan begins by claiming that most existing studies of the conflicts in North Maluku and elsewhere in that era are undermined by their quest for 'causation and chronology'. They are preoccupied with 'grand narratives that discuss timelines, causal mechanisms, and the roles of political elites and their parties' (p. 7). These studies are 'based on media reports and interviews with regional and national elites' (p. 8) and 'omit the stories and voices of those individuals most affected' (p. 7). He eschews 'causal analysis' of why things happened and who was to blame, and is more concerned with 'understanding people's conceptions and experiences of what they "know" happened' (p. 10).

This is the first of at least two serious straw men erected in the book. In the studies he critiques, causal analysis is based upon how people perceived their surroundings, evaluated their interests and weighed their options. The scholarship of Jamie Davidson (*From rebellion to riots: Collective violence on Indonesian Borneo*, 2008), Dave McRae (*A few poorly organized men: Interreligious violence in Poso*,

*Indonesia*, 2013), Gerry van Klinken (*Communal violence and democratization in Indonesia: Small town wars*, 2007) and others is based on extensive ethnographic work. My own analysis of North Maluku (*Ethno-religious violence in Indonesia: From soil to God*, 2008) was based on several hundred interviews, most respondents far removed from the elite. The fact that these studies also analyse the interests and activities of those in positions of power is hardly a weakness. Many crucial questions in conflict study require examining the role of both elite and non-elite actors, including: When and why will elites attempt to mobilise violence? When will their constituents respond? Who is to blame? How can it be prevented?

Duncan denies that he is avoiding the question of human agency, yet the book is void of the names of the influential people who organised the violence. Aside from handicapping readers' understanding, this raises issues of accountability and justice. Many North Malukans hold particular people in power responsible for the violence and their motivations. Not giving voice to these 'understandings' held by the people involved is a failing Duncan accuses of others.

Indeed, Duncan is inconsistent in his use of the understandings of those affected. Accounts which seem to confirm that the violence was understood as religious in nature are accurate reflections of the prevailing psychology. Those which do not are discounted as subsequent recalibrations. For example, Duncan criticises me for concluding that the intentionally provocative 'Bloody Sosol' letter did not motivate non-Makian Muslims to attack Christians in Ternate. He asserts that I rely too much on interviewees' denials four years later and fail to 'consider the atmospherics surrounding the reading of the letter'. (Elsewhere, *Ethno-religious violence in Indonesia* and 'Provocation or excuse? Process-tracing the impact of elite propaganda in a violent conflict in Indonesia'), I have provided numerous reasons, based on interviews and the situation in Ternate in November 1999, why I believe the release of the letter did not provoke the riot and cannot repeat them here). Yet in other cases, Duncan takes statements years later at face value. For example, he is satisfied that even clashes between Muslim factions in Ternate were religiously motivated based on participants' claims that they were angered that several Christians remained in the Sultan of Ternate's militia. But in relying on this handful of statements Duncan ignores the profound 'atmospherics' present in Ternate in late 1999. With an approaching election to decide the province's first governor and a dispute over the location of the provincial capital, was it a coincidence that the protagonists were supporters of the two main political factions in the capital? The rapidly ascending political fortunes of the sultan posed a serious threat to the incumbent power-holders; the presence of several Christians was inconsequential.

This goes to a larger problem with Duncan's approach to analysis. Is it useful to simply relay what people believed (or claim to have believed) during the conflict or have come to believe years later? Wars are information-poor environments, particularly in rural areas, and memories and interpretations change after the fighting has stopped. Yet the analyst has abundant sources of information: the accounts of opponents and witnesses; preceding and subsequent events; police investigations and court trials; along with a vast comparative literature on conflict, which allow a more accurate and comprehensive account of what happened and why. This is not denying the understandings of those involved, but bringing as much information to bear as

possible, something victims often desire. For example, Duncan discusses (pp. 131–6) how Christians blamed Muslims for instigating violence while Muslims blamed Christians for the same events. One waits for a conclusion to this discussion, perhaps each was equally culpable, or was most aggressive where it formed a majority, but none comes. The finding that each community blames the other will hardly be of surprise to even the freshest student of conflict. In another instance, Duncan objects to my contention (based on numerous interviews with leaders and members of the local Muslim militia, Pasukan Jihad) that the Java-based Laskar Jihad did not enter North Maluku. He finds that ‘in the minds of many Christians, for all intents and purposes, the Laskar Jihad was involved’ (p. 92). But again, where does this leave us? That Christians believed one thing and Muslims another? Surely the more important question is whether the largest militant Muslim militia in post-authoritarian Indonesia, one deeply entwined in national political dynamics, was involved in the conflict?

Duncan’s central assertion is that religion was at the heart of the conflict, and ‘outside observers, such as academics, journalists and NGO workers have quickly dismissed the religious framing of the violence’ (p. 2). Here is Duncan’s second impressive straw man. I cannot think of any study that denies the importance of religion after the Ternate riot, and indeed he provides not one supporting citation. Oddly, he then proceeds to explain the conflict in the same terms as I, Van Klinken, John Sidel (*Riots, pogroms, jihad: Religious violence in Indonesia*, 2006) and others have done — an ethnic dispute over a new sub-district became religious war after anti-Christian rioting in Ternate City and remained so until the end of the conflict in mid-2000 (using the same chronological approach he had criticised so vigorously). The absence of citations will give the impression that this version of the conflict has not been provided before; in fact it has long been the accepted account.

Leaving aside this straw man, the most disappointing aspect of the book is that for a study focused on the importance of religion in the violence, it does not enhance our understanding of that role. Many readers are likely to complete the book with little more than a sense that the violence ‘had something to do with religion’ (p. 131) and then confusingly discover that hatred between religious communities ‘was a result of the communal conflict, not a causal factor’ (p. 171). What of the many important questions concerning religion in the violence? Did extreme ideologies motivate the militias (interviews with members of Pasukan Jihad are notably absent)? Why did some religious leaders advocate violence and others vigorously oppose it? Why did ethnicity override religion in some areas and not others? Why did intra-Muslim violence occur during a war about religion (these extremely important events are termed a mere ‘interlude’ and dealt with in less than two pages)? The scholarship that Duncan dismisses so strongly as preoccupied with ‘causation and chronology’ does a better job of answering such questions by showing how religious identity was being dramatically altered by changing political and economic contexts.

In the end the book hides far more of what happened in North Maluku than it unearths. Perceptive readers will notice fleeting references to how the conflict began not long after Indonesia started its rapid processes of democratisation and decentralisation, at the moment the area became a province in its own right, in the vicinity of a large gold mine, and wonder how important these factors were. Studies which refuse to deal with political and economic phenomena do not help us accumulate knowledge

on violent conflict nor do they assist its prevention, which requires a sound understanding of structural and proximate causes. Upon finishing the book I reflected on the truncated statement of the young Muslim man on the first page, ‘The conflict in Maluku is not a religious problem. It is —’, before being shouted down. North Malukans have so much more to say about the violence than is presented in this book, I was left wishing the young man could have finished.

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*The halal frontier: Muslim consumers in a globalized market*

By JOHAN FISCHER

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This book is among a handful exploring the contemporary role of halal. *The halal frontier: Muslim consumers in a globalized market* provides fascinating insights into the consumer choices, adaptation strategies, and pragmatic decisions among members of the Malaysian-Malay diaspora in Britain, living in the interface between revivalist Islam, the sending state’s efforts to institutionalise and standardise ‘halal’, the recipient state’s difficulties in embracing notions of halal, and global market forces which have discovered Muslims as consumers. Johan Fischer traces the encounters between the very Malaysian conceptions of halal of his informants and their navigation of the sheer endless and often challenging diversity of the British capital. The author followed his informants into ‘halal restaurants, butcher shops, grocery stores, supermarkets and hypermarkets’ (p. 25). Even though private homes, sadly, appear to have been excluded from his list of fieldwork sites, *The halal frontier* is able to provide important and fresh insights into the dynamic interaction between competing halal discourses, between producers and consumers, and between Malaysian ‘state’ Islam and the diasporic realities of London’s Muslim minority. Locating his study in the British capital, a Western metropolis that has become an integral part of the Muslim world and whose economy profits strongly from these connections, enables Fischer to explore life on the ‘halal frontier’, an interesting concept he develops throughout the book.

Fischer’s exploration of Malay-Malaysian consumers in London focuses on a field of inquiry that has until now not received much attention from either Southeast Asianists or from students of contemporary Muslim societies. Beyond its relevance in describing at great depth the negotiation of halal among a particular British Muslim community, *The halal frontier* adds to the overall still equally small body of works exploring contemporary Southeast Asian diasporas, complementing recent works by Tim Bunnell, Michael Laffan and Tony Milner. It is hoped that the work may help stimulate an expansion of serious academic enquiries of diasporic Southeast Asian Muslim communities in places as diverse as Bloomington, Melbourne, Stockholm and Cairo, and of their engagement with what it means to