Moluccan Cyberactors: Religion, Identity and the Internet in the Moluccan Conflict

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Introduction

Cyberspace and the Moluccan conflict are the two topics on which this paper primarily focuses. Since the Moluccas had been praised for their religious harmony up until December 2002, it is a work in progress report relating to my dissertation project at the Ludwig Maximilians University in Munich, begun in mid 2000. It is based on Internet and literature research in combination with interviews conducted in the Netherlands. Additionally fieldwork was conducted in the Central Moluccas and in Jakarta in February and March 2002, applying qualitative methods such as participating observation and interviews.

Abstrak


1 This article is based on the paper presented at the panel on: ‘Questions of Identity on the Internet: Research “Software” Towards a New Indonesia’ at the 3rd International Symposium of the Journal ANTROPOLOGI INDONESIA: ‘Rebuilding Indonesia, a Nation of “Unity in Diversity”: Towards a Multicultural Society’, Udayana University, Denpasar, Bali, 16–19 July 2002. It is a work in progress report relating to my dissertation project at the Ludwig Maximilians University in Munich, begun in mid 2000. It is based on Internet and literature research in combination with interviews conducted in the Netherlands. Additionally fieldwork was conducted in the Central Moluccas and in Jakarta in February and March 2002, applying qualitative methods such as participating observation and interviews.
1998, nobody really expected that a minor quarrel between a Christian bus driver and a Muslim passenger in Ambon town in January 1999 would end up in a bloody and enduring conflict. Religion itself was not the cause of the unrest, but the people involved very soon grouped around religion as their main identity marker. In this paper I want to show that the Moluccan conflict is not only fought out on the local and national level but also in cyberspace, a point which has been totally neglected so far. The presentations in cyberspace run along religious lines and thus contribute to the image of a religious war. The Internet provides means for the parties involved—Christians as well as Muslims—to present their perspectives of the conflict that construct imagined communities and identities along religious lines, in this way influencing the conflict.

The potential of religion to be a major source of identity has been emphasized by several scholars (see Ata 1988; Juergensmeyer 2000; Rutledge 1985; Schiller 1997; and Sofsky 1996). Religion seems to be an ideal means for an effective identity project. Approaching the concept of identities in a manner that stresses their flexibility and their negotiability, one can see how religion can easily become extremely important for people involved in a conflict. Religion not only helps to interpret the world and the current situation, it also provides patterns how to organize one’s behavior and action (Geertz 1993:123).

Very soon after the outbreak of the Moluccan conflict one was confronted with a flood of information online, like what Shenk (1997:15) calls ‘data smog’. My study concentrates on the Internet contributions of people directly involved in the conflict, which are rather scarce. These are the most interesting sites since they claim to provide first hand information and thus to have a legitimate role in shaping the image of the conflict in the outside world. Interesting questions concerning the role of the Internet in the Moluccan conflict are how the two warring parties present the conflict on the Internet and which means and arguments they are using, which role religion plays for the Moluccan cyberactors and their presentations, what kind of identities and/or communities are constructed online, and which effects this might have on the conflict.

Cyberspace in theory and practice

The media heavily influence the conflicts they report on (Allen and Seaton 1999; Benthal 1995; Butler 1995; Carruthers 2000; and Karetzky and Frankel 1989). The Internet as a medium in conflict has hardly been researched.

This goes back to the situational approach of Barth (1969) to define ‘identity’.
Its potential for influencing a conflict is high since the Internet is almost non-controllable and its sites can offer extremely selective information that is often not verifiable. The Internet facilitates the combination of traditional media, like print, radio and TV with other modes of communication, like webpages, newsgroups, electronic mail, file transfer and chat. The change in spatial and temporal perceptions and the potential integration of text, images, and sounds in the same system fundamentally alter the character of communication (see also Castells 2001:356). These aspects make online-environments ideal playgrounds for the construction process of identities (Bahl 1997:132; Hoffmann 1998; and Turkle 1995:180) and provides means for the imagination of communities and identities, which constitute part of the Moluccan conflict.

Among the most discussed subjects in the field of Internet research are the so-called “virtual communities” (VCs) which are either seen as totally separated from reality (Turkle 1995), as interconnected with it (van Dijk 1999; Jones 1999; Miller and Slater 2000; and Slevin 2000) or as simply non-existent (Jones 1997: 16; and McLaughlin, Osborne and Ellison 1997:146). I would like to deploy Benedict Anderson’s (1998) concept of ‘imagined communities’, not at all that different from the hotly discussed VCs. In discussing ‘imagined communities’ of nations and national identity, Anderson focuses on print, but the principle of focusing on media is transferable. I argue that VCs are as real as Anderson’s imagined ones, where traditional terms of spatial proximity are put aside. A more abstract level is applied (Mitra 1997:58), but they are still part of real life for the people concerned (compare with Miller and Slater 2000: 6; Piliang 2000: 106, footnotes:5; and Rheingold 1993). In other words, I think it does not make sense to present ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ as opposed to each other. VCs do not replace traditional ones, but they ‘have the potential to be just as fundamental to the identities of some people as the existing ethnic communities whose existence we have taken for granted for decades or even centuries’ (Elkins 1997:141). For Jan Fernback, this is especially true for times of crisis. She suggests that ‘the symbolic value of virtual community (maybe)...enough to sustain us in an era when physical community building is hampered by distrust or fear’ (Fernback 1997:40). VCs primarily exist as interest groups (van Dijk 1999: 160; Mizrach 1995; Schwara 1999:271; Watson 1997:124) and as imaginations through ‘which a community … can textually produce itself, thus imagine itself—as well as present itself to the outside world, and thus produce an image (Mitra 1997: 55)’.

The field of Internet research offers a great opportunity for cultural anthropologists, since most of the Internet studies so far neglect the cultural background of Internet users and any culture specific use of this medium (see also Morton 2001; Schwara 1999:260; and Slevin 2000: 9). Already in 1994 Arturo Escobar outlined the main topics regarding anthropological Internet research in his article ‘Welcome to Cyberia: Notes on the Anthropology of Cyberculture’. He raised the question of what new forms of social constructions of reality are introduced by the new technologies, how they will be negotiated and which transformations

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6 Of course, this is only true for nations where free access to the Internet is guaranteed, like it is the situation in Indonesia right now. One of the biggest exceptions is China, where Internet access is very restricted and strictly controlled by the government.

7 Their ideological father Howard Rheingold (1993:5) defines ‘virtual communities’ as ‘social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace’. Rheingold has been frequently criticized for this vague and simplistic definition.
of our notions of community, fieldwork, subject, identity etc. will accompany them (Escobar 1994: 214).

Field research and participant observation are as important for Cyberanthropology as for traditional fields of anthropology. Traditional approaches are in principle transferable onto the new subject (see Helmers, Hoffmann and Hofmann 1996:14, Chapter 3.5), but we have to adapt our conceptual apparatus as well as our methods to the new kind of subjects, which are more abstract and deterritorialized. Imagination as ‘social praxis’ and as an ‘engine for the arrangement of societal life’ becomes increasingly important (Schwara 1999:266).

The Internet supports different modes of communication, each one serving different purposes. The modes used by the actors in the Moluccan cyberspace are newsletters (unidirectional), mailing lists (multidirectional) and websites (unidirectional) with e-mail address contacts (bi-directional). Unidirectional modes prevent online discussions, and they might be used to impose values and constructs on the user, rather than give him or her the possibility to join their negotiation. Further, one should differentiate between private and public cyberspace (Piliang 2000:105), the former involving restricted access (for example to mailing lists), the latter open access.

Websites give individuals as well as groups of people the chance to present themselves on the World Wide Web. Daniel Chandler (1998) outlines how personal homepages contribute to the construction of identities on the Web. According to Chandler (1998:5), ‘the Web is a medium ideally adapted to the dynamic purposes of identity maintenance’. ‘One constructs a home page by composing or ‘pasting’ on it words, images, and sounds, and by making connections between it and other sites on the Internet or the Web’ (Turkle 1995:258). These presentations can extend their author’s potential influence in both time and space (Chandler 1998:4). Therefore, content as well as creative aspects have to be taken into account when analyzing Internet presentations.

Mailing lists are e-mail discussion groups organized via a central operator, who distributes contributions among its members and has the option to act as moderator. Some mailing lists accept a restricted number of members only, others are open to the public. The reading of mailing lists offers a totally new perspective as a research method (Hofmann 1998). ‘Lurking’ in mailing lists allows participation which itself stays to a large extent unregistered. It can provide insights into the dynamics of mailing lists and the negotiations of their members. On the Internet, ‘real’ identities can be hidden from the public (Dery 1993:560–561; Mitra 1997:68, footnotes:10; Turkle 1995). People can also pretend to be somebody else, and thus try to ridicule or harm an opponent. Mailing lists (or websites) which exist for a longer period of time and whose membership is quite stable offer a way for researchers around this problem. Following the discourse conducted on the list long enough, identities and motives—‘the politics of identity’—of the diverse avatars become visible to the observer (Kendall 1999:71).

Newsletters have to be differentiated from mailing lists. They only offer a unidirectional mode of communication. Information is provided by an authoritative center and distributed via e-mail among the subscribers.

**The Moluccan cyberspace**

Attitudes discussed in the next paragraphs do not represent the attitudes of all Christians and Muslims in the Moluccas, but rather show what specific actors claim to be Christian or Muslim perspectives. With the presentation
running along religious lines, differences within the Christian and the Muslim bloc are blurred for an audience not directly involved. Dozens, if not hundreds of small localized battles, by far not exclusively fought out between Christians and Muslims, become part of one major fight between Islam and Christianity. It is obvious that the Internet in the Moluccan case is not the Habermasian ‘ideal public sphere’ that many people were dreaming of with the advent of the Internet. Even if everybody could theoretically have access to the Net, Yasraf Piliang (2000:101,116) argues that we cannot ignore the fact that the discourse in cyberspace is dominated by certain elites, leading personalities and outstanding spokespersons (Jordan 1999:6).

My focus is on the perception of the local context by the Internet producers and how they present it to the outside world. Through style of presentation and discursive activities like creating and exchanging messages on electronic bulletin boards, imagined communities evolve. These communities provide powerful imagined identities, which influence the national and international audience and thus the ongoing conflict.9

Only three organized groups directly involved in the Moluccan conflict are continuously represented on the Internet.10 Each of them applies different communication facilities and means and strategies to construct group identities. The Moluccan Christians are primarily represented on the Internet by the Crisis Center of the Diocese of Ambon (CCDA, Catholic)11 and the Masariku Network (Protestant), the Muslims by the Forum Komunikasi Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah (Communication Forum of the Followers of the Sunnah and the Community of the Prophet, FKA JW). I observed these ‘virtual communities’ by participating and lurking12 in their mailing lists, newsletters and by analyzing their websites since their set up. The contributions of all three groups are obviously religiously oriented.13 While the Muslims direct their appeals mainly to the national Muslim community and the world ummat, the Christians plead mostly with international Christian associations, the international community and the United Nations.

Christian internet presentations

Masariku was the first Moluccan group regularly providing information about the conflict in the Moluccas via mailing list. Using Yahoo as platform, the group was founded on 17 August 1999, the number of members hovers at around 210, and the language chosen is Indonesian.14 The group’s technical settings are a restricted membership, unmoderated, all

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9 The Internet is the main information provider for the international community, even for most of the Moluccans in the Netherlands, this way directly shaping their perception of the conflict.

8 Several reports even indicate a direct influence of the Internet on the conflict—some Mujahidin from inside and outside Indonesia were attracted to join fighting after reading reports on the Internet, some conflicts were provoked through Internet reports of violence and cruelty, the FKA JW uses the Internet to search for members, etc.

10 All three groups are called ‘Moluccan cyberactors’ in this paper since they all inhabit the Moluccan cyberspace, even if they do not originally come from the Moluccas.

11 About eleven percent of the Christian population of the Central Moluccas is Catholic.

12 Still I was a legitimized observer since the mailing lists and newsletters are not generally open to the public. You have to apply for subscription first and the moderators can decide whether you are accepted or not.

13 It is hardly possible to provide balanced information, especially when people simply have no access to information from the ‘other side’ (the Christians or the Muslims). In fact, there is no neutral information in a conflict, even if the parties claim or at least try to be neutral (Carruthers 2000:17).

14 All ‘local’ contributions are in Indonesian. Only a very small amount of them are translated into English. Contributions from international organizations and newspapers are mostly in English, only very sporadically translated into Indonesian.
members may post, and archives for members only. The intention of the list is described as being an information distributor on the Moluccan conflict and the trouble the churches in Indonesia experience. The organizers hope that the archive of Masariku is used as a source for campaign and study efforts concerning the Moluccan conflict, and that it helps to balance out the incorrect and one-sided reporting on the unrest in the Moluccas. The Internet as a medium was selected mainly because of its speed, allowing an immediate check and re-check of data sent.

The different kinds of contributions posted on the Masariku mailing list, more than 6000 by December 2001, are reports by the Masariku Network itself and other Christian organizations in Ambon (such as CCDA), articles from the local, the national and the international press and other Indonesian Internet newsgroups, writings from national and international (mainly Christian) organizations, requests to pray together, and comments to all the aforementioned contributions. A small percentage of the group members dominate the discourse, either with their own contributions or by forwarding reports and articles they regard as relevant for Masariku Network and its purposes. The majority of members (maybe 90%) are lurkers, as I was for most of the time.

For its own reports, Masariku uses local informants and local, mostly untrained journalists. Its contributions cover almost exclusively the Christians situation. The regular Masariku Reports and Updates cover current news about the conflict and conflict analyses. The Masariku Testimony series provides Christian eyewitness reports by refugees, people attacked or forcibly converted or by traumatized children and women. The Portret Maluku series frequently delivers photos of victims and damage to private and public property. The combination of these different kinds of reports creates an aura of authenticity and truth and enables the members to identify with the victims. According to the list owners, the Moluccan diaspora plays an essential role as multipliers by forwarding Masariku information to other webpages and also translating it into English, so that it is accessible for a broader international readership.

As a subscriber of Masariku, one easily gets the impression that the ‘real’ identities and backgrounds of contributors are hidden sometimes. Some members use pseudonyms. Hints concerning the social networks of the participants only become apparent if one follows the discourse for a long period of time. Some of the founders and the active members of Masariku are also active members of the Protestant church. All members are Christian, a majority is Moluccan—some living in the Moluccas, some in other regions of Indonesia, some abroad. The founders repeatedly express their fear that materials provided by Masariku might get into the wrong hands, and they emphasize that all Masariku members should take care that these are only spread internally in the Masariku circle.

Using Yahoo groups, Masariku maintains a webpage with very restricted possibilities. Both archiving and chat are possible, but only the former is used. There is no room for personal design, or to provide links, hit counts, or other facilities. According to active Masariku members chat facilities are not used and no proper webpage is created because of the financial and organizational expenditures this would imply.

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The Crisis Center of the Diocese of Ambon (CCDA) was established in July 1999 and has been delivering newsletters on the Moluccan conflict since 22 June 2000. The language used is English, directly addressing the international community. Indonesian summaries were provided in April and December 2001. The newsletters are written and maintained by one single person, who is very engaged and tries to report in a leveled way. Since his contacts and informants are mainly on the Christian side, this proves to be a difficult if not impossible venture. By December 2001, 219 reports had been sent. The sources used by the CCDA include local informants, eyewitness reports, and reports from other parishes throughout the Moluccas, but they are mainly RRI (Radio Republik Indonesia), TVRI (TV Republik Indonesia) and the local newspapers Siwalima and Suara Maluku. Masariku also refers to these two dailies, which are accused by the Muslims of being Christian instruments. The CCDA puts a lot of effort into summarizing information. This enables the newsletter’s subscribers to stay up to date without investing a lot of time. CCDA does not provide an archive but re-sends old reports on request. Otherwise, the reports are accessible via several international websites related to the Moluccan tragedy.

Moslem Internet presentations

The Muslim side is mainly presented by the FKAJW, an Islamicist organization that was founded on Java in 1998 and went online in the year 2000. The FKAJW became a solid foundation for the formation of the Laskar Jihad - Muslim fighters for the Holy War. Since the government during the whole crisis was not able to provide a solution, the Laskar Jihad took over and sent their fighters to the Moluccas in May 2000. They provided their organization, their staff, their influence and their means to give a voice to the Moluccan Muslims, to help them against the Christian attackers and to restore peace and order in the Moluccas, of course according to ideas and prescriptions that they claim to be appropriate for all Muslims in Indonesia. Moderate local Muslims do not seem to have a voice at all on the Internet.

The FKAJW presents itself through quite an elaborated website and a mailing list. It uses Yahoo as its platform for sending messages. The group was founded on 17 May 2000, at the end of 2001 there were 1351 members, and the language chosen is Indonesian. The group’s settings are quite different from the Masariku ones: open membership, all messages require approval, only the moderator may post, and public archives. Choosing these options, a unidirectional newsletter is created, thus explicitly avoiding any open discussions. The intention of the list is to provide recent information about Jihad in the Moluccas and the Laskar Jihad. The Laskar Jihad and the Mujahidin in the Moluccas are the exclusive sources.

16 These media (radio, TV and newspaper) claim and try to be neutral, but during hightides of the conflict and since their offices are located in Christian areas, this is definitely not always possible.

The FKAWJ website offers the most recent news on ongoing conflicts in Indonesia in which the Laskar Jihad are involved, with a focus on the Moluccas. This daily updated news page is completed with citations of the Koran, a list of sponsors and information on diverse bank accounts for donations. All material and information is provided by FKAWJ members. No links to other sources are given. A menu offers the Internet user an Indonesian and an English section (covering far fewer topics than the Indonesian one). The Indonesian section offers information about the Laskar Jihad, donation possibilities, news archives beginning in March 2000, articles, press releases, authoritative treatises and fatwas about Jihad, and a section including frequently asked questions. A ‘gallery’ section provides pictures and maps showing the territorial captures of the Laskar Jihad in Ambon. A ‘download’ section offers ‘fan articles’ like wallpaper motives and the logo of the Laskar Jihad (crossed sabers) and sound files, such as a speech given by the FKAWJ’s head, Ja’far Umar Thalib, at the Tabligh Akbar in the Senayan Stadium, Jakarta, in April 2000, just before he sent Muslim fighters to the Moluccas. The ‘contact’ menu provides e-mail contact with the forum and forms for donations and applications for becoming a Laskar Jihad in Ambon.

The Laskar Jihad website is unmistakably a religious project. It presents the Moluccan conflict as part of a struggle against a Judeo-Christian dominance worldwide. The only authorities accepted are the sources provided by Islam as interpreted by Ja’far Umar Thalib: the Koran, the Sharia and fatwas of well-known Muslim clerics. The Laskar Jihad website embodies an authentic symbol of the true Islamic religion—at least as the FKAWJ perceives it—and provides a pure Islamic identity, forestalling any negotiations.

Following the discourse about the Moluccan conflict on the Internet, one can outline the different constructs of reality in the sense of Niklas Luhmann (1996). According to constructivist theories, reality is always con-
constructed, since nobody can know reality by cognition alone. The only thing one can do is observe the way people, organizations, the media etc. construct reality, and then compare different constructs (Luhmann 1996: 17–18).

The main argument of the Muslims is that the Moluccan Protestant Church (Gereja Protestan Maluku, GPM), the RMS movement (Republik Maluku Selatan, Republic of the South Moluccas) being supported by the Netherlands, and the ‘Christian-Nationalist’ PDI-P (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan) initiated the conflict.25 It is part of a Christianization project going on throughout Indonesia. In the Moluccas, Christianity is equaled with the RMS—sarcastically called Republik Maluku Serani (Republic of the Christian Moluccas)—implying that all Christians strive for sovereignty, to be separated from the Indonesian state. This thesis was elaborated and formalized in three books by the retired Ambonese General Rustam Kastor, the full versions of which are also available online.26 He is often called the ‘chief ideologue’ of the Laskar Jihad.

The Christians argue that the conflict mainly results from the Islamization policies of the central government, started in the 1990s. While approximately 90% of the Indonesian population are Muslim, the percentages of Muslims and Christians in the Central Moluccas were quite balanced for a long time. This changed after the massive transmigration policy of the central government and spontaneous migration brought many outside Muslims into the Moluccas, thus toppling the former ‘religious’ balance. The Christians tend to position the main causes for the atrocities outside of the Moluccas. Provocateurs are supposed to have further disturbed the already weakened harmony between Christians and Muslims. According to the Christians, the real separatists are the radical Muslims from outside the Moluccas who want to introduce the Sharia law, thus ignoring the national Indonesian Civil Law and the state’s philosophy (Pancasila) and its principle of religious freedom.

Frey (1999) writes about the power of images and shows the influence of visualization in the media on the viewers. Pictures are judged by the viewer as being much closer to reality than texts and thus have greater authenticity (Butler 1995: 118; Hudson and Stanier 1998:315; and Spangenberg 2001:218–220). Pictures can also be used to serve certain purposes, like provoking emotions and the impression of being there and sharing the agony of the people depicted (Carruthers 2000:194; Karetzky 1989:131–134; and Moeller 1989:4).

Photographs published by the FKAWJ as well as Masariku on the Internet play an outstanding role in presenting the conflict. Each side exclusively documents the tragedy of their religious brothers. The main subjects covered are victims (badly burnt, mutilated and killed people), destroyed houses and religious buildings, and graffitis often enclosing religious insults like ‘Yesus Anjing’—‘Jesus is a dog’, or ‘Islam Muka Lonte’—‘Islam has the face of a whore’.27 Nobody can prove where these pictures were taken and who is responsible for the inscriptions. Fur-

25 This theory was already raised on 28 January 1999 in a press conference organized by a leader of the Ambonese Muslim community in Jakarta together with the quite radical Muslim organization KISDI (Komite Indonesia untuk Solidaritas Dunia Islam) (Human Rights Watch 1999:9).

26 The books are provided by Islam Net Indonesia (http://media.isnet.org/ambon/Kastor/index.html) and http://listen.to/Rustam-Kastor. The first one of the books was published in early 2000 and became a bestseller in Indonesia (Fakta, Data dan Analisa Konspirasi Politik RMS dan Kristen Menghancurkan Ummat Islam di Ambon-Maluku. Mengungkap Konflik Berdarah Antar Ummat Beragama dan Suara Hati Warga Muslim yang Teraniaya)(Wihdah Press).

27 Stones used as sites of inscription can become both weapons and media in a battle (Peteet 1996:142).
thermore, both sides show pictures of the weaponry of the enemy to demonstrate its superiority and other documents of authenticity, such as photographs of a notebook written by a villager attacked by Muslims or photographs of people giving their eyewitness reports. There are more examples, but these may suffice.

Interaction between internet performers

Besides each side delivering its own line of argumentation, pictures, and sounds, the parties involved also interact in cyberspace. Particular Internet strategies include (inverse) cross-posting and flame wars. ‘Posting’ means putting a message into a mailing list or newsgroup one is either a member of or regularly attends to. ‘Cross-posting’ means putting the same message on a list where it does not fit in, usually for provocation and inciting a discourse or conflict (Mitra 1997:67). The ‘Moluccan’ internet performers forward messages from other mailing lists or newsgroups to their list, in order to comment effectively, criticize or mutilate them while remaining in a safe position (at home), or to get a reaction and support from the other members.

Masariku is the group mainly using the (inverse) cross-posting strategy. Some members frequently cross-post news reports from the Laskar Jihad to their list. The contents of the messages are left unchanged, but their headings (‘subject’ field) are mutilated. Popular headings are ‘Laskar Jahat’ (Bad Warriors) or ‘Laskar Jahanam’ (Damned Warriors) and ‘Provokasi’ (Provocation) or ‘Propaganda Laskar Jahat’ (Propaganda of the bad warriors). Another strategy is to cross-post parts of the Laskar Jihad website, such as the list of donors of the FKA WJ, and let them speak for themselves.

The language used for commenting on ‘the other side’ is sometimes quite rude. The way the Laskar Jihad write about the Christians is an outstanding example: they are called kutu busuk (bed bug), anjing (dog) or babi (pig), implying that they are dirty and smelly. The reporting by the Christians is far less emotional and insulting.

The contributions and comments using rude and insulting language follow the cyberspace tradition of so-called ‘flame wars’. As Sherry Turkle (1995:13,FN 4) explains, ‘a flame war is computer culture jargon for an incendiary expression of differences of opinion. In flame wars, participants give themselves permission to state their positions in strong, even outrageous terms with little room for compromise’ (see Barry 1991:243; Dery 1993:559–560; and Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire 1984:1125–1130). This seems to be a particular online phenomenon, several Internet researchers noticing that ‘many people who are perfectly polite in everyday life seem to forget their manners in their e-mail’ (Hamelink 2000:42).

Cyberidentity politics

Characterizing the Moluccan cyberactors and their strategies it became clear that presentations online run along religious lines, thus deepening the image of a religious war. The Internet performers in the Moluccan conflict construct collective (religious) identities, deliberately using the means offered by the Internet. Not all members know each other, but all have a common goal and, at least the Masariku mailing list, frequently express their

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28 This way the poser strives for a united response in his ‘home-list’ to communally perceived threats, which further strengthens the metaphor of community as a descriptor for what occurs online (Watson 1997:119).

29 The CCDA reports analyzed never used any swear-words for characterizing the Muslims. The same counts for most of the Masariku contributions.

solidarity. This way imagined communities emerge that are based on densely knit local and national offline networks and the only identities left in the Moluccas which are able to mobilize people and provide cohesion: the Muslim and the Christian religion.

By partly lifting restrictions of time and space cyberspace allows to extend and to idealize these existing communities (see Miller and Slater 2000: 10–11)—which in reality are not that coherent at all—and in this way also influence the conflict level. Both sides, Christians as well as Muslims, use this expansive potential. The Christians try to expand their community and its identity through the integration of reports and letters delivered by international Human Rights, Christian and UN organizations. They call upon the help, and the intervention, of these groups, and show their hope in and solidarity with them and the worldwide Christian community. The Muslims try to reach out for something Gary Bunt (2000) calls a ‘global electronic umma’ by the methods described above. As Bunt (2000:102) shows, it is a general trend among politically active Muslim organizations to ‘now regard the web as an integral part of their information strategies’.

One important factor in cyberidentity politics is the use of archives. Masariku as well as the FKAWJ offer online archives of all mails, newsletters and pictures sent. The archive fulfills two essential functions: First, it presents (partly in a visualized way) the discourse through which the respective identities were negotiated by the imagined communities. This provides members with symbols of identity and enables accepted newcomers to undergo the enculturation process into the community whenever and wherever they want. Secondly, the archive constitutes the history of these communities. It provides all members with a vivid representation of a common past and establishes a shared social and cultural memory.

Comparing the different identity projects, the FKAWJ is more patriarchal, imposing an idealized Islamic identity on its visitors and this way providing an important supporting pillar in times of identity crisis. Negotiations are neither permitted nor required, since the sources for this identity are seen to be out of reach for all humans anyway: the Koran, the Sunnah and the Sharia. The Masariku project is much more open, allowing discussions for members of the mailing list. Masariku does not provide such stringent identity guidelines as the FKAWJ, but a long-term study of their list shows that few highly active contributors dominate the discourse and thus the group’s identity. The CCDA venture can hardly be called an identity project since only one person maintains it, providing no archive and enabling no online discussions among its subscribers.

Conclusions

In the year 2001 less then one percent of the Indonesian population had access to the Internet, in January 2002 approximately two percent. Of what importance, of what influence, can cyberspace and its imagined communities be then? Are not these communities too loose, too impersonal, to be of any importance or influence? Shouldn’t we just forget about cyberspace and concentrate on solutions for the ‘real’ problems on the local and the national level?

Even if the democratic revolution through the Internet has not yet come true, it still offers possibilities never existing before and has particular effects: First, it elevates local incidents and dis-
courses the world otherwise hardly would have known of to a global level. Secondly, it enables the interaction with other discourses on the global level, the integration of the Moluccan diaspora and the construction of imagined communities. In this context, I already hinted at the danger of essentializing (religious) identities through their expansion and idealization and its negative effects on the conflict. Thirdly, the Internet brings together different levels of conflict and authority on the same virtual stage, contributing to the leveling out of discourses formerly conducted on separated levels. This means that local rumors and the voices of people the world never heard of before might now have the same effect as an article of a renowned online-magazine or author. The globalized local information is seen as first hand information and is enthusiastically accepted by the international press. And, last but not least, the Internet itself becomes an integral part of the conflict. The different processes described throughout this paper interconnect cyberspace with ‘real life’. How long these imagined communities and identities will survive, whether they will be of any importance once the conflict ends—these questions can not be answered yet. What is important for the moment is that these constructed identities exist and exert their influence. This is a point neglected so far in analyses of the Moluccan conflict. The Moluccan conflict is fought out on several levels, cyberspace being one of them, which needs to be taken into account. Research has to be conducted on all levels, involving all sorts of communities, with the online community being one of them.

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