Community Diversity and Unity in Witihama, Adonara

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Abstract

For fourteen months in 2000-2001, I conducted research in the District of Witihama, eastern Adonara. Witihama is a religiously mixed community, made up of Muslims and Catholics. However, both groups also practice blood sacrifice and carry out ceremonies required by adat. Muslims and Catholics are closely related by ties of marriage and descent. In the recent historical past, as well as in the ancient legendary past, the community has a remembered history of bloody warfare and murder, not linked to questions of modern religious allegiances, which provide incentives to take precautions to maintain community harmony and peace. Mindful of sectarian conflict elsewhere in Indonesia, Catholics and Muslims maintain close ties of cooperation and solidarity. On holidays like Christmas, Easter and Idul Fitri, for example, they hold community meetings to express mutual friendship. Members of the District have suffered from conflict elsewhere in Indonesia, for example during the fighting between Suku Batak and the 'Flores people' in 1999 in Batam, in the Moluccas and in the violence in Dili, East Timor. Refugees from these other conflicts came and went while I was there. There have been attempts at sectarian provocation in Witihama by people from elsewhere in the past, leading to their expulsion. There was an unexplained incident in which a hand grenade exploded in Witihama killing one child and injuring two others, causing considerable consternation within the community. Rumors of plans to bomb the Catholic church were taken seriously. Efforts to place East Timorese refugees in the Kabupaten of Flores Timur were strongly resisted on grounds of safety and local peace. Finally the national move toward regional autonomy led to Witihama becoming a separate Kecamatan and resulted in moves to turn Flores and Lembata into a separate Province.

Introduction

For fourteen months in 2000-2001, I conducted research in the District of Witihama (Kecamatan Witihama), eastern Adonara. Witihama contains a cluster of governmentally organized villages (desa), and its population numbers about 12,000 people. It is a religiously

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mixed community, made up of Muslims and Catholics, who are closely related to each other by ties of marriage and descent. During the period I was resident there, Indonesia continued to suffer sectarian conflict in areas such as Aceh and the Moluccas. From time to time I met people in eastern Adonara who had been forced to return to their homeland in flight from troubles in the Moluccas, East Timor, and Batam (where in 1999 there had been fighting between people from Sumatra and so called Flores people, which included all migrant laborers from Flores and the islands to the east as far as Alor). Several of these had lost all of their possessions and suffered threats to their lives after years of living in the areas from which they were expelled. The community, therefore, had been indirectly affected by these difficulties and was quite aware of the consequences that would derive from a collapse of community solidarity. Furthermore, Witihama was fully aware of its own conflict-riven past. Evidence for past conflict comes not only from remembered history of actual or putative events. Myth and legends concerning the origins of the various clans are replete with similar descriptions of violence. Apart from one small war in a region adjacent to Witihama on the south slope of the Boleng volcano, east Adonara was, however, peaceful during my period there.

Witihama

The villages of Witihama consist in a series of patrilineal clans linked by marriage. In fact the larger clans, such as Bahi and Lama Tokan, are actually alliances of otherwise unrelated groups, and they are spread over a wide area of Adonara. Individual clans have traditions of either being autochthonous or of deriving from ancestors who came from elsewhere, usually Sina Jawa (i.e., China Jawa, but actually meaning the west), the Moluccas or Timor. The outsider clans, which incidentally are the most numerous in terms of population, have lived on Adonara for centuries and intermarried with those who regard themselves as autochthonous. They have also acquired the local language and culture and lost the languages and cultures their original ancestors may have brought with them. Witihama and adjacent districts, such as Hinga and Lama Bunga, are therefore homogenous in language and culture, although divided in terms of religion.

Today Witihama is governed by an appointed Camat or District Head, but the village heads are elected, except for the village of Wato Ona, where a longstanding disagreement has prevented the election of a head. However, in the past Witihama as a whole was ruled by a Kepala Besar (Great Head), whose position was hereditary. Leadership was provided by a family in a lineage of the Lama Tokan clan. This lineage now calls itself Goran Tokan but was formerly referred to as Seran Goran. According to their tradition their ancestors originally lived in the Moluccas.

Goran Tokan

Haji Muktar Lebu Kelake Kei recounted the story of his group for me. Once there were two brothers (he was uncertain which was the elder and which the younger); one of them owned a leader wire for attaching a fishhook to a fishing line. According to a version of the story recorded by Pater Stevanus Kopong Keda Lamahoda, the leader (in his version a fishhook) belonged to the elder brother. The unusual thing about this leader wire was that it was made of gold. In any case, one of the brothers borrowed it from the other to go fishing. He went out to sea in his sampan and let down his line. Before long it was seized by a shark. The line broke, and the shark took the hook together with the leader wire. The brother returned to shore and told the owner that the leader and...
the hook broke and were taken by a fish. The owner did not take this news in good spirit. He said: ‘Return my leader wire and its hook, do not substitute another.’ He wanted exactly the same leader in exactly the same condition it had been in when it had been borrowed. If it was not returned in this fashion, he threatened that there would be war.

The brother who had borrowed the leader could not sleep that night worrying about the consequences of the loss. Very early the next morning he went to sea in his sampan. He recognized the place where the loss had occurred and let down his anchor there. He thought, ‘My life is worth nothing, it is just as well I risk it trying to get the leader back.’ He climbed down the anchor rope to the bottom of the sea. There he found a village. Near the village there was a well. Lots of men and women were collecting water from the well. He was surprised and thought that perhaps they were having a feast. He asked, ‘Are you having a feast?’ The women answered, ‘We are not having a feast. Our raja is sick. Everyone has gathered around, and we are hauling water in order to feed them.’ He realized that this was not an ordinary village. He told them, ‘Maybe I can cure the raja with my medicine.’ The women went back and told the elders that there was someone at the well who claimed that he could cure the raja. They did not believe him.

By then it was nighttime and he wondered where he could sleep. There was a village temple and gathering place, and he thought, ‘It is just as well that I sleep here.’ Nearby was a lontar palm that was being used to tap palm wine. The lontar palm belonged to a man named Ikä Kelepak (the name refers to a species of fish). When it was about to be dawn the brother moaned expressing his feelings of difficulty. People heard this and thought it was Ikä Kelepak. They said, ‘The raja is sick, why are you tapping and making so much noise?’ Ikä Kelepak answered, ‘I have not yet tapped.’ ‘Who is it then?’ ‘Someone is sleeping in the temple.’ They surrounded the temple and asked, ‘Who are you? Why are you sleeping here? Why are you making so much noise, when our raja is sick.’ He answered, ‘Excuse me, I did not know. If I give him medicine, he will get well.’ They went up to the palace and told the elders: ‘There is someone in the temple who says he can cure the raja.’ They said, ‘It is true, yesterday we heard that someone said he could cure the raja, but we did not believe it. Call him.’ They called him to the palace.

When he arrived, he said, ‘I can cure him, but I must check him first.’ Everyone was gathered around the raja. [The raja, it turned out, had the form of a shark.] The brother said to all of the men and women gathered around, ‘Excuse me, but you may not see my medicine, please go outside first. If my medicine fits, I can cure him.’ When they left, he began to inspect the shark’s head, which was swollen up. He opened its mouth and saw the golden leader wire. He called the people to come back in and told them that he had seen that the illness fit his medicine. ‘I will go and collect my materials.’ He went and gathered roots and leaves in any old way. He also took a thorn from the thorny lime and hid it in a different place. He then went back to the palace and said, ‘I have already got my medicine. Please go outside, while I give him the medicine.’ Everyone left. He had already shown them the leaves and roots. He then took the thorn and dug out the hook. He took the leader wire and hid it. He then called the men and women to come back in and told them he had already removed the illness. They were all extremely happy. He showed them the thorn and said that it was the cause of the illness. The shark was already cured.

He then wanted to ask leave to go. They refused because they had not had an opportu-
nity to make a return gift. He said that he had everything that he needed. The raja would not agree to let him go empty-handed. Near the shore he saw a cluster of taro plants with wide, edible leaves. He said, ‘I was just helping, but if you insist, just give me one of those plants near the shore.’ They answered, ‘If you want to take them all, you may, they are just weeds.’ He said, ‘No, I will just take one.’ So they dug it up for him. He took his leave and climbed up the anchor rope. He then rowed ashore and stored his things in his house. He then took the original leader and hook back to its owner. Everything was in good order then. He planted the taro plant. After several years, it was thriving and its leaves were broad. One day women were collecting water at the well when there was a heavy rain. They looked for cover. The daughter of the owner of the tree cut a leaf (as they cut banana leaves to use as umbrellas). The owner had gone to his fields and did not know this had happened. When he returned, he noticed that one leaf was missing. He asked the women collecting water who had cut the leaf. They answered, ‘your daughter’. Not believing the women, he became angry and insisted that the plant be restored as it was, which of course was impossible. From this incident a war broke out that drove a group of people from the Moluccas.3

This group led by seven brothers sailed to Lembata and Adonara. One brother became the leader of the Lewotolok region of Lembata. The eldest brother became the first raja at the (now Muslim) village of Adonara, founding a line that was to become especially powerful on the island during the Dutch period. The youngest brother, Jou Boli Ama, was the only one not yet married when they settled at Adonara. He told his brothers that we would search for a wife in the interior (or they told him to do so, according to the version consulted). He searched through west Adonara without success, until he finally came to a place located between the present south coast (today Muslim) villages Terong and Lamahala called Lamabahi. There he encountered the leader of Bahi clan named Kopon Lusi Mau Molan cutting planks in order to construct a boat, who asked where he came from and invited him to stop for a while and chew betel. Jou Boli answered, ‘(the village of) Adonara.’ He was then asked where he was going, to which he replied that he was looking for a priest (mau molan). This comment was in fact a play on the name of Kopon Lusi Mau Molan and meant that he was looking for a wife. While they were sitting, Kopon Lusi Mau Molan called his twin sister, Peni Iheq Karabau, to bring betel, which she did.4 When Jou Boli saw her, he wanted her for a wife. He soon asked if he could marry her, which was accepted. Jou Boli offered various forms of valuables as bridewealth, all of which were refused because Kopon Lusi Mau Molan already agreed. Haji Muktar told me that because of this particular gift of a boat, his own group cannot own boats successfully. Although he and his relatives have often tried to

3 In the version of this story recorded by Stevanus Kopong Keda Lamahoda, it is the brother who takes the leaf leading to war, which makes better narrative sense: ‘One day his elder brother went to shore to move his horse. He was caught in a rain. Because he had no protection, he cut off a taro leaf to use as an umbrella. When he came home, his younger brother saw that his taro leaf had been cut. The younger brother became angry and insisted that the taro leaf be reattached to the branch. It must be restored again as before. This was an impossible demand but comparable to the demand of his elder brother concerning the hook which disappeared. Because he was not able to meet the demand and because he was ashamed, the elder brother went to war with his younger brother. As a result of this war, some people from the younger

4 In some versions Peni Iheq Karabau is the daughter of Kopon Luis Mau Molan.
do so, their boats never lasted long. His line has had a long-standing alliance with Bahi clan into which Jou Boli married.

Kowa Bala

Another branch of Lama Tokan called Kowa Bala descend from an original pair named Kelake Ado Pehan (the male) and Kewae Sole Boleng (the female). This group claims to be completely autochthonous. They view the two ancestors as a brother and sister pair who emerged from the top of the Boleng volcano. This myth underpins their claims to mythical precedence through their original association with the land. However the Goran Tokan group (and others) dispute this version of the myth and claim that Kelake Ado Pehan came from overseas and encountered Kewae Sole Boleng for the first time when he ascended the mountain and discovered her. Arndt (1940:149) gives a version of the myth that associates Kelake Ado Pehan with the shore (meaning that he came from overseas) and mentions that these two groups within Lama Tokan disputed which had the higher rank. They were still doing so during my field research.

The day I arrived Witihama began building a village temple for the first time in over a century. Thousands of people took part under the leadership of Haji Muktar. The Kowa Bala group, however, refused to attend although they were invited to do so, because they felt that the Goran Tokan group were usurping their prerogatives. It may be mentioned in passing that both Catholics and Muslims from many clans happily participated and provided an audience for the ritual sacrifice of both a goat and a pig.

Haji Muktar explained to me that in the past people on Adonara lived by the law of the jungle and that Kelake Ado Pehan was not competent at war. When the group now called Goran Tokan arrived in Tana Oloq, where Kelake Ado Pehan’s group then lived, they wanted to give power to Jou Boli, but he refused, saying that, ‘my elder brothers have not yet arrived. When they come, you can give the power away.’ However people of Kowa Bala said, ‘you with your short trousers and short sleeve shirts, you sit up there. We give our power to you without condition.’ Afterward they lived together at Tana Oloq, which is a few kilometers from the present Witihama. The move to Witihama occurred only much later. The comment about short trousers and sitting on chairs is to be explained as follows. Before the Second World War, the head of Witihama was entitled to wear fancy clothing including trousers, and in formal occasions to sit on a chair, while the Kowa Bala group wore more traditional clothing and sat on sacred stones. One member of Kowa Bala commented to me that the significance of the chair was that it was the chair of government, but that the sitting on the stones was the sign of ownership of the land. Kowa Bala maintained its right to rule, although that right was exercised by Goran Tokan. If Haji Muktar or his ancestors sat on stones, it would mean that Witihama belonged to them, but if he sat on a chair, it would not. Both sides agree that the heads of Witihama sit on chairs and wear fancy clothing, while the leaders of Kowa Bala wear rough clothing and sit on sacred stones, which by the way are lower, but there is a disagreement about the interpretation of this arrangement. For Goran Tokan sitting higher is a sign of their political superiority and the clothing a sign of their great wealth. For Kowa Bala sitting on the lower stones is a sign that ultimately power and the right to use the land derives from them.

Post World War II

World War II and the struggle for independence in Indonesia had profound local effects. For one thing, a figure named Buang Duran,
who was the grandson of a former head of Witihama and who began as a Catholic schoolteacher before converting to Islam, formed a group resisting the Dutch return to control of eastern Indonesia following the war, for which the Dutch imprisoned him. On release from prison, he formed a Marxist peasant movement in 1946 called ‘The Union of Indonesian Peasants’ (Persatuan Kaum Tani Indonesia). The Dutch imprisoned him again in 1947. The Republic of Indonesia released him on August 17, 1950. At first he worked for a section of the army writing a report on elements regarded as still colonialist in orientation. He identified a close relative who was then head of Witihama, Kelake Kei (father of Haji Muktar), and other prominent leaders in eastern Adonara who had close political and marriage ties with Kelake Kei as feudal elements. Eventually he led an uprising of his Union of Indonesian Peasants in 1950, which lasted into 1951 and came to a bloody ending, after which he was imprisoned by the Indonesian authorities. He was released early from prison in 1965. However, shortly thereafter he was arrested again by the army on Adonara following the events of September 30, 1965 and executed (Barnes 2003). Among Buang Duran’s ambitions was the abolition of the sumptuary restrictions that forbade ordinary people from wearing the sort of finery worn by the family of the Head of Witihama. Whether he succeeded may be disputed, but at any event during the 1950s and 1960s, the Indonesian government at various levels agitated against ‘feudal’ practices. The end result was that the customs that marked out the Goran Tokan group as superior survive only in memory. However, a vivid memory it is.

Among other memories that provide an accent to present day life are those pertaining to a series of wars through history and right up to around 1965. There have been minor incidents since then, but people with experience of the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s attest that eastern Adonara was unsafe and that it lived up to the reputation it earned in the 1920s as being the ‘Island of Murder’. First mentioned in print in 1932 (Vatter 1932:157), this sobriquet is still fixed in local imagination. Its accuracy is affirmed by neighbouring peoples and sometimes conceded by the people of Adonara and indeed has been the subject of writings by local Adonara intellectuals (see for instance Lewokeda 2002). I once commented to a former parliamentarian from Witihama that it was strange that the most fertile island in the Regency was also the most murderous. He replied that perhaps it was so fertile because so much blood had been spilled.

Whether Adonara deserves this reputation today may be questioned, since violence does occur elsewhere too and since, despite the incident on the south of the Boleng volcano which led to two deaths and the burning of houses, during 2000 and 2001 Adonara was enviously peaceful, especially when compared with the major trouble spots elsewhere in Indonesia, in central Europe and in the Near East. Locals and visitors can travel around Adonara today without worries of encountering violence or hostility, which reportedly was definitely not true in the 1950s. Villages of present-day Witihama engaged in warfare with each other on several occasions during this period, and these wars are very much part of living memory. Among them the wars between Honi Hama and Wato Ona, Witihama and Redon Tena, Noten and Balawelin and between the contiguous villages of Oringbele and Wato Ona may be mentioned. The physical distance between the combatant villages in each case is negligible and never more that a kilometre or two. The patterns of hostility usually resulted in killings and burning of houses. It unsettled everyday life, but loss of life was never extensive.
The mass killings that followed the 30th of September uprising in 1965 did not reach Witihama until 1966. A reputed 700 people were slaughtered in the East Flores Regency, of which 33 came from Witihama, all accused of belonging to the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). The strong presence of the military and various repressive measures had the effect of restricting the earlier patterns of turbulence. Since the fall of the Suharto regime in 1997, these repressive measures have been removed, but there are few if any signs of a return to older habits.

Demon and Paji

Other than the distinction between autochthonous clans and those descended from ancestors who came from outside, there is within the East Flores Regency a division between territories which are deemed Demon and formerly allied to the Raja of Larantuka and those deemed Paji and allied to the Raja of Adonara (Arndt 1938). Among the latter group are a series of small Muslim coastal villages that were formerly petty kingdoms and who formed an alliance called the Solor Watan Lema or 'Five Solor shores'. These included in the historic period the villages of Adonara, Terong, and Lamahala on Adonara, as well as Lohayong and Lamakera on Solor, although other villages, such as Labala on Lembata, are sometimes mentioned. This set of five coastal villages was in intermittent alliance with the Dutch East Indies Company after the Company took the Portuguese fort on Solor in 1613. After the Netherlands East Indies took over the lands under the Raja of Larantuka from the Portuguese in 1851, Dutch links with the Raja of Adonara were strengthened and his influence and power spread through the last half of the nineteenth century. The Solor Watan Lema also had ties to a similar alliance of Muslim coastal villages on Pantar and Alor called the Galiau Watan Lema (Barnes 1987; 2001). All of these coastal villages were and are made up of people of very diverse origins, who are primarily traders, craftsmen and craftswomen and fishermen.

It is impossible to date the origin of the division between the Demon and the Paji, but the division is mentioned already by the first Portuguese visitors early in the seventeenth century (de Sá 1956:484; Catharina 1733:792-793). Arndt gives several legends about the origin of the Demon and Paji division, which imply that it is primordial, but he also gives an account which attributes the division to a war between the two brothers Igo and Enga, sons of Pati Golo Arakian, the Raja of Larantuka (Arndt 1938:46). This legend is well known and there are several sources for it (Dietrich 1995).

The most common version has it that Enga stole Igo’s wife while Igo was leading a war party in Sikka. Igo returned and defeated Enga, who eventually retreated to the island of Adonara. Later either he or a descendant reached the village of Adonara. There is disagreement about whether he arrived there before, at the same time, or after the ancestor of the rajas of Adonara. In any case, Enga’s line became the second most important political group in the rajadom of Adonara, holding the office of Kapitan, although in the Dutch period two of them served as acting raja. The younger brother of the second of these Arakian Kamba Kei Helu (Ama Nuen Ape), also entertains the view that Igo and Enga instituted the division. Igo’s descendants continued the line of the rajas of Larantuka. Despite the division, today the family of the last Raja of Larantuka and Ama Nuen Ape’s family maintain close, although the Larantuka group are prominent Catholics and Ama Nuen Ape’s relatives prominent Muslims.

According to the genealogy of the family, their father was Siria Napan, great-great-great-great-grandson of Pati Golo (Dietrich 1997:111).
In the past there was often warfare and in particular head hunting between the Demon and Paji regions, called ‘wars of the mat and pillow’ in reference to the cause of the original enmity between Igo and Enga. These occurred well into the twentieth century, and led the Dutch to take strenuous measures to stamp them out. Following World War II, local officials strove to abolish the two identities and enmities with some success. However, relations between Demon and Paji areas were not always hostile. There were occasional alliances between Demon and Paji villages. The Demon village Kiwang Ona, for instance, were allied with the Raja of Adonara who assisted them in destroying the village of Libu with which they were at war. In the Hinga war of 1904, when the Paji village of Hinga was defeated by the Dutch and the Raja of Adonara, various of the leaders from Hinga fled to Kiwang Ona where they sought and received shelter.

The Hinga war illustrates another pattern, namely wars between districts within the Paji region. It arose because a man in Hinga wanted to marry a woman in the district of Lambunga, whom the Raja of Adonara claimed for himself. This incident led to friction between Lambunga and Hinga, which ended only after military intervention by the Raja of Adonara and the Dutch. Another pattern is relevant to the Hinga war, namely wars caused by disputes within the family. Puru Duli and his brother’s son Kei Tokan of the Goran Tokan line went to war with each other in a contest for power. This war not only split Goran Tokan but also allied clans such as Lamablawa. The younger brother Kei Tokan won the war leading Puru Duli and his followers to flee to Hinga. Thus members of Goran Tokan and Lamablawa lived in Hinga and joined it in the Hinga war. Withama as a whole, however, sided with the Raja of Adonara.

Ritual related to war and murder

Traditional culture provides a wealth of forms of ritual, among them rituals to insure success in war or murder and rituals to reconcile hostile parties subsequent to killings. The most frequent causes of such violence are disputes over land or women.

Premeitated murder or warfare, as opposed to spontaneous or accidental killing, necessitates a ritual process. Lewokeda (2002) provides a detailed description of this ritual. For this purpose the parties to the killing must foregather at their ritual hut. A ritual expert (mua méa) then buries ritual stones in the earth and erects a bamboo pole on which the seven side branches have been left having been cut several inches from the pole. These paraphernalia are used to establish the connection between the heavens (Rera Wulan, Sun Moon) and the earth (Tana Ekan, Land Earth), that is to say the male and female aspects of divinity. Then the ritual expert will inspect a raw egg by breaking open a bit of the shell and looking inside to see the cause of the misfortune and the disposition of the ancestors. He will present the koda or reasons for the animosity and request God’s blessing on the steps that are planned. Then the expert will need to fast and spend a night or so sleeping and dreaming to find out if the blessing will be given. In the case of a war he will learn exactly how many people will be killed and how many will escape during the next day. Once the revealed number has been killed, the war must stop. The side with the greatest number of fatalities loses. Any further killing is the responsibility of the person who does it. After a war is over, there will be no attempt to get revenge against someone who has killed a relative, unless in the midst of another war. In the case of murder, the expert would appoint a place and time for the murder. Inevitably the intended
victims would appear at that place at the ap-
pointed time, even though he had no knowl-
edge of the intentions of the killers. Killing can
only take place at certain times of day, early
morning and early afternoon. It is not possible
mid-day. A person who intends to kill another
must not eat with him.

When warriors return successfully from the
field of battle there must be a ceremony to cel-
ebrate. Furthermore there must be a ‘feeding
the army’ or ‘feeding the village’ festival to
thank the warriors and allies from other villages
which have helped out. Following a murder
there must be a ceremony to turn back the blood.
Unless this ceremony is performed, the blood
of the victim will be inherited by the children
and their descendants. A killer may have to
pierce his finger with a lime thorn so that a
drop of blood comes out. Blood pays for blood.
Relationships between the two sides become
severed. They may not eat together or visit
each other until there is a ceremony of recon-
ciliation. A violation of this prohibition will re-
sult in accident, illness or death. Furthermore,
until there is reconciliation, members of the of-
fending party are subject to revenge attacks.
One often sees men carrying spears because
there is some such incident in their background
for which there has been no resolution. Lamahoda (n.d.) mentions that in May 1959 the
villagers of Noten returned a month after a war
party from neighbouring villages had burned it
to the ground. He commented that, ‘We should
not be surprised [that they returned so soon]
because in Adonara, those who lose a war have
no need to fear, because they are regarded as
holding credit against their enemies. It is the
victors who have to be careful, so that they are
not caught in a surprise attack.’ Following a
war or murder, there must be a ceremony to pull
up the sacred stones and take down the pole in
order to return God’s blessing.

Reconciliation may be achieved through
ceremonies of ‘shaking hands’ and ‘making
good’, involving the mixing and drinking of
palm wine between representatives of the two
sides and the exchanging of betel baskets. In
these ceremonies, the reasons for the killings
and the way and by whom they were carried
out must be publicly confessed. Generally
speaking killers want to effect such reconcilia-
tion as soon as possible, while the relatives of
the victims are very reluctant, although these
days people are less anxious to confess kill-
lings because they are afraid of the police hear-
ing about them. Many past murders have still
not led to restoration of normal relations, and
indeed many murders are still secret and are
revealed only in response to misfortunes they
may have caused.

Splitting the coconut ceremonies

Of course a murder or the loss of a war will
lead to the survivors to try to ascertain why
they experienced such a misfortune. Deaths by
murder or in wars fall into a category of death
called mate kenekat, ‘death through being cut
to pieces’. This category also includes unex-
pected deaths, such as falling from a tree or
other accident, from snakebite, falling dead from
a chair or bed, suicide, drinking poison, and
the death of a newborn child. Formerly a male
who died a mate kenekat would be wrapped in
a mat woven from lontar leaf, while a woman
would be wrapped in a cloth and tied with cot-
ton thread. In either case they were buried with-
out a coffin. Mate kenekat are opposed to
deaths which are mate layo ‘death on reaching
the limit [of one’s allotted days]’, which are
deaths from illness or old age. Any mate
kenekat leads to ceremonies to ascertain why
such catastrophes occurred. These ceremonies
are called lewak tapo, literally ‘splitting a
husked coconut’. Before such a ceremony a
ritual expert who specializes in finding causes of misfortune will consult with the affected family and then dream. The purpose of the coconut splitting ceremony is to determine if the cause of the misfortune has been correctly identified.

I was invited to attend several such rituals. In one instance, the expert told me that he had held twenty or more sessions searching for the probable cause, going one by one through the family members. It was only after this long search that they got to the basic fault. This particular case involved an old bachelor who had been working in Tanjung Pinang and Riau from 1960 until 1999. He became ill and had to be brought home, as he was too sick to travel by himself. Not only was he extremely ill, he had also turned blind and deaf as a result of his illness. On June 25th, 2000 the inhabitants of a house in a hamlet near Witihama where this man was staying at the time came home from a feast in Witihama. They noticed someone moving around in a banana grove and asked a friend they had returned with for help. He responded by going to investigate for them. He called several times, but got no answer. Thinking that he was dealing either with a ghost or with someone with evil intent, he stabbed a figure he encountered in the dark through the chest and then called a neighbour to bring a flashlight to see who it was. When he had the light he saw that he had killed his mother’s brother [i.e., the returned bachelor]. The family then waited until the morning to call the police and medical staff to investigate. The killer immediately confessed. He was tried and is in jail, although it is thought that his sentences will not be a long one, since there is no question of intentional homicide. When he gets out, there will be a ceremony to restore peace between the two families, but it cannot be held before then.

This accidental killing was attributed to an ancestor who died in the 1940s. The death of the old man had been arranged by the ancestors as a sign that a fault needed clearing up. Punishment for faults of this kind can be passed down for seven generations. What they found was that an ancestor had married off the daughter of his elder brother to someone even though it was not his right to do so. He had killed his elder brother and then disposed of his property as though it was his own. He then did the same thing to one of his paternal cousins. He never told members of his family about this, but after his death other people remembered.

The purpose of the coconut splitting ceremony is to test whether the ancestors confirm that a diagnosis of this kind is correct. Relatives of the deceased announce in Lamaholot what the cause is deemed to be, and then the expert sacrifices a chicken before proceeding to splitting the coconut with a field knife. In this particular ceremony, the ritual expert tried to split a coconut, but it did not split all the way through, indicating that the confession was not complete.

The family and the expert then went off to a house to consult further. When a second coconut was attempted, it split evenly in two, indicating that the true cause had been found. The reason the first coconut did not work was that the ancestors had merely been asked if something the victim had done had caused his death. The second time the representative of the family came out with the full story stated forcefully for all to hear, which the ancestors rewarded with approval. The test in such ceremonies is for the husked coconut to split cleanly into two equal parts. Any glancing blow or uneven fracture of the coconut represents a negative answer. This particular expert was prepared to use more than one coconut if necessary. However, other experts will use only one. An unsatisfactory answer would necessitate the rescheduling of a new ceremony, with the expense entailed by such a repetition. I suspect that the latter strategy puts considerable pressure on the family in question to make a full confession at once.
This is not the place for a full description of coconut splitting ceremonies. However, it may be remarked that such a ceremony is required after a war or any other serious misfortune. Among the objects used by the priest in such a ceremony are small pellets, which he rolls from raw cotton. These pellets have many uses; in this case they help to communicate with the heavens and earth. They are also used to call the soul of the deceased whose death occasions the ritual in the first place. Wherever the dead person is, even in the Americas, he must come. They are also used to sweep away faults. For example if someone who is forbidden to eat meat does eat meat, he may wipe the fault away by brushing his lips with the cotton. The ancestors are fed in this ceremony and told not to come near again; the fault should not come near again. In at least some instances they might say, ‘the spadix of our lontar palm is heavy [full of sap and ready for tapping], the chicken basket is full, we therefore call [you]’. The coconut represents the head of the deceased, as I was told by two of the ritual experts I knew best, who use only coconut on each occasion. When I asked them about the difference in practice, they said indeed there are variations, but a person after all has only one head. When I asked them how a coconut could be turned into a human head, the reply was that it is easy. You go to a coconut palm and call the name of the deceased. Then you send someone up the tree to pick the coconut and bring it down without dropping it. Then the ritual expert boasts that this is the head. On several occasions, but not all, I witnessed, when the coconut was split successfully, the close relatives broke into loud sobbing. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the ritual expert grates the coconut meat and mixes it with water. This substance he then rubs on the hair, one by one, of the male and then female relatives of the deceased.

After the conclusion of this ceremony, whether it is successful or not, there will be a feast for the numerous guests who have attended, all of them bringing contributions to the food needed. For this ceremony they do not use plates and other modern utensils, but instead use coconut shells cups, gourd bowls and banana leaves as plates. Cooking should be done in earthen pots. Great quantities of chicken and rice are characteristic of such occasions. The plucking, gutting and boiling of hundreds of chickens is a spectacular sight and is done by young men, while women cook the rice. Men serve, while women are among those served. Indeed, in this particular type of ceremony, women are forbidden to serve. Bananas leaves are spread out on the ground or on tables and piles of food are placed on them. Until this ceremony members of a family that has suffered a bad death may not eat meat of any kind, although they may eat fish.

Bombs

In 2001, there was a spate of newspaper reports in Indonesia about hand grenades being found in various unlikely places and sometimes causing injury or death to civilians. These incidents occurred in a period marked by bombings of Catholic and Protestant churches and the burning of mosques. It can be safely said that all communities in Indonesia were made uneasy by these travesties. In Withama on May 4, 2001 three young boys, relatives of Haji Muktar, were seriously injured when a hand grenade they found in a ravine and inadvertently placed in a fire with which they were roasting bananas exploded. One of the children died. The police decided that the grenade was too old to have exploded had the pin been pulled and only did so because it was heated in the fire. There were no apparent consequences, except personal, of this incident, but it occurred at the same time that there were
rumours that attempts were going to be made or had been made unsuccessfully to place bombs in the Catholic church. In fact, despite the appearance of a mysterious wire in the church bell tower, no such attempt actually occurred during my stay in Withama. However, rumours of plans to bomb the Catholic church were taken seriously, and they set up guards. Such rumours have been rife in the general region for several years. It might be added that in a similar incident of threatened assault in a village I know well on a neighboring island, according to those closest to the church in question, it was the community Muslims who sent out word that they were mounting a guard to protect the church and would deal with anyone threatening it.

Inter-religious cooperation

In 1997 for the first time rabies appeared in this part of Indonesia, and by 2000 it had reached epidemic proportions in central Flores. Some deaths occurred in Withama, and the government initiated a program to eliminate dogs and cats. In this context rumours spread that Muslim fanatics had introduced the disease from Java. There was even a bizarre rumour that a couple of Javanese were injecting trees with rabies, so that when people ate fruit from the trees they got the disease. This panic actually led to the killing of some Javanese men by a mob in west Flores. Fortunately there were no such incidents in Withama.

In the past, so I was told, a Javanese Muslim had come to Withama whose harsh views threatened to disrupt communal harmony. Catholic relatives of Haji Muktar consulted with him. In the end the Javanese was, according to report, asked to leave the community by the Muslims. More characteristic of the community is a carefully cultivated pattern of inter-religious cooperation. In particular the principal Catholic priest, who originates from the adjacent island, maintains very close ties with Haji Muktar and the rest of the Muslim leadership. On holidays like Christmas, Easter and Idul Fitri, for example, they hold public community meetings to express mutual friendship, with speeches by prominent Catholics and Muslims. Muslims are invited and do attend festivities following the confirmation of Catholic children (confirmed by Tukan 1999:36). All adat feasts and ceremonies are always well attended by both Catholics and Muslims. Seating is not segregated by religion except during the actual meal. Separate utensils and separate tables are set out to provide for those who eat pork and those who do not. However, Catholics who chose to, and many do, may sit with the Muslims and share their food on such occasions. What is not permitted is for someone to sit with the Muslims and at the same time eat pork. These restrictions cause no real inconvenience.

Such cooperation is not unique in the regency. It is commonplace for Muslims to contribute labour for the building of churches and Catholics to help build Mosques. In Larantuka on Flores the great Good Friday procession is policed annually by Muslim youths, and the mosque in Kampung Baru received a subsidy from the Catholic mission (Tukan 1999:37). Catholics join in greeting Muslims returning from the Haj and in the celebrations afterward.

Rejection of Timor refugees

In September, 2000 East Timor militias attacked the UN food relief agency in Atambua and killed four relief workers and burned them in the street. The U.N. responded by withdrawing relief workers providing the refugees with food. Following this event I learned that when the East Flores government was considering a request to resettle some of the East Timor refugees in the regency, the Archbishop of Atambua, Timor, who comes from Adonaraih-
self, advised them not to do so. He sent a report on their behaviour on Timor, involving systematic intimidation, theft and violence. Opposition to receiving them was widespread in the regency. People were afraid that they would behave in the same manner in east Flores and place unbearable burdens on inter-religious relations. In the end, the regency declined to accept any of the refugees.

**Regional autonomy**

In 1999 and 2000 the national government took steps to encourage greater regional autonomy. One local consequence of these steps was that the island of Lembata succeeded from the East Flores Regency and became a regency in its own right. Political leaders from the area, including several stationed in Jakarta, met and announced plans to push for establishing a Province of Flores and Lembata and thus withdrawing from the Province of Nusa Tenggara Timur. In this atmosphere, the Districts of East and West Adonara were broken up and re-formed as five independent districts. The District of Witihama was inaugurated by the Regent on June 1, 2001. These developments will undoubtedly give the community a greater sense of self-sufficiency and mutual dependence.

**Conclusion**

Witihama is a linguistically and culturally homogenous community. Despite this fact it has had a history of almost continuous, if intermittent, warfare. Legends and myth depict incidents of similar violence linked to the accounts of the original settling of the island. While the older patterns of violence are largely suppressed today, the memories live on as a cautionary reminder. Although the district is divided by religion, large clans contain both Catholics and Muslims who are closely related to each other. The two religious communities are mindful of sectarian conflict elsewhere and take steps to avoid the threat that it might appear locally. Members of Witihama have extensive ties to the wider world, both within and without the Republic of Indonesia, and have means of exerting influence even in the political world of Jakarta. The increased autonomy should also give them greater political control over their own affairs at home than they enjoyed during the long period of the Suharto regime. It is to be hoped that the generally peaceful situation I witnessed will continue as well.

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