Adat in Maluku:
New Value or Old Exclusions?¹

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Abstract

The religious-ethnic violence in Maluku has unearthed a complex network of rivalries, inequalities and rhetoric. Opinions as to the causes of the conflict, and possible avenues for reconciliation are extremely diverse, and reflect many of the tensions and challenges faced by Indonesia as a whole, as it moves towards decentralisation. One of the elements of Maluku society that has proved to be controversial in this context is tradition or adat. This paper explores some current perspectives on the role of adat in Maluku, and its potential for social transformation. Does a situation as extreme as that in Maluku itself encourage radical transformation and creative solutions for rebuilding civil society, or does it simply further entrench existing prejudice and power relations? How will regional autonomy influence this? What relation do these questions have to other reconciliation initiatives? The paper does not attempt to draw far-reaching conclusions about the future role of adat in Maluku society, but simply indicates some of the questions to be asked and answered in the years ahead. It provides examples of past activities, current perspectives, and future possibilities. It is hoped that these questions will contribute to an already lively debate at the local level.

Introduction

In March 2000 a meeting was held in Tual, Southeast Maluku, to explore solidarity between Christians and Muslims within the context of the continuing conflict. The meeting, which assembled 1500 representatives of both communities, issued a statement reasserting the authority of traditional leaders (bapak rajas), with the proviso that they should uphold state law, and guarantee the acceptance of migrants within local communities (ICG 2002). The statement is a vivid illustration of the deep tension that exists in Maluku society between a perception of adat authority as the only viable means for long-term reconciliation, social cohesion, and successful local government, and a sense that what is understood as ‘traditional’ leadership cannot accommodate the complexity and heterogeneity of contemporary life in the province.

Across Indonesia, the new decentralisation legislation has provoked spirited debate about possible new forms of village government. Regional autonomy provides an opportunity for

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communities to re-assert their local identity, and to re-value local culture, after the enforced uniformity of the New Order. In some places this has prompted a ‘neo-traditionalist’ tendency, bent on rescuing adat from the theme park and reinstating traditional forms of leadership. There are others, however, who see regional autonomy as a chance to finally dispense with outdated and discredited modes of authority and build a new system of governance based on accountability, democracy, and equality.

Nowhere is the debate as urgent, or as heated, as in Maluku. Years of marginalisation and underdevelopment, followed by dramatic and violent social change have polarised opinion about the role of traditional authority in rebuilding Maluku. According to these essentialised perspectives, the conflict has demonstrated either that traditional leadership and alliances have no influence whatever in contemporary Maluku, or that a return to traditional adat systems of government holds the only possibility of uniting Maluku people across religious lines.

This paper makes some observations about contemporary perceptions of adat in Maluku, and considers the implications of these viewpoints in competing visions of a post-conflict society. It suggests that, in order to establish lasting peace in the region, Maluku society must find a way to accommodate and live with difference and dissent. It does not seek to present a blueprint for the future, but rather aims to ask the kinds of question that will contribute to a constructive debate.

A future for Maluku adat?

A noted Maluku scholar said to me recently, ‘you know, adat is simply people coming together to talk about their problems and work out solutions’. If a solution works, it may be adopted long-term, and perhaps enter the realm of tradition. Once it stops working, a new solution is devised, and the system altered slightly to accommodate this. The reason this comment was so arresting was that the simplicity and practicality of this definition is virtually unrecognisable in the multiple representations of adat available to Indonesians and Indonesianists. ‘Adat’ is a rarefied domain, bringing with it considerable symbolic and political significance. It is instructive to unravel some of this semantic baggage.

One image of adat available today is that of a quasi-legal system. Since the colonial period, a succession of authorities have in turn mystified and defined adat, in line with their own priorities, and set it apart from ‘normal life’. Under the Dutch, adat law was codified as a parallel legal system for the colonial rulers (Ter Haar 1948). Charles Zerner has described how, in Maluku, traditional systems for the regulation of access to natural resources, known as sasi, were co-opted and manipulated by colonial officials (Zerner 1994). One result of this formalising of custom was to make adat knowledge the preserve of a limited number of ‘experts’ within the community. As codified, written knowledge, adat was the responsibility of the few on behalf of the community.

Another familiar image is the New Order construction of adat-as-folklore. As has been well documented, New Order rhetoric sought to reduce diverse adat practices and beliefs to picturesque tradition—to strip them of conflict, opposition, and negotiation—and distil diversity into cosmetic detail such as costume and architecture (see Howell 2001; Pemberton 1994;
Anderson 1990). Nestling behind this is the assumption that difference is inherently undesirable. Munir notes: ‘There is no place for differences and plurality, because plurality itself is considered a threat’ (Munir 2001:18). A less-noted consequence of the 1979 Village Government Act was its effective removal of the built-in accommodation of difference in local communities, in favour of a system where dissent is either ruthlessly suppressed, or totally ignored. Villages in Maluku stood to gain satellite dishes and televisions if they produced a 100 per cent vote for Golkar in general elections. An army presence at village level ensured civil disturbance, for whatever reason, was an automatic indication of subversion.

The result was a denial of difference, and a dangerous inability to manage and to accommodate it, as part of healthy civil life. Patricia Spyer comments that ‘unity in diversity’ does not describe a fait accompli, but rather ‘targets the diversity of the Indonesian peoples as an affair of the state’ (Spyer 1996:25). This is an important point; it at once highlights the deeply political nature of this rhetoric, and indicates the extent to which the management of difference has been taken out of the hands of local people. Top-down, centralised government, and state co-optation of civil society leave little room for open discussion of and engagement with differing opinions. Ironically, the disintegration of the unitary state we are now witnessing is, Munir argues, a direct result of ‘the failure of the social and political system to accommodate the differences in a true consensus’ (Munir 2001:19).

Aspects of adat practices have been seen as important markers of identity in attempting to counterbalance the would-be uniformity of the state. In the early decades of the Indonesian Republic, pela (a system of traditional alliances between villages, often one Christian and one Muslim) served to assert Malukan identity, as something unique to Maluku in a climate of pan-Indonesian nationalism, and to materially support villages outside the reach of government development aid: ‘While urban politicians were fighting for the spoils offered by the new system, people on the grassroots level reacted to the twin threat of loss of identity and social disunity through placing a renewed emphasis on pela’ (Bartels 2000). In an article written in the mid-1990s, Tonny Pariela suggests that the continued existence of adat in the Ambonese village of Soya can be seen as a form of resistance against government interference in local affairs (Pariela 1996). If anything, since the conflict, adat has become even more of a strategic political resource (see Bubandt this volume), as communities struggle to assert themselves in competition with others.

Signe Howell, in a study of the Lio people from Flores, suggests it is only possible for adat to retain its potency as long as it is kept separate from the realms of religion and government (Howell 2001). I would argue that, on the contrary, adat’s contemporary currency derives precisely from its strategic interaction with these domains. Under the New Order the promotion of adat became instrumental in managing state-society relations, and returning a degree of agency to a disenfranchised community. Indeed, can we see current support for adat as code for rejection of the state? Certainly, confidence in the government is at an all-time low—a government official in Kei admitted that when adat elders stepped in to stop the violence, ‘no one was listening to us, we were completely powerless’. But since then, the adat community in Kei has sought, admittedly with little success, to establish an ongoing relationship with the newly devolved local government. As is discussed below, while some people see adat as an alternative to the state, others clearly envisage a new form of partnership between the two.
Adat and the necessity of difference

How can adat help enhance the social cohesion necessary for lasting peace in Maluku? An examination of traditional social structure and cosmology in Maluku helps give us an understanding of how difference can operate as a functional element of society, not as something to be eliminated or avoided. Traditional ethnographic and historical literature emphasizes the interdependence of oppositions in the region. The relation between Ternate and Tidore, according to Leonard Andaya’s account, is a good example of this. Throughout history the two sultanates have been in constant opposition, but each requires the other to constitute itself (Andaya 1993). Structuralist anthropologists have also noted the dominance of dualistic systems within symbolic thought and practice in traditional Maluku society. Valerio Valeri’s paper on the Siwa-Lima system in Seram is an example of work that highlights the reciprocal, often ambiguous relationship between pairs of symbolic concepts—published in a collection entitled The Attraction of Opposites (Valeri 1989). In a study of the Kei Islanders, P.M. Laksono also emphasizes the sometimes very practical need to maintain a sense of difference, precisely in order to guarantee interdependence:

Due to the competitiveness of local resources in the market, the Keiise have to survive in the shadow of extensive needs of debt by maintaining their traditional social contracts. For this purpose the Keiise have to keep the notion of differences among themselves alive by exchanging gifts, otherwise, their contracts will immediately be over (Laksono 1996).

Social life in Maluku, then, is predicated on difference, as an essential means for maintaining equilibrium, and for establishing identity. This point is central to the logic of pela, one of the most-discussed aspects of Maluku adat in recent years. Much discussion about the continued validity of adat practices in Central Maluku has centred on the ‘failure’ of pela alliances to prevent conflict between Christian and Muslim communities. The fact that conflict occurred despite the existence of these bonds is taken as proof that ‘adat is dead’, in Ambon at least. It is particularly unfortunate that such a dramatic conclusion has been reached as a result of a misunderstanding of the origins and nature of the pela bond. As Bartels explains, pela alliances relate to relationships between specific villages, and have never been a guarantee of solidarity between Christians and Muslims beyond the village level (Bartels 2000). They were formed as a result of conflict, to acknowledge the assistance one village has given another, or simply to facilitate economic relations, especially in times of shortage.

Bartels (1977) points out that pela bonds were only established as a result of conflict when the two parties were fairly evenly matched. The connection depends on an element of respect, as the victorious party recognizes the contingency of its success. Pela, therefore, is not a strategy for preventing conflict between anonymous enemies. It is a mechanism that recognizes and reaffirms the relationship between the two elements, and accommodates the ambiguity that is an inevitable characteristic of close relationships. The representation of pela villages as siblings, then, is particularly appropriate: for siblings, love and hate, fierce loyalty and brutal conflict are varying manifestations of the same bond.

The point is a simple one: without an awareness of difference there can be no unity; with-

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The paper attempts to point out, this is not always the way the term is used in politically charged contexts.
out engagement there is no identity—which, as is well known to anthropologists, depends on the self’s relationship with the other. Under the New Order Maluku was seen as a model of religious tolerance. Recently we have come to realise the extent of the tension and resentment, obscured by this rhetoric, that has seen such violent expression in the recent conflict. But we also now understand that the religious segregation which is currently seen as the only way to contain the violence in Maluku is not a sustainable ‘solution’. It is not possible to eliminate difference, as it is essential for identity. If the distinction is not religion, it could be class, wealth, ethnicity, or anything else.

It is clear from this discussion that seeing pela’s failure to prevent inter-religious conflict in Maluku as an indication of the redundancy of adat in general is a red herring. However, a closer look at the literature also informs an understanding of traditional social dynamics in Maluku. The suggestion is not that pela really does rule people’s lives (far from it), or that the solution to Maluku’s problems lies in ancestral wisdom. More mundanely, traditional social structures simply reflect the necessity of acknowledging and engaging with the other. This observation could inform any model for a new social and political orientation for Maluku.

**Back to the future: reinventing adat**

One Tanimbarese man, who has lived for many years in Jakarta, told me ‘regional autonomy must reach right down to village level.’ For him this means the freedom to be able to reinstate a system of village government based entirely on an adat system that has not functioned fully for several generations, if indeed it ever did in its textbook form. His vision is of a community ordered by respect for seniority, and united by a common myth of origin. This nostalgic view of the past, compared with an all-but irretrievably degraded present has much in common with the structuralist approach of many Maluku anthropologists in the mid-twentieth century, who considered Maluku social life as a degenerate version of a former intact system, rather than recognising its constantly evolving nature.

Not all those who see a future for Maluku that includes a role for traditional authority have such an idealistic and ahistorical perspective. Certainly, there is a sense that adat and tradition have become weakened, and that there is a need to find a way to return to a value-led society, after the disillusionment of Pancasila. But this need not involve a return to an imagined ‘pure form’, dragged from somewhere in the timeless past. The effective social breakdown in contemporary Maluku could, some suggest, provide the catalyst needed for a radical re-imagining of tradition. An Ambonese man says, ‘people are rethinking the nature of Malukan traditional beliefs’. Bartels notes that this is not the first time dramatic social change has prompted such reflection: ‘It seems likely that the Ambonese in the Central Moluccas will have to do what the Ambonese exiles in the Netherlands have been doing ever since they arrived in the Netherlands in 1951, namely engage in a continuous process of reinventing adat to reflect contemporary socio-political reality’ (Bartels 2000).

Experiences during the conflict have given a glimpse of potential points of intersection between traditional alliances and modern reconciliation processes. Ot Lawalatta is a lecturer in law at Ambon’s Pattimura University, and a leading member of the Protestant Church in Ambon, as well as the chairman of the local branch of the human rights organisation Komnas HAM. He describes his experience at the Malino II peace talks in February 2002, finding himself sitting opposite a Muslim delegate from a village with which his has a pela relationship.
I held out my hand to him, and he hesitated for the longest time before taking it. The next day he came to me and said he’d not been able to sleep a wink all night, thinking about how he’d nearly rejected the pela bond.

Lawalatta is cautiously optimistic about the potential for aspects of adat to play a role in rebuilding communities in Maluku. He sees no reason why the ‘good’ parts of traditional life, such as a respect for authority, a sense of solidarity and common purpose, and a valuing of local culture, cannot be combined with modern ideas of, for example, gender equality, and with religion, as an institutional presence as well as a spiritual one.

What is important here is the recognition that tradition, far from being a static, codified set of unchanging rules, exists only as a set of practices that serve a certain social purpose at a certain time, and are constantly subject to revision and refinement as those social needs change. There is an assumption in the ‘pela is dead’ line of thought that a departure from the behavioural prescription of pela is a definitive indication of its permanent impotence. Sylvia Huwaë has pointed out, however, that pela does have a normative force, insofar as this behaviour is institutionalised within village practice, but that people depart from it quite readily in times of social change (Huwaë 1995). This does not have to mean a permanent severing of the pela bond—indeed, this kind of flexibility may well enable it to endure much longer than a less pliable arrangement.

It is not possible to strip adat of its history, and try to go back to some mythical ‘traditional’ understanding. For better or worse, modern adat includes all that it has been understood and manipulated to mean in the past. What is now needed, if adat is to have any significance for future generations, is to restart the clock, slowed by Dutch codification, and almost stopped by New Order nationalism, and allow a new form to emerge.

Building civil society

In the words of one Tanimbaranese man, ‘central government has slowly but systematically killed local institutions’ in Maluku—as in many other areas of Indonesia. Many would argue that, in Central Maluku at least, this includes adat: the ritual language (bahasa tanah) traditionally used in ceremonial kabata tunes has been forgotten, and ceremonies once related to practical issues like land and inheritance are now often only symbolic. Young people growing up in the city have little understanding of or respect for adat traditions. A local government official in Kei, explaining why adat elders had been successful in bringing conflict in Kei to an end, while violence still raged in Ambon, commented: ‘here we have hukum adat [a system of adat law]—in Ambon it’s just tradition’.

Is this comment something we should take seriously? Many would argue that adat’s authority is based on a holistic system, which includes spiritual beliefs and the recognition of hierarchies, as well as ritual and ceremony. Without a spiritual basis—and this what the Kei official is arguing is missing in Ambon—adat is indeed little more than a Taman Mini version of local culture.

Those who reject adat as a spent force, inappropriate in a modern world, also point to its exclusive and hierarchical nature: valuing culture can lead to new exclusions, especially of incomers, women, non-adat families, and young people. Those without adat credentials often find their only opportunity for participation in community affairs comes through religious groups—little wonder then that people have mobilised around religious identities in the recent conflict.
Although the dynamics of social life, especially in Central Maluku, are distinctly urban in many respects, the village remains both a powerful symbolic personal reference point for Malukans at home and abroad, and a significant physical factor in local politics and allegiances. Any indigenous Malukan living in Ambon City will proudly explain which village they are from, and a handful of villages in Central Maluku are known to have produced a number of government and religious leaders.

Alternative models

What are the alternatives to ethnically or religiously based organisation? It has been suggested that the combined dominance of both religion and locality in Maluku society impedes the emergence of a civil society not based on either. A civil society based exclusively on a modern conception of citizenship would not necessarily find much support in a reconstructed Maluku. Memories of civil organisations with no relation to local systems and structures imposed by an interventionist New Order state (the women’s organisation PKK is a good example) are too fresh. There needs to be balance struck between the coercion and countrywide uniformity of New Order state-sponsored civil society and a regressive, ethnically and religiously exclusive affiliation, with all the potential for renewed conflict that this brings. There is, however, considerable encouragement to adopt a model of civil organisation that reflects the priorities of yet another set of external interests. This time it is the international development community.

With the signal failure of modernisation theory to deliver prosperity and freedom for all, international donors have turned to ‘civil society’ as an alternative means of promoting democracy in the developing world (Edwards and Gaventa 2001). The concept of civil society currently enjoys great favour with the institutions shaping policy making for international development and democracy. Thomas Carothers (1999) is critical of the vague and potentially misleading conception of civil society assumed by many in the development community. In many cases, civil society is seen as a ‘motherhood and apple pie’ term, and is assumed uncritically to be a good thing. Increasingly, like ‘participation’, and ‘community’, civil society ‘is more often invoked to convey a benign glow than to illuminate debate or practice’ (Eade 2000:10). As represented by international agencies, with half an eye on global geopolitics and the other on public opinion in donor states, civil society has much to recommend it. It is ‘non-violent but powerful, non-partisan yet pro-democratic and emerges from the essence of particular societies yet is nonetheless universal’ (Carothers 1999:207).

We can see here traces of the same obscuring of plurality as in state representations of adat and tradition. As Mike Edwards points out, ‘civil society is an arena, not a thing’ (Edwards and Gaventa 2001), and therefore contains conflicting agendas and interests, which are critical for its operation as a space for discussion, disagreement, and consensus. This function, and the complex interrelationships between elements within civil society are obscured by the cosy, one-dimensional image promoted by the international community. International NGOs in Maluku have favoured supporting local organisations in their peacebuilding activities, resulting in an explosion in the numbers of new foundations, created according to an NGO-friendly blueprint that will maximise potential funding, but often without any basis in or mandate from the communities they claim to benefit. This strategy acknowledges local experience and knowledge, but fails to recognise that, far from safeguarding its impartiality, this implicates the international aid community in the creation of a net-
work of alliances and self-interest with little inherent connection with local traditional and political structures, going under the name of 'civil society'. If they contribute to reconciliation, such actions also potentially fuel further division and discontent.

Whether this is the result of naïve wishful thinking, sloppy theorising, or some more sinister intention to shape the nature of non-state institutions in the developing world is the subject of another paper. What is important here is the effect this might have on a society currently flooded with foreign funds. With the number of new Maluku NGOs chasing foreign money running into several hundreds, it is a question that deserves serious investigation.

Taking up the challenge

An Ambonese man, discussing the options open to Maluku with me recently commented, ‘we cannot afford to be naïve’. He’s right. While this discussion of the nature of tradition might seem rather esoteric, the debate is a real one, and the stakes are high. Malukans cannot afford to make the kind of decision that will result in further violence in the future. It is crucial that Malukans are proactive in engaging with this problem honestly and openly, and developing a workable solution. The achievements of, for example, adat elders in Kei Besar in invoking adat as a peace-building tool are remarkable and admirable. But if there is no mechanism for following up this success with a model of closer cooperation with local government in the future, it is not clear how this will contribute to developing a healthier, more stable society.

While we can argue about the degree of external provocation involved, and the ultimate culpability of the New Order, the conditions under which the conflict in Maluku is played out are fundamentally local. Maluku needs to negotiate a compromise between tradition and modernity on its own. Yet another imposed solution will not be successful. But a stable and conducive atmosphere is essential before this work can begin.

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