Competition, collateral damage, or 'just accidents'?
Three explanations of ethnic violence in Indonesia

Jacques Bertrand, *Nationalism and ethnic conflict in Indonesia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, xxiii + 278 pp. ISBN 0.521.52441.5. Price: GBP 17.99 (paperback).

Cristina Eghenter, Bernard Sellato, and G. Simon Devung (eds), *Social science research and conservation management in the interior of Borneo; Unravelling past and present interactions of people and forests*. Jakarta: Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), 2003, xviii + 297 pp. ISBN 979.336102.6. Price: USD 58.00 (paperback).

Nancy Lee Peluso and Michael Watts (eds), *Violent environments*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2001, ix + 453 pp. ISBN 0.8014.3871.0. Price: USD 29.95 (paperback).

Günther Schlee (ed.), *Imagined differences; Hatred and the construction of identity*. Münster: Lit, 2002, ix + 280 pp. [Market, Culture and Society 5.] ISBN 3.8258.3956.7.

Between 1997 and 2002, at least 10,000 people have been killed and over a million displaced as a result of seven violent conflicts in Indonesia.[1] These violent clashes have been predominantly characterized as ethnic violence with complex and interrelated causes (Davidson and Kammen 2002; Davidson 2003; Bertrand 2004). Resource dynamics, regime change, political struggles, religion, and outside influences all seem to have played a role in these conflicts, although it remains difficult to assess the relative weight of

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[1] Clashes occurred in Aceh, Jakarta (anti-Chinese riots), West and Central Kalimantan (between Dayak and Madurese), Sulawesi (Christians and Muslims in Poso), Maluku (again between Christians and Muslims), East Timor, and Irian Jaya.

such factors. In Indonesia, violence on such a scale had not been seen since the previous regime change when Soeharto came to power in 1965. As, except for East Timor, Aceh, and Irian Jaya, no large-scale violence had taken place in Indonesia for over 30 years, for many inside and outside Indonesia the outbursts of violence came as a total surprise.

How do we explain the outbreaks of violence in different regions of Indonesia at the end of Soeharto's regime? Why did they happen at this particular moment in time, and why at so many places almost simultaneously? And why did they occur in certain regions with ethnic and religious diversity, and not in others? During the past five years, political scientists, historians, anthropologists and geographers have all dealt with these questions from their own disciplinary background. So far no one has been able to come up with a full and coherent explanation, and new studies are still appearing. The complexities of the conflicts probably require a more integrated and multidisciplinary explanation. But is such a 'total' explanation possible, or are the various different explanations mutually exclusive?

This review takes a closer look at three sets of explanations by looking into three recently published books: *Imagined difference; Hatred and the construction of identity*, a collection of papers edited by Günther Schlee; *Nationalism and ethnic conflict in Indonesia* by Jacques Bertrand; and *Violent environments* edited by Nancy Lee Peluso and Michael Watts. These books offer three different approaches to the study of violence in Indonesia: a cultural-symbolic approach, a socio-political institutional approach, and a resource-based political economy approach. In an attempt to test the analytical merits of each approach, I will apply them to one of the most puzzling violent conflicts in Indonesia, the violence between Dayak and Madurese in West and Central Kalimantan. (Schlee's book, I should add, does not explicitly refer to Kalimantan, but contains two pieces on Indonesia and deals with similar conflicts in other parts of the world.)

After a brief discussion of the conflict in West and Central Kalimantan and of the explanations given for it in existing literature, I will outline the theoretical approaches and interpretations of the books under review. Some details will also be given on the role of academics in the process of identity formation and institutionalization. In this connection a fourth and at first sight unrelated title, *Social science research and conservation management in the interior of Borneo*, has also been included in the review. This book is a collection of papers written mainly by Dayak authors, and edited by Cristina Eghenter, Bernard Sellato, and Simon Devung. What do it and our other three studies tell us about the causes, structure, and persistence of violence during the turbulent period from the end of the New Order to the restoration of democracy in Indonesia?

Ethnic violence in Kalimantan

The ethnic cleansing and mass killings of Madurese migrants in 1999 in Sambas, West Kalimantan, and in 2001 in Sampit, Central Kalimantan, shocked the world.[2] All of a sudden, it seemed, the original Dayak population was revolting against newcomers and reclaiming its ancestral lands. The display of severed Madurese heads in Western media, and the stories about Dayaks eating the hearts and livers of their enemies, stunned the international community.[3] In the early days of the 1999 'Sambas Incident', journalists and observers seeking quick explanations for this excessive violence turned to simplistic, exotic and orientalist observations about the Dayak, 'the once most feared tribe of headhunters in Southeast Asia', returning to old practices of headhunting and cannibalism.[4] Others mentioned the economic crisis as the immediate cause of the outburst.

Later, more nuanced explanations appeared. While some continued to talk in terms of raids by former 'headhunters' and 'savages' (CNN 1999b; *Jakarta Post* 2001; *New York Times* 1999), others looked to cultural controversies (ICG 2001) and political errors of the past (Colombijn 2002). Fingers were pointed at the forced migration of hundreds of thousands from densely populated Java, Bali and Madura to Kalimantan, and the lack of integration of the migrants into local society (Ave 2003; Dove 1997; HRW 1997); at the political heritage of repression under Soeharto's New Order (Davidson and Kammen 2002), and the political instability after his fall (Davidson 2003; Putra 1999); at a failing legal system and the likelihood of malicious political manipulation by Indonesian authorities (HRW 1997; ICG 2001; Schiller and Garang 2002); and at deeply rooted cultural and religious tensions (Schiller and Garang 2002). Van Klinken (2003:70) analysed the conflict in the context of decentralization, and blamed local ethnic elites 'who deflect democratization by stimulating ethnic conflict'. The arguments expressed in these studies remain rather fragmentary, and do not provide a comprehensive explanation. But taken together and in retrospect, they provide a pretty coherent explanation of the violence in West and Central Kalimantan, at least from the Dayak point of view. By comparison the Madurese perspective, so far, has been poorly represented in media reports and in research.

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[2]   In the 1996-1997 and 2001 clashes between Dayaks and Madurese in some districts (including Sambas and Sampit) of West and Central Kalimantan, an estimated 3,000 Madurese were killed and hundreds of thousands displaced. To date, many of the refugees have not been able to return.

[3]   See, for instance: Chandrasekaran 2001; CNN 1999a, 1999b; *New York Times* 1999.

[4]   See Linder 1999; CNN 1999b.

Three sets of explanations

According to Günther Schlee's introduction to *Imagined differences; Hatred and the construction of identity*, violence has too often been morally condemned, treated almost as a taboo in the social sciences, and studied only indirectly. This has prevented social scientists from developing a clear picture and from studying 'naked violence'. 'If we want to find out how, why and under which circumstances normal people, who are husbands, fathers, sons and lovers in other contexts, commit genocide, massacres and gang rapes, there is little we can learn from hearing for the umpteenth time that all these things are very bad. If anything, this wrapping in moralism reduces our direct analytical grip on the matter.' (p. 5.)

Conflict starts with the creation of difference, differences between people, ethnic groups, and religions, which are constantly created and in need of recreation. These differences, according to Schlee, are largely imagined. In some cases, for instance, units that were to become the 'ethnic group' of colonial and postcolonial times could not be described as such at all in pre-colonial days, when in certain areas there were simply 'no ethnic groups' (p. 7). Crucial in 'imagining difference' is the notion of identity and differences in identity, as it is shaped and 'remoulded' by people who 'want to make sense of their situation […] simply to fit the needs of their economic or social advancement' (p. 8).

Identity is also shaped by political movements that define different aggregates of people as the target of their policies, or who instrumentalize identifications for the organization of support. 'There is no end to the kaleidoscopic recombinations of features in this game of identity and difference' (p. 8). In this process of imagining difference, history is important: the linguistic, cultural and historical similarities with, and differences from, other groups are carefully traced. There are no roots of violence, but roots are grown in the process of identity construction. 'They grow their roots; roots grow from the present into the past. […] In a similar fashion it is the present societies which grow their roots by describing their links to real and faked, often quite plausible but selected past events [...].' (p. 9.)

To further illustrate the process of identity construction, Schlee uses the metaphor of a supermarket. 'History fills the shelves with its products: culture in all its forms and shapes, and ideology selects from these shelves whatever it needs'. The word 'imagined' in the title of the book reflects the arbitrariness of this process; 'the multiple and mutually contradictory forms the definitions of ethnic groups and nations can take' (p. 9) differ in each situation. Further on in the volume, Philip Quarles van Ufford gives another example of this arbitrariness, explaining in 'Murder in the Cathedral' the imagined violence around the replacement and death of a church leader in Java as 'just an accident'. Here the outbursts of violence are no longer seen

as the products of conscious and deliberate moves or schemes. Rather, what is suggested is a series of simultaneous collapses of established rules and regulations which rendered order illusory and violence uncontrollable (p. 96). Mark Hobart, who in the same volume analyses the construction and imagination of difference and peace ideology through a Balinese play, struggles with this arbitrariness of imagination. 'The difficulty', he concludes, 'is deciding in any instance how to determine when, and for whom, ethnicity, religion, class, economic or other motives is the "real" cause and when the idiom for something else' (p. 119).

When it comes to violence, the impunity of this imagination becomes painfully visible. Or, in the words of Schlee: 'the products of this imagination [...] are often not lofty dreams that fade after some time, but collective identities with their own historical dynamics and with expressions in real life, many of them violent. They may be dreamt up but they are difficult to dream away again' (p. 9). It is this harsh reality of violence we need to address and consciously value as a reminder. If we look at the example of the violence in West and Central Kalimantan, we cannot neglect the many 'imagined differences' between the fighting parties. Dayak identities indeed have been shaped and sharpened along ethnic, territorial and religious lines as opposed to newcomers such as Madurese. They have been constructed historically as well. 'Dayak' is a Dutch construction, designating a collection of ethnic groups scattered all over the interior of Borneo. It indicates distinctiveness from the Malay people who live predominately in the coastal zones. In a similar way, Madurese identity in contemporary Kalimantan has been constructed in contradistinction, and often antagonism, to local culture and traditions.

The arbitrariness of this process of the construction of difference lies in the fact that 'real' divisions between Malay and Dayak, Christians and Muslims, indigenous people and newcomers, are difficult to identify. Dayak people can be Muslim, many more Javanese than Madurese have moved to Kalimantan, and many Madurese have already lived in Kalimantan for over three generations. Nevertheless, the proliferation of opposing identities and the imagination of differences created a nightmare, which was more than an accident. An analysis of the processes of creating differences is useful in order to understand why the Madurese were targeted. Highly visible, marginalized in a similar way to the Dayak themselves, and religiously and culturally distinct, they were an easy target. However interesting and useful the analyses of Schlee, Quarles van Ufford and Hobart are in describing the construction of difference at the local level, they do not tell us why the violence happened, and why at this particular time.

Jacques Bertrand argues in his book *Nationalism and ethnic conflict in Indonesia* that ethnic violence in Indonesia in the late 1990s can largely be explained by analysing Indonesia's national model and its institutionaliza-

tion during the New Order of President Soeharto. The late 1990s constituted a 'critical juncture' in Indonesia's history, a juncture at which institutional transformation opened up possibilities for renegotiating elements of the national model: the role of Islam in political institutions, the relative importance of central and regional governments, the access and representation of ethnic groups in state institutions, and indeed the definition and meaning of the Indonesian nation itself. According to Bertrand, the causes of ethnic violence can be traced to the institutional context that defines and shapes ethnic identities, the official recognition of groups, their representation in state institutions, and their institutionalized access to resources. 'Ethnic identities become politicized and the potential for mobilization is heightened when groups feel threatened by the structure and principles embedded in political institutions. Most obviously, when groups are excluded from representation or the ability to pursue their interests within given institutions, they may become increasingly alienated from the state.' (p. 4.) The violence thus marked a period of renegotiation of national models and state institutions.

For this period of reshuffling existing power relations and state institutions, Bertrand uses the term 'critical juncture'. Indonesia's critical junctures were the periods in which Indonesia swayed between authoritarianism and democratization. In fact, nation-state development is cyclical. Periods of stable political institutions and ethnic relations are followed by periods of institutional reform accompanied by more ethnic violence. At the end of the juncture, a national model is reconfirmed or a new one adopted, and a different structure of political institutions reflects newly achieved gains and losses for ethnic groups in terms of inclusion and exclusion. The eruption of ethnic violence is an outgrowth of path-dependent choices regarding the national model and the institutions defining ethnic relations.

This interesting and comprehensive book offers an institutionalist analysis which explains two aspects of the eruption of violence: first, it shows how institutions have shaped ethnic identities in Indonesia's history, and second, it shows how the development of these identities is constrained by concepts of nation and by the national models that are implicit or explicit in the institutions. According to Bertrand, ethnic conflict is shaped and mediated by the institutional context in which it occurs. He addresses three interrelated institutional contexts which caused or triggered the violence: those of national or Jakarta-based elites, those of local elites, and those of groups nurturing local grievances against state policies. Access to resources, social exclusion, and religious sentiments all played a role. Among the factors that recur in all cases of violence in Indonesia are the use of terror by the state's armed forces, and the strong ideas of elites regarding the need for national unity. Secessionist movements are seen as the worst threat to the unity of the nation and the unity of the state.

Bertrand's study of the conflict in West and Central Kalimantan explains how this national model excluded some groups from an otherwise largely inclusive concept of the Indonesian nation. According to him, the conflict resulted from the marginalization of the Dayak within the Indonesian nation because of their status as a 'backward' group. 'Violent conflict is most likely to occur when groups feel threatened and have few peaceful instruments available to guarantee their survival' (p. 19). This would also apply to the Madurese position in Kalimantan. Violence can also occur when groups are included and their recognition acknowledged, but in terms that maintain them perpetually in the status of 'backward' group or 'second-class citizens'. Again this applies both to the Dayak and the Madurese position.

Bertrand's book is convincing and readable because it highlights many different causes and mechanisms of ethnic violence in Indonesia. Ultimately, he withdraws his initial argument that all can be explained by institutional change. The problem remains that his model fails to explain why violence did not occur in all areas in Indonesia where marginalized and neglected populations live, or why some national institutional changes form critical junctures triggering violence while others do not. Moreover, he fails to explain why other forms of violence continued to occur during the New Order, outside his 'critical junctures' (Hüsken and De Jonge 2002).

A third useful interpretation of the Kalimantan violence can be found in an excellent chapter by Peluso and Harwell in the book *Violent environments*, edited by Peluso and Watts. This chapter offers the reader a lengthy and complete picture of the context in which the conflicts in West Kalimantan should be placed. First the authors evaluate the role of the national government in the erasure of ethnic boundaries and the struggle for control over and exploitation of territory. New Order discourses of development, citizenship and identity were directly linked to control of, and changes in, access to both natural and state resources. According to Peluso and Harwell, the failure of these new forms of national territorialization explain the underlying conditions for violence, while the cultural politics of identity construction explain the specific direction of violence against Madurese.

If we take this political economy approach to explaining the conflict, one puzzle remains: Dayak culture and livelihoods seem more threatened by local Malays, by large companies, and by the influx of Javanese than by Madurese immigration. At the end of the chapter, the analysis therefore moves from territory and resource-related explanations to the specific nature of the acts of violence itself as well as their narration. Peluso and Harwell show that ways of 'narration within stories about collective identities polarized these divisions and helped bind exclusive [ethnic] communities more tightly through the perceived threat of imagined violent "others". In clashing, these images and identities helped ignite and maintain the [...] violence

at such a high level. […] Violent identities – both Dayak and Madurese – have been produced and reproduced over time, constituted and strengthened by participation in violence' (p. 109). And ultimately, 'although most Dayaks likely did not view the Madurese as a primary driving force in the changing political ecological landscape of West Kalimantan, they were viewed as being among the beneficiaries of these changes' (p. 114). Javanese, Chinese, and some Malays also benefited from the changes that took place during the New Order. 'Yet these latter groups were not seen as perpetrators of the disrespectful and dishonourable treatment of Dayak culture and identity associated with the Indonesian government (as an abstract entity) and the Madurese (as a local community). […] Ultimately tough, the most important explanation for "why the Madurese?" and not Chinese, Javanese, or Malays, is that Madurese were the only ones who committed purposeful violent acts against Dayaks' (pp. 114-5).

Finally, the weakening of the New Order's legitimacy enabled people to speak out about their frustrations and reconstruct a part of their community through violence. The loss of local authority and the failure of national authority 'were thus reshaped by local actors into a form unintended by the national policies that led to them: the collective self-authorization of one community to inflict violence against another' (p. 115). Peluso and Harwell have shown convincingly that there is more at stake here than cultural differences, ethnicity or religion. They probably would agree with Gilley (2004:1156), who recently suggested doing away with the concept of ethnic violence altogether: 'We better not speak too hastily of ethnic or religious conflicts and might choose to abandon the concept of ethnic violence altogether', since such qualifications might blur our view of the underlying, long lasting, complex tensions over resources, territory, power, and the state in Indonesia.

Explaining violence in Indonesia

The foregoing discussion once more makes clear that we cannot relate ethnic violence to single causes and processes. Neither can we understand conflicts by studying outside, national, and political dimensions, or solely by looking at the local dimensions of the conflict. An analysis of the institutional and political-economic dimensions such as provided by Bertrand and by Peluso and Watts, as well as inquiries into the local culture and conditions of the parties in the conflict, is absolutely essential in order to understand the practices of creating difference as described by Schlee. The players here are not limited to local people, strongmen, and policy makers, but can also include journalists and social scientists. The book *Social science research and conservation management in the interior of Borneo*, edited by Eghenter, Sellato, and Devung,

forms an interesting example of how social science itself can play a role in processes of making difference and constructing identity.

In this book Dayak livelihoods, property rights, oral history, and local ways of resource management are described and formalized in an attempt to protect Dayak culture and interests. The book is the result of a long period of cooperation between local, Dayak, and international conservationists and social scientists concerned with the study and protection of both natural environments and Dayak culture. The preface is illustrative. 'Translation of the rich cultural heritage of forest-dwelling communities into forms accessible to outsiders', it proclaims, 'would be a scientific, spiritual and aesthetic gift to the rest of the world. That gift would in turn give voice to the communities themselves, and broaden the constituency for protecting those communities from thoughtless disruption of the social and ecological systems that had generated such cultural riches' (p. xii). The book belongs to, and clearly illustrates, the revival of Dayak identity as described by Peluso and Harwell. It is in itself a sign of, and a tool in, the awakening of Dayak ethnic identity. There is a need for a similar book on Madurese culture, knowledge and livelihoods in Kalimantan. So far, Madurese voices, dreams, and points of view have hardly been heard.

Those who seek to understand the causes of violence in Indonesia or elsewhere may fail to find a new theory of violence, social identity and hostility in the volume edited by Schlee, as the explanatory value of cultural-symbolic approaches is not very strong. They will, however, find powerful and thought-provoking descriptions of the construction of difference and hatred which may offer insights into the structure, perpetuation, and constitution of violence in different parts of the world. 'What more can one expect', asks Schlee, 'in a field of knowledge where all attempts at a unified and all-embracing theory so far have been accused of one-sidedness and simplification and ultimately abandoned?' (p. 28). The volume convincingly shows that this one-sidedness can never be fully avoided. The volume edited by Eghenter, Sellato, and Devung is an illustration of this, and demonstrates the role which science itself can play in the construction of identities and difference.

What is needed now is a book which takes all three approaches into account. Maybe it is impossible to write such a book, given the virtual incompatibility of the cultural-symbolic approach with institutional and material views. And perhaps we may never fully grasp the impact and force of naked violence unless we have experienced it ourselves. Most interesting is the emotional aspect of violence as brought in by Schlee. His book reminds us that conflicts cannot fully be explained by their causes; one also needs to take into account their courses. Violence produces emotions and may mimic earlier violence caused by emotions: 'The conflict itself is the ground on which hatred is cultivated' (p. 28). Bertrand, and Peluso and Harwell too,

tell us how under conditions of marginalization, institutional change, and declining state legitimation, hatreds which are initially directed toward the state, or toward a range of foreign ethnic groups, can be redirected or concentrated against one particular ethnicity. From the Madurese point of view in Kalimantan, this concentration is probably best understood as a piece of very bad luck: the collateral damage of a regime change combined with a fierce battle to gain access to resources.

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