

ETHNICITY IN ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN INDONESIA

[Parsudi Suparlan]

Introduction

In this paper I want to show that ethnic and religious conflict is basically ethnic conflict arising out of resource competition between individuals of local ethnic communities and migrants of different ethnic categories. Such conflict is a product of interplay between individuals and groups competing for resources, with ethnicity emergent as social power. This interplay includes processes of ethnicity, i.e. activating and manipulating ethnicity as the means to attain power through group cohesion and solidarity, and the use of ethnicity in conflict for resource attainment in the defined structure of power of local level politics. In this view ethnicity is an individual phenomenon that emerges in social interaction, and it varies depending on the various kinds of interplay between individuals and groups with their natural and social environments (Suparlan 1995). This follows Barth (1969) that ethnicity increases when there is intense spatial-geographical and social contact between members of different groups, especially in relation to economic interests and resource competition. The case presented is from Indonesia, a plural society, where ethnicity is an idea and a realm, as it is ascriptive and primordial as well as social and political.

In this paper I also want to show that such conflict can be prevented before it erupts. The case presented is from Pangkalan Bun, the capital of Kotawaringin Barat, the south-western part of Central Kalimantan Province, during the 2001 ethnic conflict between the Dayaks and the Madurese*). I looked at the interplay between the individuals and the groups and their manipulation of their own ethnicity to interpret their

opponents' ethnicity during the heated conflict situations in other parts of Central Kalimantan. This had caused them to view themselves and their opponents as conflicting categories and led them to organize into groups ready for a war. Then I used a combined top-down and bottom-up approach to exercise pressure for a peace treaty between the Madurese and the local non-Madurese, with the consent of the local

government, the army, and the police authorities. At the same time I discussed with heads of all the local ethnic communities and groups, in individual and within in-group discussions to find out what their problems were and to stimulate them with a vision of an alternative way of living peacefully in terms of interethnic relations in Pangkalan Bun and Kotawaringin Barat.

The Background

In this paper ethnic group is seen as a category of ascription as "it classifies a person in terms of his basic, most general identity, presumptively by his origin and background" (Barth 1969). And, ethnic culture is treated as a blueprint for living, as sets of reference systems or cognitive and affective models at varying levels of senses and awareness. People make use of such models selectively, as they appeal to them, to generate meaningful interpretations of situations and things and to guide their actions in their environments, through their activities. Such actions may be seen as a drive to fulfill needs as well as responses to the defined structure of power of their environments. Culture and ethnic category are iterated as the reference systems of such interpretations and responses. This approach, then, takes into consideration the social power of the actors in comprehending their actions in the defined structure of power and in-

teractions. Religious belief is attached to an individual's ethnic identity or ethnicity and to the ethnic group. However, religiosity may crosscut the ethnic boundaries for those of the same religious persuasion of different ethnic groups. In this sense religiosity may strengthen or weaken one's ethnicity, depending on one's decision in responding to the defined structure of interethnic relations.

The Indonesian motto of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, or unity in diversity, reflects the actual reality of Indonesian society. Indonesia consists of about five hundred ethnic groups, each maintaining its own ethnic and cultural identity and claiming its own territory. Members of each ethnic group live in ethnic communities that are basically homogeneous with their own ethnic and cultural identities and territorial boundaries. In its homeland the local ethnic or indigenous culture is the dominant one, functioning as a set of reference systems to guide members of the community to everyday activities and in their way of perceiving the world around them of which they are a part. In the past only in the cities and urban centers could a mixture of different ethnic groups be found.

At present almost all parts of Indonesia are ethnically heterogeneous, as members of different ethnic groups live side by side in communities of local

ethnic groups. Thus interethnic relations have become more intensive than in the past, and this may bring problems of accommodating cultural differences between migrants and locals since most migrants to other ethnic communities are those with more advanced and aggressive economic cultures. Then, the problems faced by the hosts and the migrants are centered on competition for resources. Levels of being economically aggressive are critical in resource competition, as the locals see migrants as their guests, who should defer to local traditional rules or customs (adat). Rules governing behavior between hosts and guests imply that guests should conform to the hosts' rules of conduct. The saying, known all over Indonesia, "dimana bumi dipijak langit dijunjung" (wherever you live, you should honor the local customs), is the reference for establishing harmonious interethnic relations between migrants and locals in the view of the locals. When the migrants violate the rules the hosts may indirectly tell the migrants to behave themselves. When time after time violations occur the hosts

will chase the migrants out of their ethnic territory through violence, a total bloody ethnic war. This is because the violations by the migrants are seen by the local communities as efforts to dominate their lives.

The Conflict

From cases of Sambas of West Kalimantan (Suparlan 2000a), and Ambon in 1999 (Suparlan 2001), the lesson learned was that interethnic conflicts were started by the acts of thugs and criminals to win local resources through violent acts**. The locals learned that such acts, then, expanded from economic to social and political domination. Members of the local ethnic communities, who in the past were dominant, became minorities in their own traditional territories, defeated in resource competition as migrants organized themselves based on ethnicity, while the locals were loosely organized ethnically. The locals learned from their experience that ethnicity was useful in resource competition. Prior to the bloody ethnic conflicts of Sambas and Ambon, tensions between hosts and migrants



were expressed in the avoidance of social relationships or in separate incidences of fights between individuals and groups of hosts and migrants. When a group of Madurese came to reside in a Malay neighborhood in Sambas, the Malay community avoided contact with them. And, if a dispute occurred between a Malay and a Madurese, the Malay would rather defer to the Madurese to avoid being stabbed and wounded or killed by the Madurese. The Malays believed that the Madurese solved all disputes using daggers. I met with some well-to-do families who lived in Pontianak, the capital of West Kalimantan province, and they had decided to move out of Tebas, a small town of Sambas municipality, out of fear of the Madurese.

If the Malays kept deferring to and escaping from the Madurese, the Christian Ambonese in Ambon reacted openly to the Muslim South Sulawesi thugs and criminals who dominated the markets and public places. Individual fights between Ambonese and the Buginese, Butonese, and Makassarese of South Sulawesi were not uncommon. The Ambonese were known as fighters and their cultural tradition was one of tribal warfare (Bartels 1977), while the South Sulawesi peoples were also known for solving disputes using knives or daggers.

Both the Sambas and Ambon conflicts were started by migrant thugs and criminals. The violent acts by the

natives in both places can be seen as efforts to free them from being dominated and exploited and from being losers in their own traditional homeland. In the case of Sambas, ethnicity was the main reference for this conflict, as both the Malays and the Madurese are Muslims. In Ambon the ethnic conflict had shifted to religious conflict. Apparently when the Christian Ambonese attacked the Buginese, Butonese, and Macassarese who were just out of the Idul Fitri mass prayer from the Al Fatah mosque of Ambon, their act was seen by the Muslims as an attack by the Christians toward them. This easily shifted from an ethnic to a religious issue, leading to religious mobilization that included Muslims of various ethnic groups against Christian Ambonese.

The Pangkalan Bun Peace Agreement

Central Kalimantan province was inflamed by bloody ethnic conflict between the Dayaks and the Madurese from February 20 to the end of May 2001. This bloody conflict was the end of a period of domination by the Madurese, mostly by thugs and criminals, in economic, social and political spheres. The anger of the Dayaks exploded into war with the Madurese when the Madurese in Sampit, an important business town and the capital of Kotawaringin Timur municipality, claimed that Sampit is their Madurese

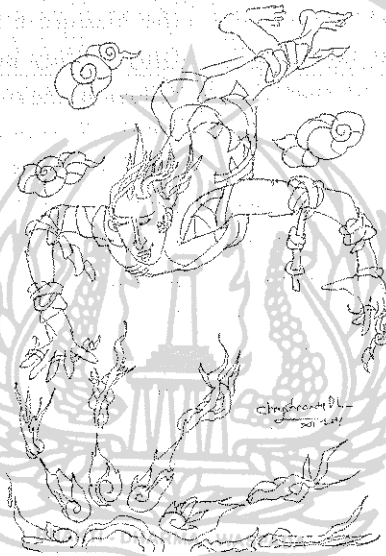
town and named this town as Sampang the Second (Sampang is the name of a town in Madura island). The Dayaks launched attacks on February 20th and after a about a week of fighting the Madurese in the town and its surrounding areas were defeated. The victory over the Madurese in Sampit stimulated the Dayaks of other towns and villages to attack the Madurese, to kill or chase them away from their homes and burn or destroy their property. Most of the Madurese who escaped from being killed took refuge in the police and army barracks and in the local municipal office building or escaped by boats and ships to Java, Madura, and Banjarmasin (the capital of South Kalimantan province).

The only municipality not yet disrupted by the Dayak-Madurese conflict at that time was Kotawaringin Barat and its capital Pangkalan Bun. The police and the army guarded the municipal boundaries to prevent intruders from other municipalities from entering Pangkalan Bun to provoke the Dayak to have war with the Madurese. When the team I led came to Pangkalan

Bun on March 21, the situation of the town was calm but tense as about one third of the Madurese had already fled the area while the remaining were ready for war against the Dayaks, the Malays, and the Banjarese. The police report revealed that some Madurese stored bombs in their houses and a few also owned guns. The same was also the case with the Dayaks, the Malays, and the Banjarese.

In my meeting with heads of the local government (i.e., head of the municipality, the local parliament heads, the local army commander and the local police head) we discussed the possibility of interethnic conflict destroying everything in the municipality. I

offered to act as a mediator between the two conflicting groups, and asked their advice. As an anthropology professor of a prestigious university and head of a team assigned by the Indonesian police chief to investigate the interethnic conflict of Central Kalimantan I gained their confidence and also that of the leaders of the conflicting ethnic groups. The team and I went to visit the ethnic leaders' houses to discuss their problems and talked to their neighbors who were



of the same ethnicity. Then, with the consent of and facilitated by the local government, the team had several meetings with the conflicting ethnic groups separately. In the meeting with Madurese, who were leaders of IKAMA or the Association of the Madurese Family, they admitted that there were some Madurese criminals who did harmful things to the non Madurese in Pangkalan Bun and in its surrounding areas. They also admitted that they protected these Madurese criminals because they did not have any other alternatives but to protect them or else the criminals and their gangs would kill them. They said that it was a Madurese custom to protect family members who are in trouble with the law. Finally, these Madurese IKAMA leaders said they would submit their predicament to the Team, and that they would do anything to avoid bloody conflict with other ethnic groups in Pangkalan Bun and in Kotawarin Barat municipality.

In a separate meeting with all ethnic leaders of Kotawaringin Barat, they all cursed the Madurese as insolent and violent, and called them criminals. I let them express their frustrations and anger toward the Madurese. They all wanted to go to war with the Madurese, to kill and chase them away from Pangkalan Bun and Kotawaringin Barat. After there was no more to say about the Madurese, I asked them if they would

rather have war with the consequence of losing everything they owned including their family members' and their own lives? Or would they like to live peacefully side by side with the Madurese with nothing to fear? Some said they would rather have war because the Madurese had caused them economic and social losses, and more importantly the Madurese had dishonored them. Only if they behaved themselves by following the rule "*dimana bumi dipijak langit dijunjung*", would they accept them as fellow neighbors or even as brothers or sisters.

I explored their last remarks by asking them what kind of proper behavior in their opinion would be in accordance with "*dimana bumi dipijak langit dijunjung*?" After some discussion I asked them to write the rules of conduct that the Madurese through IKAMA should conform to. I gave them four hours to discuss among themselves and to write the rules down, then they gave them to me at 7:00 pm at the police headquarters. I reported the results of the meetings with both conflicting groups to the local government heads. At 7:00 pm the written set of rules of conduct for the Madurese to live in peaceful interethnic relations in Pangkalan Bun and its surrounding areas was submitted by a team of Dayak, Malay, and Banjarese leaders in the presence of the local government

leaders. We discussed the contents, and as they were reasonable to us, nothing was changed. The following day, on March 26, 2001, we invited ten Madurese leaders of IKAMA to come to the police headquarters to learn about the written rules of conduct for the Madurese. They all agreed with its contents, signed it as a peace agreement, and promised to inform the Madurese of Pangkalan Bun and its surrounding areas that they all should follow these rules. The Madurese leaders also promised to read the rules of conduct and to swear to them publicly the next week in front of the local government heads at a public meeting in front of the municipal building. After the Madurese leaders signed the rules of conduct the local Dayak leaders refused to succumb to the pressures from Dayaks in other communities to fight the Madurese. The town of Pangkalan Bun and Kotawaringin Barat municipality were the only places in Central Kalimantan where there was no bloody ethnic conflict.

Conclusions

I would like to conclude this paper with a brief optimistic view that bloody ethnic conflict can be prevented before it explodes. This needs some prerequisites, which include a sound methodology in understanding the nature of interethnic relations and ethnicity

in local settings, the ability to measure and hypothesize a certain level of heated economic, social, and political situations of the local community caused by unfair domination by certain ethnic groups upon the other(s), to bring about the will of the local government heads to think and act seriously to prevent the emergence of bloody ethnic conflict. The use of a combined top-down and bottom up approach in bringing the conflicting members of ethnic groups to think and to interpret their positions in the world around them is important, a world of the defined structure of power of interethnic relations. And finally, the mediator should be socially well-respected and impartial and be able to indirectly exercise his power through personal relations.

*) I was assigned by the Office of Indonesian Police Chief to lead a team of scholars and senior police officers to carry out a research on the bloody ethnic conflict of Central Kalimantan, from March 15 to March 31, 2001. The Draft Report is still being processed.

**) A lengthy discussion on the nature of ethnic and religious conflict in Indonesia can also be found in Suparlan (2000b)

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