

Escalating Socio-Environmental Stress and the Preconditions for Political Instability in South Seram: The Very Special Case of the Nuauulu¹

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Abstract

Nuauulu currently number around 2000 and are predominantly animist. Despite gradual conversion to Islam and Christianity over a period of 300 years, recent acceleration in conversion, and an ancient traditional alliance with the Muslim *kerajaan* of Sepa, Nuauulu have retained a robust independent identity. In the context of the recent civil disturbance in Maluku their position deserves special consideration. The paper examines the common socio-environmental

¹The data reported here are the cumulative outcome of various periods of fieldwork conducted between 1969 and 1996. Completion of the paper has been supported by ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) grant R000 23 9310, for work on “Frequency and periodicity in Nuauulu ritual reproduction, eastern Indonesia”. On all occasions it has been sponsored by the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI: Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia) and latterly also by Pattimura University Ambon. Special thanks are due to Rosemary Bolton of the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Ambon for keeping me informed on developing events from 1997 onwards. As ever, I am grateful to numerous Nuauulu friends and acquaintances. Additional data are derived from a videotaped Masiriku interview with Paulus Matoke made in Waraka in 2000, and from various email reports of the Crisis Center of the Catholic Diocese of Amboina. Most of what I have to say here for the period up to 1996 has been previously published in some form by me. Interpretation of events since 1999 is based on selective and indirect reports, and on a one-month visit during August 2003. In connection with this last I am grateful to Professor Robert Osaer and Dr. Hermien Soselisa for their efforts in arranging for special permission to enter Maluku.

modalities of contemporary conflict in south Seram related to immigration, resource extraction and *Reformasi*, and tries to explain the process of escalation in the conditions for instability, and how Nuaulu have responded to and managed both underlying resource management problems and the associated communal violence.

1 Introduction

The largely animist Nuaulu of central Seram are placed by the Indonesian government in the official category *suku terasing* or (more recently) *masyarakat terasing*, which encompasses various remote and less developed groups for which special administrative provision is made (Persoon, 1998). In 2003 they numbered something more than 2000 individuals. Before the last few decades of the nineteenth century, they had lived in dispersed clan-hamlets throughout the central highlands, particularly along the valley of the river Nua, from which they derive their name. Between about 1880 and 1980 they lived mainly in the vicinity of Sepa on the south coast, in what is now the Amahai *kecamatan*. They have maintained a special relationship of alliance with the raja of Sepa since at least the late seventeenth century, at a time when they were both aligned in opposition to the forces of the Dutch East India Company, Tamilou and the Christian Sepanese. Nuaulu have, therefore, never been completely disengaged from regional and world history. Indeed, this long history of independent existence and interaction has made Nuaulu ultra-sensitive to questions of identity vis-à-vis other cultural groups, even though that identity has not always been reflected in any degree of permanent political centralization (Ellen, 1988). However, from approximately 1980 onwards they have been subject to increasing external pressures linked to the market, forest extraction, transmigration, and state social policy directed at “remote” peoples. The political instability in Maluku between 1999 and 2003 has been partly the consequence of escalating pressures on the population of Seram as a whole, regardless of ethnicity, but in this paper I wish to ex-

amine the particular way in which these pressures have impacted on the Nuauulu. In particular, I attempt to show how it is difficult to separate environmental factors from the way they socially present themselves; how the particular features of the Nuauulu way of life have been influenced by such pressures; and how a repertoire of traditional cultural responses have provided a means of coping with them.

2 1880–1980: Absorption within colonial and post-colonial dispensations

By the eighth decade of the nineteenth century the government of the Dutch East Indies was finally able to effectively, and formally, bring the peripheral areas of Seram into the wider administrative system. To a large extent this transition was symbolized by their ability to control head taking activity. Much of what we know of this period in the published literature relates to West Seram where the Dutch were faced with the particularly intractable problem posed by the so-called *kakean* society, an initiation cult which served as the basis for organized resistance. However, the authorities also faced problems in central Seram, with the military garrison in Wahai not being withdrawn until 1917 (Ellen, 2002). In the Sepa area, we know that around 1880 Nuauulu clans were finally persuaded by the authorities, and convinced themselves, that they should re-locate and concentrate in a single area near the coast, under the protection of the *raja* of that domain. From a purely administrative point-of-view, the problem which the colonial government faced with groups such as the Nuauulu was the political autonomy maintained by individual clans, the devolved, distributed and diffuse character of social organization which accompanied this, the widely separated tiny hamlets in remote and inaccessible upland locations, and clan land claims over a formidably wide swathe of central Seram. As we shall see, the centralist and authoritarian policies of the Dutch colonial period and those of the Indonesian New Order regime, between them, for the best part of

100 years disconnected Nuaulu from any realistic expectation that they might have of claiming these lands. *Reformasi*, however, has, by contrast, and somewhat paradoxically, raised unrealistic expectations of returning to some *status quo ante*.

Formal incorporation into the Dutch colonial system required that the set of spatial identities, traditional alliances and patterns of settlement outlined above be modified and regularized“ (Ellen, 1988, pp. 118–9), both for bureaucratic convenience and in order to provide the Nuaulu themselves with an effective channel of political communication. It is not, therefore, surprising, that at this time—the 1880s—when Nuaulu clans were relocating around Sepa, and when Sepa was, in Dutch eyes, becoming administratively responsible for Nuaulu *rust, orde en belasting* (peace, order and taxes), that there emerges a line of Nuaulu rajas, themselves subject to the Raja of Sepa (Ellen, 2002, p. 296, n. 7). By concentrating settlement, and centralizing and personalizing the terms of the linkage between Nuaulu and Sepa, the relationship became more hierarchical. Clans began to lose some of their autonomy, even though the line of rajas effectively terminated after only a few generations. Environmental and social distinctions which had hitherto been implicit became underscored by administrative fiat. Nuaulu movement to the coast meant not only a shift from a pattern of dispersed clan-hamlets to concentrated multi-clan villages, but also from dispersed long fallow swiddens to extensive contiguous areas of garden land. This, in turn, led to a reconceptualization of the forest: village (house) boundary, contrasting owned land with unowned forest, and gardens with uncleared forest (*wesie*—in which the first distinction is juridical, and the second technical). The changes in Nuaulu social relations of land use which accompanied this (Ellen, 1993b, Ellen, 1999)—land sale, cash-cropping, individualization of land ownership, permanent occupancy—altered still further their engagement with the natural world. During the twentieth century there has been renewed clearance of forest on Seram as a whole, for clove, nutmeg and other tree crops, such as coconut, cacao and coffee.

Despite these radical changes in the material and social conditions of their identity, Nuaulu have continued an essentially highland, interior-oriented, way of life down to the present, relying wherever possible on historic zones of extraction. In the eyes of official agents of the present Indonesian government and other coastal peoples, and in terms of their own self-definition, they have never ceased being uplanders and people of the forests. Indeed, the patterns of ecological change which have accompanied Nuaulu interaction with the rainforest cannot be understood properly except in relation to the history of contact (direct and indirect) between the forest peoples of Seram and various groups of outsiders: the rulers and subjects of various traditional coastal polities; the Dutch East India Company, its heirs and successors; various agencies of the colonial Dutch government, and thereafter of the government of an independent Indonesia (local district officers, police, military, and the personnel of assorted provincial level departments); and finally traders and settlers of diverse ethnic origins, but predominantly Chinese, Butonese and Ambonese.

3 Nuaulu responses to intrusion, 1970–1990

The 1970s and 1980s saw the acceleration and convergence of five major forces of economic and environmental change in the Amahai sub-district generally, all of which impacted greatly on the Nuaulu way of life. These were expansion of market participation and cash-cropping, logging, road-building, in-migration and population growth, none of which were independent variables and all of which represent factors which might be grouped in other ways.

3.1 Cash cropping

Nuaulu appear to have acquired most of their exchange goods prior to resettlement on the coast through the barter or sale of what we would now describe as non timber forest products: resins, rattans, bushmeat, live birds, and the like. However, it is likely that Nuaulu spontaneously became involved in the cash-cropping of coconuts

(for copra) and then, progressively, clove production from 1900 onwards. These means of earning exchange credit had (almost entirely) replaced various forms of forest extraction by the 1970s, and had become the main instruments for integrating Nuaulu into the market economy. The process was accelerated through various government projects, usually linked to Nuaulu status as *suku-* or *masyarakat terasing*, designed to integrate them into the cultural and social mainstream. From 1970 through to 1990, the government encouraged cash-cropping initiatives, variously described as *kebun sosial*, *kebun pemerintah*, or *dusun negeri* partly through incentives such as gifts of tools and seed, and partly through coercion linked to an ideology of development (*pembangunan*) implemented through the Department of Social Affairs and the office of the local *camat*.

3.2 Logging

The extraction of timber and wood milling had been established on a small scale during the colonial period, but until the 1980s eastern islands such as Seram with their hilly forest, deep gullies, limestone substrate and low density of commercially important tree species had been spared significant levels of extraction. The depletion of more desirable, and accessible forest resources further west during the seventies/1970s, made the forests of Seram more attractive, especially in the light of government policy of developing plywood and pulp factories near to zones of extraction (Ellen, 1997). By 1981, commercial logging had been initiated in the coastal Nuaulu area between Rouhua and Tamilou with the establishment of a lumber camp employing Filipino labor. This was first viewed benignly by local people (Ellen, 1993b), since it provided new routes into the forest, improved hunting and opportunities for exchange, but it later came to be seen as a major ecological threat. Logging had, by 1987, become a particularly serious threat in the area where the Manusela National Park meets the Samal transmigration zone. Here and elsewhere, so-called 'selec-

tive' logging of *Shorea selanica* led to water shortages, gully erosion and soil compaction, and undermined existing forest ecology, resulting in more open canopy structures, *Macaranga* dominance, a greater proportion of dead wood, and herbaceous and *Imperata* invasions. In terms of fauna, there has been an obvious reduction in game animals. Logging continued in the Sepa and Tamilou areas throughout the 1990s, often involving small concessions, but each one bringing with it new unpaved logging roads through the forest and heavy local timber depletion (Ellen, 1997).

3.3 Road-building

Perhaps the most significant facilitating factor in all of this, especially after 1980, was a major road-building program, resulting in numerous multiplier effects. Paved roads were completed which at last connected, and allowed for rapid transport between all coastal villages and the administrative centers of Amahai and Masohi, including Nuaulu settlements, and with the extension of the road to Hatusua, for quick ferry connection with Ambon. In addition, a spur from the southern coastal road, the so-called "Trans-Seram Highway", provided a link across the central mountain range to the north coast settlement of Sawai. Not only have the roads provided the Nuaulu with access to markets, but they also provided rapid access to their traditional resources, most importantly sago reserves along the Ruatan river and to a large area of forest right up against the central mountain divide. While Nuaulu have been the beneficiaries of new forms of rapid transport, few have had sufficient capital to profit from controlling the means of transport. During the early eighties one person in Watane owned a truck, but this had broken down by the time of my field visit to the area in 1986. Other attempts to purchase vehicles since then have also been abortive.

3.4 Transmigration

With the roads came the development of an extensive transmigration zone along the lower course of the Ruatan. Indeed, the impetus for the roads was in large part due to this. Road building and the opening-up of hitherto inaccessible land for settlement permitted a large influx of transmigrants from other parts of Maluku, both government-assisted and spontaneous. Sepa, in particular, began to grow much larger from the mid-1980s, and some Nuaulu villages (Rouhua, Watane, Bunara) absorbed significant numbers of mainly immigrant Butonese from southeast Sulawesi to whom they were under pressure to rent, lease, or sell land. The rate of forest transformation due to logging and conversion to plantation crops accelerated as a result of both improved road access, and the needs of transmigrants. Forest was removed through unplanned slash and burn cultivation by non-indigenous pioneer settlers, and through the expansion of transmigration settlements into surrounding areas. There is no doubt that rapid forest clearance of this kind caused environmental damage, and that long-standing swiddening practices (which though modifying the forest, increased its genetic diversity and usefulness, and permitted extraction on a sustainable basis) were eroded through technological innovation, population pressure and market forces.

One, certainly unpredicted and unintended, consequence of the new roads and transmigration development, was that Nuaulu clans which had been located on the south coast within the domain of Sepa since the 1880s, began to move, with government encouragement, to inland settlements in the Ruatan transmigration zone (to begin with, at Simalouw). The pressure of immigration led Nuaulu to move to other settlements too. The settlement of Aihisuru was completely evacuated and relocated at Simalouw (Kilo Sembilan), and the settlement of Watane (Niamonai or Nuaulu Lama) substantially so. Some clans moved away from Sepa altogether, though interestingly the new sites were technically within the estimated but never properly measured inland borders of the

Sepa *desa*. The reasons for this were to be nearer sago resources, both for their own use and to protect them, and to take advantage of government incentives, such as the P.T. Hasil Bumi Indonesia gift of transmigration zone houses at Sokonana (*Proyek Solala*) in return for Nuaulu ceding a large amount of land.

Roads and transmigration, therefore, brought Nuaulu closer to lands which they had inhabited before the 1880s, and over which they still exercised claims (Ellen, 1993b, Ellen, 1999). Indeed, the transmigration zone abutted sago swamps long utilized by Nuaulu. Although Nuaulu had been located around Sepa for the best part of one hundred years, and subject to the tutelage of its raja, their self-image and the image of them held by non-Nuaulu, had never—as we have seen—been other than as inlanders and uplanders. Although by 1990 only the villages of Watane and Aihisuru had moved permanently from their earlier locations on the south coast (about a quarter to one-third of all Nuaulu households), many Nuaulu established temporary dwellings, used the improved transport facilities to reach ancestral sago areas, and began to cut land for cash crop plantations. Moreover, two clans (*Matoke-hanaie* and *Sounaue-ainakahata*) moved even further inland, out of the original transmigration zone altogether to a place called Tahena Ukuna, and yet another (Numanaeta) as far as the north coast. Many Nuaulu saw these shifts as a return to traditional land, and for outsiders it confirmed Nuaulu status as inland forest peoples rather than lowland and coastal.

3.5 Population growth

During the period covered by my own fieldwork, the animist Nuaulu population has continued to grow dramatically: from 496 in 1971 to over 2000 in 2003 (Ellen, 1997, pp. 1288–9). By comparison, the population of the entire *kecamatan* of Amahai grew from 18,538 in 1971 to 61,183 in 2001. This has caused greater pressure on existing land, intensified by competition along the south Seram littoral with people from indigenous non-Nuaulu villages,

and due to unplanned immigration, mainly of Butonese. Growth along the south coast has, of course, been facilitated by the extension of a paved road during the early 1980s.

4 Increasing pressure on resources and conflict, 1990–1999

The development of cash-cropping and integration into the market had long been conducive to limited sale of land by Nuaulu, but this was generally exceptional and strictly contrary to *adat* up until the 1980s. Logging and mass immigration, however, put greater pressure on Nuaulu to sell land. As I have argued elsewhere (Ellen, 1993b), this created a rarely reported situation in which an indigenous forest people appeared to be endorsing further forest destruction by themselves and by others, for short-term gain. Nuaulu cash incomes certainly increased through sale of land and trade with immigrants. This permissive attitude on behalf of the state was reflected further in a successfully defended land claim in the courts at Masohi, the capital of Kabupaten Maluku Tengah. Nuaulu also ceded land in the Ruatan valley in exchange for cash, houses in the transmigration zone, and other privileges. With the relocation of clans from Aihisuru and Watane to Simalouw, much Nuaulu land around these villages had already been sold to people from Sepa, especially Butonese immigrants.

However, as the eighties 1980s progressed and the changes began to accelerate, so there was an increase in conflict over land rights, disenchantment with the effects of logging, and later, since 1990, serious confrontation with settlers. Conflicting claims on land and forest, between migrants and indigenous people, between Nuaulu and other autochthonous villages, and between different Nuaulu clans raised the level of litigation, violence and general aggravation. Conflict over land, of course, had always been present, but up until the eighties 1980s had been managed and suppressed by invoking the principle of amity which underwrote the Sepa-Nuaulu alliance. When violence did occur, it was generally assumed to relate to disputes between Nuaulu and a traditional en-

emy, such as Tamilou, such as I witnessed in Bunara in 1981. But in February 1990, during a short field visit, there was tension between Sepa and Rouhua Nuaulu over land, and other Nuaulu were in litigation over land sold to the government at Kilo Duabelas, only this time it was Nuaulu being prosecuted as a result of an attempt to re-sell land which had already been sold to the government. On this occasion the Nuaulu defendants lost the case. These events marked the further escalation in both the sale of land and of increased conflict over land up to and including the time of a subsequent visit in 1996.

Moreover, government tolerance of Nuaulu claims to “dual” ownership (that is, with the state), was diminishing. Having successfully defended some land claims in the courts, Nuaulu were now, in their representations to outsiders, becoming more articulate about the damage done to their environment. In order to protect their own way of life, Nuaulu found themselves adopting the discourse of officialdom and national politics, responding to agendas dictated by the state: they began, for example, to adopt a recognizably “environmentalist” rhetoric. Part of the explanation for this is that the older, local, forms of knowledge underpinning subsistence strategies were qualitatively different from knowledge of macro-level processes—“environmental consciousness” in the abstract—which only came with a widening of political and ecological horizons. The rapidity of environmental change forced the Nuaulu to redefine their relationship with the natural world, to see connections between microclimatic change, deforestation and erosion, and game depletion; and between land clearance, river flow, compaction caused by logging vehicles, and fish depletion. Nuaulu now identified their forest as a whole as a commodity, something with exchange value, when previously it was inalienable.

The climactic moment of the process reported here, that is the escalation in resource based conflict linked to in-migration, came well before the eruption of communal conflict on a regional scale in 1999. In the pre-1999 period, that is before the eruption of communal conflict on a regional scale, the climactic moment of

the process reported here, of escalation in resource based conflict linked to immigration, was iIn October 1992, when there was a serious altercation with settlers that resulting resulted in convictions for murder of two Saparuan transmigrants being brought against three residents of Rouhua. Although tension over land continued after these events, the events themselves were so momentous in the lives of Nuaulu and non-Nuaulu alike, and in the context of this narrative, so iconic, that regardless of the details of chronology it makes some sense to examine them as the penultimate chapter in the story to date. This incident was widely reported in the local press, which made much of the manner of death (decapitation), and the use of the heads for burial near a *rumah adat* in the village. The episode has understandably been viewed by some government officials and other observers as a reversion to head hunting, or confirmation that it had never ceased, though the protagonists themselves strenuously deny such interpretations. Media coverage and the court case which followed in some ways confirmed the prejudices of non-Nuaulu in the Moluccas about Nuaulu ritual practices.

The immediate context of the killings was a land dispute which had been going on for several years in the area of the Yoko valley, a tributary of the Ruatan and an area claimed by the clan Soumori. On October 15, 1992 three Nuaulu were hunting near the settlement of Simalouw along the Yoko valley, where they encountered the two Saparuan transmigrants, from the Makariki transmigration block near the old Soumori settlement site of Atanopu, and where the latter were clearing land, apparently without permission. The three stood trial for murder on February 3, 1993 in Masohi, and the case lasted until well into March, ending in conviction and sentences of a term of six years imprisonment. I have argued elsewhere (Ellen, 2002) that although outsiders perceived this as a “reversion” to headhunting, the playing out of some cultural essentialism which had been lying dormant for several generations, it would be quite erroneous to explain these events in terms of an unbroken tradition of taking heads. Much of the context and

meanings associated with the old tradition no longer apply, though features of the behavior might be said to have arisen through some “cultural default model” coming into play in a time of extreme social anxiety. In the same way that sorcery accusations have been argued to reflect tensions in times of rapid social change and uncertainty, serious head-taking behavior can be seen as what Max Marwick (Marwick, 1970) called a “social strain gauge”. If sorcery accusations serve to indicate a rising trend of tension, and in the Nuaulu case (Ellen, 1993a) a medium through which to log, contain, and sometimes resolve fear, anger and anxiety, then even the one-off taking of heads points to a new level of critical escalation. But in the Nuaulu case the intervention of the state criminal justice apparatus effectively put a break on further violence, and Nuaulu reverted to quiescence.

The 1992 events reinforced a particularly pejorative local Ambonese stereotype of interior peoples as Alifuru, or “savages”, and have made it easier for some government agents to explicitly expropriate territory when the occasion arises. Such labeling is part of the discourse of ethnic identity more widely shared in generic elite and popular Indonesian representations of the “ethnic other” (Pannell, 1992). And the head-taking episode is significant in Nuaulu representations of themselves, because an attempt to defend legitimate interests resulted in defeat. The rugged independence and assertiveness so typical of the seventies 1970s and eighties 1980s had been—it would seem—replaced by a new passivity. As Saete puts it (Ellen, 1999, appendix), “we are quiet and obeying them”. But this was before *Reformasi*.

5 Conversion histories, religious and secular

The same factors impacting on the Nuaulu, of course, also impacted on other long-term residents of the Amahai *kecamatan*, and in the Sepa *desa* in particular. There was increased cash-cropping, and particularly a growing dependence on one crop, clove, which by the late eighties was no longer fetching good prices. There

were the effects of logging and road building. In the slipstream of logging came other industrial developments. A cement factory established at Tehoru on nearby Teluti Bay led to much population displacement and ecological despoilment, and in 1996 a prawn processing factory was built on Tanjong Kuako, abutting Amahai harbor. Most of the transmigration zone along the Ruatan was carved out of land technically within the jurisdiction of Sepa, and there was heavy immigration and strip settlement along the upgraded south coast road. The government had also moved an entire *kecamatan* from its homeland on the small islands of Teon, Nila and Serua (TNS) in the southwest Moluccas and planted it on the north shore of Elpaputih Bay.

The major difference between the Nuaulu and most of the inhabitants of Sepa and, indeed, of the rest of the *kecamatan*, has always been Nuaulu status as animists, their exclusive adherence to *adat*, and their unofficial and nowadays somewhat misleading designation as *Orang Hindu*. This last term goes back to the colonial period, and in the context of the doctrine of *Pancasila* has on a few occasions been used to include Nuaulu within the five streams of the religiously acceptable (Ellen, 1988, Persoon, 1998, p. 293). The Nuaulu have adhered to a traditional animist way of life longer than almost all other Moluccans. Though there are other small groups of animists on mainland Seram, none are as large. They have in this respect become almost totemic, and respected as older brothers by local Christians and Muslims. This survival has been possible only through a certain degree of cultural accommodation and resilience, but also—since 1970—through the serendipity of demography. The conversion rate to both Islam and Christianity has tended to be much less than the replacement rate of animists, and so the animist population has continued to grow. Although as a proportion of the total population, of both the *kecamatan* and the island of Seram, conversion is much less than it was 50 years ago, the absolute size of the population has quadrupled since 1970.

As in many situations where ethnic and religious conflict appears to be intractable, the Nuaulu perceptions of their own “reli-

gious identity” and their historic loyalties with other groups, is set within the knowledge of events which took place many years before. The formative events in this case took place some 350 years ago, and are still reflected in their sung verse (*kapata*) and oral history, the knowledge of which can still be used to rhetorical effect. We know that up to 1690, 80 percent of the population of Sepa had been animist, though from the mid-seventeenth century onwards Sepa and Tamilou were being converted to Islam by a Muslim saint from Hila. We know that at this time also Tamilou was one of the traditional enemies of the Nuaulu, who subjected the former to periodic head taking raids. Nuaulu were in alliance with Besi, which had been converted to Islam by Hasan Suleiman from Hitu. Sepa and Nuaulu were in alliance against Tamilou. In response to a VOC *hong*i (punitive raid) to contain Sepanese threats to the Dutch clove monopoly and to Christianize them, Nuaulu (under the leadership of Laulisa) sided with the Muslim and animist factions against the few Christian Sepanese. In the context of contemporary events, this history is still seen as relevant by some, and one is reminded of Van Klinken’s remarks (Klinken, 2001, p. 24) about the Raja of Protestant Porto on Saparua who was inclined to explain contemporary enmity in terms of memories of ‘Muslim treachery’ during the Iha war of 1632–1651. At the very least, such collective memories make explicable the potency of the historical alliance between the (Muslim) raja of Sepa and the Nuaulu, and underpin to some extent the recent actions flowing from such loyalties.

We do not know how many Nuaulu converted to Islam between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, but we might assume that there was a steady trickle rather than mass, episodic, conversion. Over the last 50 years, conversions have been sufficiently few to be well remembered and discussed. The eldest son of Komisi, the headman of Rouhua and *ia onate* (head) of the clan Soumori, converted to Islam in the sixties, became a religious teacher and built a house in Rouhua. He subsequently became head of the Islamic school in Sepa, where he now lives. All this

caused a major constitutional, as well as cultural crisis, for both the clan and the village. By comparison with conversions to Christianity, conversion to Islam has always been rare, usually a consequence of marriage. The rarity of such conversions, despite the traditional alliance with Sepa, is always said by animist Nuaulu to be due to the sacrifices which conversion entails (male circumcision and changes in dietary habits, in particular) and the fierce sanctions imposed for apostasy. By contrast, conversion to Christianity, of most denominations (but meaning usually, by default, the GPM, Gereja Protestan Maluku), is relatively risk-free and involves less self-denial in the eyes of Nuaulu. It is not surprising, therefore, that it has involved the nearest we get in the Nuaulu case to “mass” conversion. Of the present inhabitants of Nuaulu villages, a few had become Christians at the time of the RMS troubles, but because this conversion was motivated more by the politics of the time, they and their likes were rather disparagingly referred to as “RMS Christians”. By 1970, when my fieldwork was initiated, there was evidence of increased conversion to Christianity, with some Nuaulu moving to the Christian villages of Hatuheno and Nuelitetu. Some Christians remained in Nuaulu villages, but this was often seen as problematic. The logical extension of this was the creation of a separate Christian settlement, though this did not actually happen until the mid-eighties when a hamlet was established about 0.5 kilometer east of the old village, on the site of the earlier Filipino logging camp. A church quickly followed, funded from external GPM resources. The settlement was well established by my field visit of 1986, and by 1987, when Rosemary Bolton of the Summer Institute of Linguistics first arrived Elsewhere conversion was modestly increasing too, and by 1990 there were, for example, only two *Sounaue-aipura* households left in Bunara who had not become Christians.

The escalation in conflict over resources, and the factors leading to this, had always been to some extent represented in terms of clashes of primordial allegiance, including ties of religion, and essentialist arguments using ethnic and religious stereotyping. In

the Nuaulu area this was fuelled by the relentless growth of Sepa and continued Butonese immigration into Nuaulu villages, which led to religious tensions even in the late 1980s, for example following the building of a prayer house in Rouhua. In 1970, Rouhua's entire population of 180 was animist, apart from three Christian households. There were no Muslims at this time. By 1986, of the 218 voters (not total population) reported for Rouhua, 26 were Muslim, 29 Christian and 159 animist. The opportunities for conflicts along religious lines had clearly increased, even in this small settlement, and I have already noted some of the animist-Christian tensions above. By 1996 the Christian village of Nuelitetu west of Sepa had been raised to the ground by Muslim Sepanese, and its occupants fled, though there is still disagreement as to whether the dispute which gave rise to this was much to do with religious allegiance. Nevertheless, the sacking of Nuelitetu was a portent of worse things to come.

Since 1880 Nuaulu have not only been under pressure to convert to Islam or Christianity, but have been under pressure also to conform to other ideologies and ways of living promulgated by outsiders, in particular from the government. The most obvious and fundamental manifestation of this is in terms of patterns of settlement, which for the last 100 years have been subject to government constraints of various kinds. In particular, there has always been a tension between the Nuaulu historic compromise with the colonial state to relocate at government convenience around Sepa, and the need for separation and secrecy in their rituals. This is evident in the siting of Aihisuru, behind Sepa at the top of a steep incline, in the siting of new ritual houses away from the centers of most coastal villages, and the movement of some families from the transmigration zone settlement at Simalouw to Tahena Ukuna. Little has changed over the years in terms of the historic compromise. The Dutch administrator Tichelman (Tichelman, 1960, pp. 188–9) describes the Nuaulu settlement by Sepa between 1916 and 1921 as a "Potemkin village", meaning that it was only occupied when a patrol, administrative officer or vaccinator was vis-

iting, and that otherwise Nuaulu inhabited other houses further into the interior to elude periodic inspection. The overtures made by provincial government authorities to the Nuaulu, with respect to these developments, were, at least initially, benign and paternalistic. Thus, in 1973 a “*Proyek Sosial*” in Rouhua involved encouraging Nuaulu to move from old traditional houses to new timber plank houses with corrugated iron roofs. The first attempt to do this proved very unpopular and by 1975 most of these houses were dilapidated. A similar project in 1978 proved equally unsuccessful, with most houses dilapidated by 1981. More recent attempts have proved to be more successful, as a younger generation has been acculturated and reached new compromises with the values of the state and with other Moluccan contenders for power.

Another area of benign intervention by the state has been with respect to schooling. Nuaulu steadfast refusal to send most of their children to school until the 1980s became identified as a major obstacle for the integration of remaining *suku terasing* in Maluku fairly early (Propinsi Maluku, 1972, Tichelman, 1960). In 1970, there were only a few Nuaulu who had attained basic literacy. From 1973, Nuaulu made a concerted effort themselves to send at least some children to school. By 1981, 12 children from Rouhua were in school. At first, children went to school in Sepa, but with the creation of a Christian settlement east of Rouhua, all primary level Nuaulu children attended a school here, which forced a strong link between education and becoming Christian. There was anyway a strong association in both the minds of Nuaulu and educators between education and adopting a religion (*beragama*). It is no coincidence that those who complain that their schooled children are unable to obtain appropriate employment in the Indonesian state are animists, where a strict interpretation of *Pancasila* was presented as an impediment.

I would like, therefore, to argue that a combination of “creeping religious polarization” and secular polarization through successive state development policies (transmigration, special projects for *masyarakat terasing*) have contributed to what (Bartels, 2000) has de-

scribed as a “failed model of religious tolerance”. Though Nuaulu have never actually volunteered the term *Agama Nunusaku*, referring to a set of shared cultural values and ritual practices across the superficial boundaries of religion, these have always been both explicitly and implicitly understood to exist. This was important particularly for animist Nuaulu who for so long had been a small minority where often close families had been divided three ways by religious sentiments. It is consistent with the pragmatic management of these differences that Nuaulu traditionally represent their relations with outsiders, firstly through an idiom of complementarity, exemplified in the relationship between most local clans, in *pela* partnerships, and through common membership of the *Patalima* grouping. Institutionalized religious complementarity is even reflected in the symbolism of some of the more salient rituals which deliberately encompass acknowledgement of other faiths, and in mutual attendance at the rituals of other religious groupings (Ellen, 1988). With the increase in both Muslim and Christian immigration to Amahai of people who do not include this model of tolerance as part of their apparatus for managing cultural difference, problems were perhaps predictable.

6 Nuaulu and the post 1999 “Maluku wars”

In 1999 civil conflict erupted in the central Moluccas, ostensibly between Christians and Muslims. In an Ambonese context these developments only served to accelerate long-standing pressure on land and a preparedness to resort to violence. In the light of this, Nuaulu use of a particular cultural form of violence—the taking of heads—in response to resource conflict with transmigrants begins to look like a premonition portent of what was to follow more widely in the province. In retrospect, the 1992 episode was indeed prophetic and served as a warning of what might happen if local people did try to seek traditional forms of redress. In other words, a lid was kept on a situation that was still on the boil. What increased yet further the potential for instability was the combined

impact of the 1997 El Niño, the 1997–99 economic crisis, and political reforms from 1998 to the present.

The effects of the El Niño in the Moluccas, on the whole, were not as bad as elsewhere, but local problems were experienced and they contributed to a sense of greater riskiness in maintaining life in particular places. Sospelisa (Sospelisa, 2002, pp. 302,304) reports drought and food shortages on Buano during 1997–8, alleviated only by traditional mechanisms for acquiring sago from mainland Seram. In a central Moluccan context, sago is a cultural barometer of subsistence stress. Even though the long-term picture is one of gradual decline of sago use, sago has been the resource of choice during periods of instability and shortage of imported foods.

The events in Ambon in 1999 were a kind of trigger, which spilled-out over the periphery and provided a justification for the settlement of old (some of them positively ancient) scores, and a means of placing local problems within a wider sociopolitical framework. The improvements in communication which began in the 1980s (roads, radio, television, mobile phones, better ferries, more travel, education) simply meant that events at the center were reported on the periphery with greater rapidity than might have been the case at the time of the Second World War, independence, or the RMS period.

The specific details for the Nuaulu situation seem to be as follows. In January, 200 Christians from Rouhua (about 25 households) were threatened by youths from Sepa and ran away to the mountains, eventually relocating in Waraka (between Wai Pia and Liang) by June or July 2000. Other animist Nuaulu were allegedly paid in forged bank notes to attack the Christians after being told that an *adat* house at Kilo Duabelas had been burned down. There appears to have been a pattern to this persecution of Christians, both in the specific and in general. Remember that it had been Christian Sapparuan transmigrants who had been involved in the conflict which led to the 1991 head-taking. Moreover, Nuaulu had historically allied themselves with Muslims not Christians, while the *desa* of Sepa was arguably moving towards a more orthodox and

less culturally nuanced kind of Islam. Laskar Jihad activity was reported in Sepa and Rutah during October 2001, with many from Tamilou killed in Amahai. The iron laws of displacement dictated that a discriminated cultural minority flees to an area in this balkanised patchwork of confessional allegiances where they were the majority, as was the case for Christians in Waraka. Unrest continued until January 2003.

The immediate consequences for Nuaulu depended, therefore, very much on their confessional allegiance. The animists, because they were neither Christians nor Muslims, in a sense, occupied a privileged position and could move more freely, though their special historical tie with Sepa meant that they allied themselves more with Muslims. On the whole the animists in Rouhua were not much affected. Indeed in August 2003 they were using the word “neutral” to describe their status. Curiously, despite the infrastructure/structural changes which have globalized the Nuaulu and better connected them with the centers of Ambon, Jakarta and the developed world, their status as animists in a conflict in which the main communal contenders are presented as Muslims and Christians has left them, if less not materially poor, then certainly more “marginalized”.

7 Conclusion

This paper has documented a process of escalating socio-ecological change in south Seram over a 30-year period, between 1970 and 2000. I have shown how logging, road-building, and in-migration changed Nuaulu patterns of access to basic forest resources and sago, and how we cannot easily separate environmental from social causation: the environmental changes have their origins almost entirely in human actions and policies, and can only be interpreted through their particular social evaluations and manifestations. The situation was not unique to the Nuaulu amongst traditional peoples of Seram, but their status as animist *suku terasing* provided a unique dimension to the process of change. Many of

these conditions were sufficient to trigger and intensify conflict between Muslims and Christians elsewhere on Seram, and indeed in the Nuaulu case those who had converted (particularly to Christianity) were especially vulnerable and were displaced and suffered considerable hardship. The majority of Nuaulu were, however, protected from the worst excesses of the conflict as their status as animists conferred a kind of communal immunity, which put them under no pressure to re-locate and therefore lose access to a traditionally broad spectrum of resources. Although individual Nuaulu who had married into Christian and Muslim families suffered, a traditional pattern of subsistence provided a buffer against the excesses of deprivation which accompanied conflict elsewhere. Because Nuaulu forest knowledge is still largely intact, this could be utilized as a coping strategy when faced with both ecologically and politically induced hazards.

Having emphasized the general contextual factors, the Nuaulu case illustrates well the point made by van Klinken (Klinken, 2001, pp. 2,9) concerning the fundamentally local and plural character of many of the problems faced in post-Suharto Indonesia, which, while contained, deflected or expressed in non-violent forms when faced with the symbolic straitjacket and physical sanctions meted out by the New Order, these problems exploded into a multitude of forms once the state "failed" in particular places. The recent conflict in Maluku, van Klinken notes, has tended to comprise a great number of violent incidents, but incidents which are not always necessarily and directly connected, and with the same proximate causes. It is just that local people find it convenient to use a general idiom to speak and make sense of them, by turns to legitimate and condemn them. The account of the Nuaulu situation presented here fits well with this model.

We might wonder why we should pay attention to a group of animists, who, all told, constitute a fraction of one percent of the population of Seram, especially when van Klinken (Klinken, 2001, p. 12) reminds us that "traditional religion" is insignificant to analysis because the numbers involved are so small. . In justification,

I would argue that this case study is valuable precisely because it removes the dynamic of Christian/Muslim tension from center stage, and throws into relief some of the other factors behind the escalation of violence during the 1980s. Nuaulu, after all, have been exposed to most of the same factors. It also sheds light on the claims for a shared cross-confessional ethnic ideology of “Agama Nunusaku”, since a much larger fraction of the Nuaulu population subscribe to such collective representations than do most other Moluccans. As a conflict which has been essentially played out as one between Christians and Muslims, the animist position provides a unique perspective on the situation. Through their historical alliances they have been compelled to take sides, caught in the interstices of the “communal contenders” model (Klinken, 2001, p. 25). It reminds me rather of the old northern Irish joke in which a stranger was approached in the street and asked if he was a Protestant or a Catholic. Puzzled when the stranger replied that he was neither, but rather Jewish, the protagonist then pressed him still further: “But are you a Protestant or Catholic Jew?” Sometimes it seems that Nuaulu are being forced to declare themselves as either Muslim or Christian animists.

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