

BOOK REVIEW

Rethinking Interreligious Dialogue: Orality, Collective Memory, and Christian-Muslim Engagements in Indonesia

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From 1999 to 2004, Maluku or the Moluccas, an archipelagic province in eastern Indonesia, experienced massive Christian–Muslim violence. It was the most brutal interreligious violent conflict in the modern history of Indonesia. The violence took more than 10,000 lives, injured hundreds of thousands, and displaced millions of people. Countless public buildings (churches, mosques, schools, offices, malls, houses, etc.) were burnt or demolished by angry masses. Although large-scale violence ended in 2004, relatively small-scale localized sporadic violence continued to exist in various parts of Maluku and Ambon City (Maluku’s provincial capital) in the following years.

The brawl initially took place in Ambon between some segments of ordinary local Christians and Muslims. The involvement of military forces and non-Malukan/Ambonese actors and groups such as various Java-based jihadist and terrorist organizations (e.g., Laskar Jihad, Laskar Mujahidin, Jamaah Islamiyah, etc.) made the conflict more violent, vicious, and prevalent. Moreover, the disturbance spread out across the Malukan islands: Seram, Haruku, Saparua, Aru, Ternate, Halmahera, Tobelo, and many others. Of all non-Malukan Muslim fighters, Ja’far Umar Talib-led Laskar Jihad was the most notorious. The group sent thousands of militias to Maluku to reinforce local Muslims and fought against Christians.

The Christian–Muslim sectarian violence has produced a sizable scholarly work (books, dissertations, articles, etc.). Yet, with few notable exceptions, the majority of these previous studies focus on the examining the root causes and implications of this violence for Malukan social, political, cultural, religious, and economic life. Unlike most previous work, however, the present book discusses peace, reconciliation, and engagement processes between Malukan Christians and Muslims during and after the communal conflict. More specifically, this work, which is based on the author’s extensive ethnographic fieldwork from 2013 to 2022, analyzes the centuries-old indigenous practices of constructive interreligious engagements between Malukan Christians and Muslims grounded in *pela-gandong*, which the author defines as the “orality-based practices of a cultural network of relationships” (p. xv). Malukan Christian and Muslim communities, the author says, preserved the *pela-gandong* in forms of ritual performance, oral narrative, and folksong, making it a living local wisdom and tradition. More importantly, the author argues that this symbolic-imagined local tradition of Christian–Muslim brotherhood is useful for establishing productive interreligious engagement, conciliation, and harmony in post-violence Maluku, as well as for the basis of interreligious studies.

The book is organized into six main chapters, excluding introduction and conclusion. The first chapter discusses the history of Maluku as a junction of international trade and religions. It explores the historical background of cultural and religious encounters before and during the European (Portuguese and Dutch) colonial period between local people (Malukans) and foreigners. Known

globally as Spice Islands, the Moluccas had attracted many foreigners (Arabs, Chinese, Malays, Javanese, Makasarese, Buginese, Europeans and Japanese, among many others) from multiple professions (e.g., merchants, explorers, travelers, missionaries, preachers, colonials, etc.) in the past centuries. As a result, the archipelago was transformed into a “highway” of global conquest and contest among the competing powers and foreigners since they sought to control precious local sources (especially clove, nutmeg, and mace) as well as seeking to convert locals variously to Islam and Christianity. Since that era, Malukan societies have been deeply divided and segregated along religious lines that have existed until today. Additionally, the chapter discusses the history of the indigenous *pela* practice, a form of social networking among *negeri* (villages) in Central Maluku that existed long before Europeans landed in the Moluccas in the sixteenth century. During the European colonial time, Malukans used the *pela* system as a cultural tool of social resistance against the colonials (pp. 29–30).

Chapter 2 outlines oral texts in the form of Malukan folksongs (*kapata*) – both traditional and modern (e.g., *lagu* Ambon) – that the author believed can function as a traditional ground for mutual relationships between Malukan Christians and Muslims who share the same cultural narratives, albeit embrace different faiths, as well as a trove of collective memories that fosters social solidarity and spirits of brotherhood between Malukan adherents of Christianity and Islam. One of the chapter’s aims is to expound on why and how these indigenous folksongs are collective representations that are central to Maluku’s social cohesion (pp. 31–32). Moreover, in Maluku, folksongs can create “a sense of belonging” centered on kinship-based *pela* relationships (p. 59). The author argues that folksongs have played an important role in bridging Christian–Muslim divides, building a common ground for Malukans regardless of their religious differences, and helping efforts at establishing conciliation and social harmony in post-violence Maluku.

The following chapter, chapter 3, examines the role and contribution of commemorative ritual practices and performances to Maluku’s social integration, interreligious peacebuilding, and Christian–Muslim union (and reunion). The author argues that in the Maluku context, rituals whose forms and practices vary, ranging from formal religious rites to fruit-harvest communal feasts, can be used as a cultural instrument to rebind broken communities because of conflict, disagreement, or violence. The author also argues that rituals – via symbols, oral narratives, bodily movement, food-sharing, or imitation of the past – can revive the collective memory of kinship-based Christian–Muslim brotherhood relationships or, in Malukan term, *orang basudara* (pp. 90–91).

The fourth chapter analyzes the Jakarta-controlled political hegemony since Indonesia declared its independence in 1945 and Maluku became part (one of the first eight provinces) of this newly independent country. In addition, the chapter discusses the militarization and “Javanization” of Maluku’s sociopolitical life and Malukan societies’ social structures as well as the failures of state-based peacebuilding projects during the sectarian unrest. The chapter argues that the absorption of Maluku into the Indonesian country has negative consequences such as the destruction of the indigenous structure of village government (*negeri*) that centered on the role of the assembly of families (*saniri*) and the kinship-based group (*marga*) that determines the division of labor within the *negeri* system (p. 94), mainly because the central government introduced a new form of the government system and structure across the country and replaced the existing indigenous government systems and mechanism. The devastation of Malukan local identities – first by the European colonials and then by the Indonesian regimes (particularly during the Suharto authoritarian rule, 1966–1998) – contributed to the “malfunction of the cultural structures in Malukan rural and urban areas” (p. 119). The chapter underlines Suharto-led New Order governmental policies of national uniformity, military favoritism, and the politics of separated identity as the chief key to the loss of cultural connections during the Maluku sectarian violence. Moreover, the chapter highlights the failure and ineffectiveness of state/government-sponsored peace accords, reconciliation processes, and conflict resolution mechanisms to overcome the Christian–Muslim violence in Maluku.

In the fifth chapter, the author investigates civic networks and grassroots peace initiatives. The chapter underscores the important roles of Maluku’s non-state local actors and social institutions based on the Malukan web of cultural relationships such as, among others, *Mama Papalele* (female

small traders), Wayame villagers, *Gerakan Baku Bae* (Baku Bae Movement), and *Provokator Damai* (Peace Provocateurs) in peacebuilding attempts and reconciliation processes. The author argues that these locally based non-state actors, grassroots peace activists, and civil organizations have been the backbone of the Malukan interreligious peacebuilding (p. 144).

Chapter 6, the final chapter, under the title “Towards an Oral-Based Interreligious Engagement,” serves as a reflection concerning effective and fruitful ways for building interreligious engagements. The author claims that, based on his field experiences and analyses of various oral texts, narratives, folksongs, and rituals, Maluku offers a “new model of interreligious engagements that is more appropriate to an oral-oriented society” (p. 146). Still, the chapter underscores the Maluku case as a good example of interreligious studies and interreligious relationship studies, especially in a society where oral tradition plays a major role in everyday social life. In this context, the author proposes an idea to develop various, distinctive models of interreligious engagements depending on the type of society: an oral or written-oriented society. Applying the same model of interreligious engagements to all forms of society will be unproductive and misleading.

Of all the chapters described above, chapter 6 is the most thought-provoking part, offering a stimulating approach to interreligious peacebuilding, relations, and engagements. The rest has been discussed by various specialists in Malukan societies, cultures, and politics from multiple perspectives, theoretical frameworks, and methodological approaches. Furthermore, although some scholars discussed some elements of Malukan cultures and traditions as the author wrote in chapters 2 and 3, the viewpoints, methods, and analyses the author used to discuss oral texts (including folksongs) and commemorative rituals warrant further discussion and study.

No doubt, the present book is a welcome piece. This work is useful for both academic and non-academic communities. For academic communities, the book offers fresh knowledge, understanding, and analysis about productive and effective ways of building interreligious harmony, peace, and relationships in an orally oriented society like Maluku. The author reveals that in the Maluku context, oral texts, narratives, folksongs, and memorial rituals serve as fruitful tools for building good relations, civic peace, and social harmony among the dividing and broken communities. For non-academic communities (e.g., governments, practitioners, stakeholders, policymakers, civic and religious leaders, etc.), the book’s findings can be used as a source for policy recommendations and interreligious peacebuilding practices.

Up to now, interreligious dialogue has dominated both academia and non-academia as a medium to overcome and solve interreligious tensions and as a global pattern for establishing interreligious relationships. However, from the author’s point of view, interreligious dialogue is ineffective (and has failed) as a tool for resolving interreligious conflict and building interreligious relations. The author, instead, offers the term “interreligious engagement” as a productive way of resolving interreligious conflict and building interreligious peace.

The author differentiates the term “interreligious engagement” from “interreligious dialogue.” For him, the term “dialogue” implies formality, infers “elitism,” and involves a series of formal conversations and discussions at a table and physical place (pp. 151–152). In contrast, the term “engagement” indicates informality, designates “non-elitism,” and encompasses various forms of interpersonal/intergroup encounters and interactions (e.g., gestures, symbols, shared work, etc.), not just conversations. Also, unlike an interreligious engagement, the author wrote, interreligious dialogue tends to use religious cannons and written texts, is dominated by males, and tends to be a chit-chat talk. In contrast, interreligious engagement forms a space for broader participation from all segments of society (males and females, elites and masses, etc.) and utilizes a variety of helpful means. The author wrote an important point as follows:

Interreligious engagement, in this sense, is an *everybodyness* space and context for *manyness*. Meaning everybody from every social layer could participate in an interreligious engagement using the richness of toolkits. The interreligious engagement invites subaltern voices from the social margin that has been muted for decades. Space for mutual encounters in *everybodyness*

and *manyness* provides more expansive room for active and creative interreligious engagements (p. xix).

The author also argues that the current studies and practices of interreligious dialogue mainly focus on the discussions of sacred texts and classical (or contemporary) figures, along with their works, from Western Europe, North America, or the Middle East. The author claims that scholars and practitioners of interreligious dialogue generally believe that these central religious figures and written texts serve as a “remedy” for all interreligious problems in all societies, regions, and contexts. Yet, in reality, each context has its texts (oral or written), and each society “has particular knowledge and methods for interreligious understanding of symbols, social actions, and collective narratives” (p. xix). In this regard, the author believes that interreligious engagement is more productive than interreligious dialogue, and that this is particularly the case in an orally oriented society like Maluku (p. xix). Also, the author suggests the need to rethink the concept and practice of interreligious dialogue.

Although the book provides insightful findings and thoughtful arguments, especially on the role and contribution of orality and collective memory for interreligious engagements and peacebuilding, it has some shortcomings that need careful assessment, critical analysis, and further study. For example, the book tends to “glorify” the role of non-state grassroots agencies and diminish the contributions of the elites (religious, civic, or political, at local, regional, and national levels, both males and females) and state actors (i.e., district, provincial, and central governments) in Maluku’s interreligious peacebuilding and reconciliation processes.

As a matter of fact, while some elites and state actors played roles in the exacerbation of violent conflict, others significantly contributed to efforts at Christian–Muslim reconciliation and peacebuilding during and after the Maluku turmoil. Some elements of elites and governments played roles in the de-escalation of riots, the removal of military forces, and the initiation of the peace accord, all of which helped create calm, reduce tensions, pause violence, localize riots, and reconcile dividing groups. It is also imperative to note that, like the elites (including government officials), some segments of the non-state grassroots people in Maluku (Muslim and Christian) were also engaged in the uprisings and fought against their opposing religious groups.

In Maluku (and elsewhere in Indonesia) where state institutions have long occupied society and the social structure, the government’s roles cannot be ignored. In this context, it is almost impossible to build peace and resolve mass conflict without the government’s intervention. In fact, in many cases, the Maluku government (in the province, municipality, districts, sub-districts, or villages) facilitated interreligious meetings, peacebuilding endeavors, and reconciliation processes that involved grassroots communities. What happened in Maluku was a form of state–society synergy or elite–mass cooperation for interreligious reconciliation and peacebuilding. Accordingly, diminishing completely the role of elites and governments contradicts the facts of their contributions to Malukan societies.

Additionally, the book also tends to extol and generalize the contribution of orality and collective memory and lessen the role of scriptures and written texts. It also oversimplifies the Malukan people as an “orally oriented society.” In reality, Malukans, like other societies in the world, are a plural society. There is no such monolithic society in the world. Some segments of Malukan societies embrace oral tradition while others emphasize writings (especially religious/sacred texts). Still, some constituencies of Maluku underline the vitality of both oral and written traditions. The process of “religionization” in Maluku (within Islam or Christianity) has taken place for centuries. How can societies that have long been religionized neglect religious texts, scriptures, and narratives? Even though some parts of Malukan societies hold and practice oral tradition, they do not “throw out” written religious texts. Interestingly, many Malukans (both adherents of Christianity and Islam) used religious justification for their defense and utilization of Malukan local cultures and traditions, including oral texts, customary law (*adat*), social institutions, etc.

At some point, the book missed discussions on Malukan religious conservative and puritanical groups, religiously oriented communities (e.g., Muslim Salafis and Islamists or Christian Pentecostals and Charismatics), which have clearly anti-local cultural practices. Moreover, the author

criticizes scholars and practitioners of interreligious dialogue for using their single model of interreligious dialogue to solve all problems of interreligious conflict in all contexts and societies. Yet, the author also uses his single model of orality and collective memory-based interreligious engagement to solve all problems of interreligious violence in Maluku, which he imagined as an “orally based society.”

It is also important to underline that *pela-gandong*, a kinship and orality-based cultural network and social institution of brotherhood and relationship, only exists in the Central Maluku region (Seram, Ambon, Haruku, Saparua, among others). Other parts of Maluku have their own oral and cultural traditions. This means that the *pela-gandong* tradition as a cultural mechanism of peacebuilding and conflict resolution might only work for some constituencies in Central Maluku, especially those having the *pela-gandong* relations. Christian and Muslim communities, despite living in and from Central Maluku but without the *pela-gandong* relation, cannot utilize it as a tool of interreligious peacebuilding.

Still, the author does not adequately discuss various transmigrant ethno-religious groups from areas such as Sulawesi and Java, which constitute a substantial populace in Maluku, particularly Ambon and its surrounding areas. These groups clearly do not share the *pela-gandong* and other cultural/oral practices and traditions of Central Maluku’s societies. Finally, the book missed the discussions on intra-religious engagements and divisions such as Christian–Christian or Muslim–Muslim engagements/divisions. Maluku does not only witness the Christian–Muslim divide but also Christian–Christian or Muslim–Muslim splits due to theological, congregational, ideological, or political differences. Can orality and collective memory solve these intra-religious problems and divisions?

On the one hand, as a native of Central Maluku, the author certainly has a deep knowledge and experience of the region’s oral traditions and cultural practices. But, on the other hand, the book also implies the author’s cultural and intellectual bias. Notwithstanding this lacuna, this book is undoubtedly valuable and stimulating. Readers will benefit from the book’s rich ethnographic and historical data on Maluku’s religions, cultures, and traditions, as well as from the author’s stimulating analyses, outlooks, approaches, and arguments for interreligious engagements, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution.