

Infrastructure of the Imagination

Patrica Spyer Examines Rumours, Graffiti, and Banners in the Ambonese Conflict

Interview >
Southeast Asia

Muslims and Christians on Ambon refer to the dividing line between them as the ‘Gaza Strip’, analogous to the disputed lands in the Middle East. Ordinary people under exceptional circumstances often place their own situation in a much wider context, says Patricia Spyer, Professor of Anthropology and Sociology of Contemporary Indonesia at Leiden University since February 2001.

By Jasper van de Kerkhof

Patricia Spyer challenges what she calls ‘the taken-for-granted but hopelessly impoverished’ anthropological notion of ‘ethnographic context’. ‘Anthropologists construct a close-up of a community; it’s what they are good at. But because of that they often lose sight of the entire picture. I want to know how people experience situations, precisely by placing them in a broader framework. Context is the thread of my work.’

Last November Spyer held her inaugural lecture at Leiden University. In cooperation with the faculty of arts, she is cur-

rently working on the project ‘Indonesian Mediations’, which examines the role of the media in the final years of the Suharto regime and the subsequent period of Reformasi. ‘The media form a well-researched topic’, she says. ‘But most scholars focus exclusively on the Internet, while it is particularly “small media” like illegal radio, banners, and graffiti which are important in conflict situations.’

Spyer explores these issues in the conflict-ridden Moluccan Islands in Indonesia, specifically in the province’s capital. Communal violence broke out in Ambon city in January 1999 and lasted until a fragile peace agreement was signed in February 2002. Over time, the conflict consolidated two polarized religious groups – one Christian and one Muslim – which the outside world came to see as the war’s main opponents. At least five thousand and possibly as many as ten thousand people were killed during the three years of hostilities, and an estimated 700,000 people fled from their homes.

‘I was troubled by the sense that something was missing in the accepted explanations of the conflict’. Spyer does not dismiss the view that the Asian financial crisis, the step-down of Suharto, and the subsequent period of Reformasi, as well as the intrigues of Jakarta’s political elite and the military, all played an important role. ‘But some of these analyses are just too abstract, too far removed from the everyday lives of ordinary people.’

Too little attention is given to the work of the imagination and the construction of knowledge in all of this and, specifically, how imagination propels particular actions and shapes those who carry them out. In conflict situations, the boundaries blur between fact and fiction, fear and fantasy, knowledge and suspicion. Spyer: ‘This, I believe, is what is meant by climate, which is no mere backdrop.’

Spyer cites the examples of *Voice of the Heart* – *Acang and Obet*, a public service announcement broadcast on national TV and several commercial channels some months after the breakout of violence. The spot was meant to foster peace among the

combatant religious groups in Ambon. It featured two young boys, the Muslim Acang and his Christian bosom friend Obet, who are discussing the tense situation in their city.

Trying to understand why Ambon fell apart like this, they come to the conclusion that they do not understand. ‘It is a problem of adults, and we kids are the victims’, Acang says. The camera zooms in on the two friends, who are posed with their arms around each other, while they voice the hope and mutual promise that ‘even if Ambon is destroyed like this, our bond of brotherhood should not be broken’.

Spyer: ‘All the Ambonese took from the spot was a name and a face for the enemy’. The many interviews she held with refugees are replete with phrases like ‘Acang attacked’ or ‘Obet’s territory’ and so on. ‘Inversely, the local population actively borrowed examples from other places held close to their own fraught world. For example, Ambon city’s main dividing line between its Muslim and Christian parts has been known colloquially as the Gaza Strip.’

Comparisons with the Middle East have also been made by the people in conflict-ridden Venezuela, Spyer knows. ‘But in the Indonesian case, where the conflict is often simplified as one between Christians and Muslims, people attach even more weight to the analogy. The people of Ambon and the Gaza Strip have never met, so Ambon’s Gaza Strip is only possible when substantial groups of Ambonese were thinking of themselves as living lives parallel to those of substantial groups of people in the Middle East.’

Her interviews with Ambonese refugees showed her that the local population feels neglected by the political elites in Jakarta. She thinks that the borrowing of names and terms from other conflict grounds may thus serve a specific purpose. ‘Twinning these war-torn places may be one way of lending local suffering in Ambon larger than local meaning.’ ◀

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Biography >

Prof. Patricia Spyer (b. 1957), daughter of a Dutch father and an American mother, was born and raised in New York. Early in the 1970s, she and her parents moved to Amsterdam, where she attended secondary education. She returned to the United States, where she double-majored in history and anthropology at Tufts University, near Boston, Massachusetts. In 1992, after a period of intensive field research, she obtained her PhD from the University of Chicago on trade networks in remote areas of Indonesia (*The memory of trade: circulation, autochtony, and the past in the Aru Islands*). After completion of her dissertation, she worked for several years at the University of Amsterdam. Currently, she is Professor of Anthropology and Sociology of Contemporary Indonesia at Leiden University (the Netherlands).
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