
Kimberly Twarog

Reconciling Indonesia presents a diverse collection of essays that explore the multiple ways in which Indonesian communities approach reconciliation processes within their daily lives. Edited by Birgit Bräuchler, this book is the result of an international conference, “In Search of Reconciliation and Peace in Indonesia and East Timor,” which took place at the Asia Research Institute in Singapore in July 2007. Though discussions of East Timor are glaringly absent from Reconciling Indonesia, the essays cover significant ground, drawing upon research conducted within Aceh, Bali, the Moluku islands, Lombok, Sulawesi, and Central Java. As the contributors are a mix of academics and activists whose areas of expertise include adat (“traditional”) rituals and ceremonies, theatrical performances, law, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), education, religion, memory, and gender, the essays provide a multidisciplinary perspective on a wide range of reconciliation processes. This edited volume is a welcome, complementary addition to the abundance of literature on pre-conflict and conflict moments within Indonesia. It focuses on the ongoing methods of recovery and rebuilding taking place not only within the bounds of political treaties or legal actions, but also within individual relationships and historical memories.

As the contributors to this book emphasize, “reconciliation” is a highly fluid term that will hold different meanings for different communities of Indonesians at different times. Given the diversity in the types of violence and the regions examined in this book, it seemed crucial to me that the contributors remain open to multiple meanings and manifestations of reconciliation, particularly those that are not encompassed by the Indonesian term rekonsiliasi. I was therefore pleasantly surprised to find that each contributor presented a specific definition of “reconciliation” that was informed by the contexts in which he/she conducted research. In refusing to present a monolithic or uncritical understanding of this unstable and flexible term, the authors explored much more than the actions of village leaders and elites, and addressed processes of reconciliation that were not immediately apparent. For example, Barbara Hatley’s essay on theater practices in Java and Y. Tri Subagya’s essay on women’s organizations in Sulawesi suggest expanding definitions of reconciliation to include informal acts of social acceptance. For Hatley, this may mean that marginalized communities, such as Chinese-Indonesians, can participate alongside dominant social groups at local Independence Day celebrations. For Subagya, social reconciliation may be a long-term, private process in which individuals attempt to allay feelings of prejudice or vengeance.

The authors are also careful to note that reconciliation does not always take place just between groups or individuals. For Annette Hornbacher, focusing on the non-visible, non-human realm may prove valuable for understanding how Balinese communities explain and attempt to deal with the 2002 Bali bombings. Taking this perspective, Hornbacher finds that Balinese approach reconciliation as a process of restoring cosmological balance, rather than an opportunity to assign blame or to call
for monetary reparations. For other communities, reconciliation may take place primarily within the realm of social memory. The three essays that directly address the 1965–66 communist killings (Leksana, Sulistiyanto and Setyadi, and McGregor), for example, investigate reconciliation as a process that demands the validation or reconstruction of memories that, though more than forty years old, continue to leave psychological or emotional scars. Through their unrestricted approach to understanding what reconciliation means to particular communities and what shape it may take in specific contexts, the contributors encourage readers to challenge and rework preset notions of reconciliation.

Because the contributors approach the subject of reconciliation from such a range of perspectives, I was concerned that they might reproduce essentialized or oversimplified notions of other malleable terms, such as, “tradition,” “culture,” “identity,” “justice,” “peace,” and “healing.” For example, many of the essays examine how reconciliation in Indonesia has been shaped by the “revival of adat” that has emerged within the post-Suharto era, and a number of the contributors claim that adat may be a primary mechanism through which reconciliation is achieved. In her analysis of repatriation ceremonies held for Kariu refugees in the Moluccas, Birgit Bräuchler proposes that cultural traditions have the potential to “build inter-religious bridges and a common unifying identity” for rival communities. However, Bräuchler is careful to emphasize that within these ceremonies a specific construction of adat—one that combined a variety of local practices and beliefs—was used to serve a specific function—to re-categorize Kariu people within a unified Moloccan identity, thus minimizing religious or other distinctions that had previously marked them as “Other.” In this way, Bräuchler presents a nuanced understanding of culture, tradition, and identity that not only recognizes the constructed or “invented” meanings of these terms, but also takes seriously the claim that “in social life, what people accept as real is real in its consequences.”

Katharine McGregor produces an equally complex analysis of the role of religious identity within Indonesians’ efforts to deal with the communist killings of 1965–66. Troubled by unified or unwavering depictions of Indonesian Islam, McGregor investigates how members of the Muslim organization Nahdlatul Ulama (NU, Awakening of Religious Scholars) reconstructed Muslim identity in order to produce a particular narrative of the 1965–66 events. By crafting a pro-nationalist and anti-communist Muslim identity, NU members positioned themselves as the victims—rather than perpetrators—of communist violence and as protectors of the Indonesian state. However, McGregor argues that the reluctance of older NU members to let go of this version of their Islamic identity has prevented them from accepting alternative narratives of the communist killings, an acceptance that may facilitate reconciliation. In contrast, younger generations have refashioned Muslim identity in ways that are more open to expressions of empathy and compassion for the victims of 1965–66.

The authors’ analytical clarity offers much more than merely an explanation of key terms. Focusing their attention on grassroots initiatives for reconciliation and peace,

---

1 Birgit Bräuchler, “Mobilizing Culture and Tradition for Peace: Reconciliation in the Moluccas,” p. 102.
the contributors shift the spotlight off of state actors and policy makers, highlighting instead the understudied efforts of nongovernmental organizations, community members, women, teachers, and refugees. Further, in their commitment to investigate diverse forms of reconciliation, the authors address not only the legal, political, or economic implications of conflict, but also the ongoing emotional and psychological impact of violence at all levels of Indonesian society. In this way, the contributors are able to re-center the communities that have experienced violence and to resurrect voices that are often ignored or silenced within post-conflict analyses.

One of the most important contributions this book offers is its analysis of both the potential advantages and limitations of different kinds of reconciliation efforts. Leena Avonius's examination of reconciliation in Aceh suggests that while the peusijeuk, or "cooling down" ritual, has been successful for settling relatively minor disputes among a few individuals, this mechanism was not considered appropriate for addressing human-rights violations committed during the separatist conflict. Instead, victims of such abuse have requested the use of the formal court system, fearing that peusijeuk could allow those responsible for the violence to escape accountability. Kari Telle's study of the garap, or "oath-taking" ceremony, in Lombok also suggests that this ritual cannot be employed for all communities under all circumstances. For some communities in Lombok, their participation in the garap ceremony is seen as an obligation imposed upon them by local crime-fighting groups that are themselves guilty of committing crimes. Telle argues that the garap ritual, when viewed in this light, "has the potential to cause, rather than curb, conflict." The essays by Avonius and Telle thus emphasize the need to view reconciliation through the lens of existing power relations.

Jeroen Adam and Barbara Hatley also present solid critiques of reconciliation methods employed within the Central Moluccan region and Central Java, respectively. For example, though the practice of pela, or a "traditional brotherhood alliance of mutual assistance between two or more villages," has been successful in abating tensions among the villages of Batu Merah and Passo, Adam finds that the ritual is insufficient to address the material losses that the Batu Merah Christian community has sustained. Because pela cannot assist Batu Merah Christians in reclaiming their land, Adam questions whether grassroots initiatives have the capacity to address communities' political, legal, or economic needs. Similarly, Barbara Hatley is attentive to questions of how, when, and why theater can be a tool for reconciliation. Though Hatley observes that theater has the potential to promote group solidarity and facilitate dialogue among community members, she warns that the medium may only be effective to the extent that audiences are "informed and committed participants." These essays thus offer a judicious analysis of the conditions that determine the success or failure of particular reconciliation processes.

---

5 Ibid., p. 71.
Resisting a romanticized approach to the study of peace and reconciliation, the contributors of *Reconciling Indonesia* ultimately suggest that reconciliation is an ongoing, multi-step process that must address the specific needs of Indonesia’s diverse communities; in other words, “there is no such thing as a blueprint for reconciliation.” Moreover, the contributors stress that the processes investigated in this volume form only one component of reconciliation and peace-building and, in this way, the chapters complement one another. The essays by Hornbacher, Hatley, Bräuchler, and Telle, for example, resist the tendency to privilege “confessional” or spoken gestures by centering on nonverbal or performative approaches to reconciliation. For Telle, the notion of “speaking guilt” is often viewed by Westerners as the primary, if not only, means by which truth can emerge. Such acts of confession, however, are not always necessary or even appropriate for communities in Indonesia. Instead, ritual performances or symbolic gestures may be sufficient for restoring communal balance. Other contributors suggest that the voices of women, victims, and other traditionally marginalized groups can no longer be ignored. While Subagya shows how the absence of women’s voices within peace-building produces incomplete solutions that fail to address the gendered dimensions of conflict and its aftermath, Leksana, Sulistiyanto and Setyadi, and McGregor argue that voicing alternative narratives of the 1965-66 communist killings is a vital step in the road to recovery. In this sense, whether or not communicating one’s experience of violence and one’s needs in peace-building efforts takes the form of verbal expression, all of the contributors seem to concur that the task of scholars and activists alike is “to create the spaces in which a greater variety of people can speak about their experiences.”

In presenting this comprehensive and instructive exploration of reconciliation efforts within Indonesia, the contributors succeed in providing such a space. The essays in *Reconciling Indonesia* are valuable not only to academics, but can directly benefit the communities that are the subjects of this book, as well as other communities that are in the process of restoring relationships and rebuilding their social or political lives. Because the essays cover such a wide range of approaches to reconciliation, however, they have only scratched the surface of what promises to be an exciting field. I hope that this book will encourage researchers to take up these important questions and to explore more deeply the processes of reconciliation and peace within Indonesia.

---

8 Birgit Bräuchler, “Introduction: Reconciling Indonesia,” p. 3.
10 Grace Leksana, “Reconciliation through History Education: Reconstructing the Social Memory of the 1965-66 Violence in Indonesia,” p. 188.