
CYBERIDENTITIES AT WAR: RELIGION, IDENTITY, AND THE INTERNET IN THE MOLUCCAN CONFLICT

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Ambon is a city divided. Muslims occupy one end of town, Christians the other. Along the middle is a no-man's-land that acts as a line of partition. Armed soldiers keep a tense watch next to the barbed wire and the checkpoints. Around them are the reminders of the religious hatred that has torn Ambon asunder. Most buildings have been razed to the ground; those still standing are little more than burnt-out shells. A graffito on the wall of a ruined department store scrawls out a defiant message: "Muslim power vanquishes the Nazarenes." Another reads: "Christians conquer Muslim pigs." For generations, Ambonese of both faiths practiced *pela gandong*—peaceful coexistence—under which mosques and churches were built together. But it is clear that the tradition now lies buried underneath the rubble.¹

¹ Tom McCawley, "Reporter's Notebook: In the Middle of a War Zone," *Asiaweek* 26, 2 (2000) [<http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/magazine/2000/0121/nat.indon.notebook.html>, accessed March 5, 2001].

Introduction²

The situation described above sounds like a report from hell. Instead it is a journalist's account of the capital of one of the most beautiful places of Indonesia: the Moluccas, a place which was praised for its religious harmony up until December 1998. Nobody really expected that a minor quarrel between a Christian bus driver and a Muslim passenger in Ambon town in January 1999 would end up in a bloody and enduring conflict.³ Even if religion itself was not the cause of the unrest, the people involved in the conflict very soon grouped around religion as their main identity marker.⁴ Many scholars have emphasized the potential of religion to function as a

² This paper is a report relating to my dissertation project at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich, begun in mid-2000. It is based on Internet and literature research in combination with interviews conducted in Munich (Germany) and the Netherlands. Additionally fieldwork was conducted in the Central Moluccas and in Jakarta applying qualitative methods such as participating observation and interviews.

³ The settings and the parties involved in the conflict differ substantially in the three major subdivisions of the Moluccas (Northern, Central, and South-eastern Moluccas), all of which have been touched by the outbreaks of violence during certain periods in the last three years. So I should rather speak of different conflicts than of *the* Moluccan conflict. In my research, I am mainly concerned with the Central Moluccas, where approximately half of the population is Christian, the other half Muslim.

⁴ Much has been written about the conflict by social scientists analyzing its cultural, ideological, and political backgrounds, and the roles of the government and the military. Only a small selection of these sources follows: Please see George Junus Aditjondro, "Guns, Pamphlets and Handie-Talkies: How the military exploited local ethno-religious tensions in Maluku to preserve their political and economic privileges," in *Violence in Indonesia*, ed. Ingrid Wessel and Georgia Wimhöfer (Hamburg: Abera-Verlag, 2001), pp. 100-28. Dieter Bartels, *Your God Is No Longer Mine: Moslem-Christian Fratricide in the Central Moluccas (Indonesia) after a Half-Millennium of Tolerant Co-Existence and Ethnic Unity*, 2000 [<http://www.indopubs.com/archives/0401.html>, accessed October 9, 2000]. Kees van Dijk, *A Country in Despair: Indonesia between 1997 and 2000*. Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land en Volkenkunde, vol. 186 (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2001), pp. 379-96. Robert W. Hefner, "Muslim-Christian Violence in Maluku: The Role of the National Politics," paper presented at the USCRIF (US Commission on International Religious Freedom), Washington D.C., February 13, 2001. J. Mangkey, "The Church in Indonesia: Facing New Challenges towards a New Indonesia," paper presented at the Annual Conference of "Kirche in Not," Königstein, Germany, September 19, 2000. Wim Manuhutu, Johan Meuleman, Nico Schulte-Nordholt, and Jacques Willemse, eds. *Maluku Manis, Maluku Menangis: De Molukken in crisis. Een poging tot de verklaring van de geweldsexplosie op de Molukken* (Utrecht: Moluks Historisch Museum/Moluccan Information and Documentation Center, 2000). Paul Tahalele, *The Church and Human Rights in Indonesia*, Indonesia Christian Communication Forum (ICCF), 30.9.1998, 1998 [<http://www.fica.org/hr/ChurchPersecution/nov516.pdf>, accessed February 17, 2001]. John A. Titley, "Religious Freedom in Indonesia: A Losing Opportunity for Humanity," paper presented at the USCRIF (US Commission on International Religious Freedom), Washington D.C., February 13, 2001. For analyses concerning the conflicts in the Northern Moluccas, see among others Smith Alhadar, "The forgotten war in North Maluku," *Inside Indonesia* 63 (July-September 2000) [<http://www.insideindonesia.org/edit63/alhadar.htm>, accessed October 9, 2000]. Nils Bubandt, "Malukan Apocalypse: Themes in the Dynamics of Violence in Eastern Indonesia," in *Violence in Indonesia*, ed. Ingrid Wessel and Georgia Wimhöfer (Hamburg: Abera-Verlag, 2001), pp. 228-53. Paul Michael Taylor, "Underlying sources of a complex, multilayered, historic conflict. Testimony on Religious-Freedom Violations in the Moluccas, Indonesia," paper presented at the USCRIF (US Commission on International Religious Freedom), Washington D.C., February 13, 2001.

major source of identity.⁵ Religion therefore seems to be an ideal means for an effective identity project. Using the concept of flexible and negotiable identities⁶, identity markers can shift according to the situation, and religion can easily become extremely important for people involved in a conflict.

Masariku is a news group which serves as a communication medium for people involved in presenting the Moluccan conflict... The Internet facility increases the speed of data exchange and the accuracy of the data since they can directly be checked and re-checked by other Masariku members.⁷ It is a campaign concerned with the Moluccas that tries to present the troubles and struggles of the Moluccan church and the Christian community in the current conflict.⁸

The official Mailing List of the Laskar Jihad Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah provides news about Jihad in the Moluccas and the Laskar Jihad. The central information department of the Forum Komunikasi Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah directly gets this news from the Laskar Jihad and the Mujahidin in the Moluccas. The news is updated almost every day, Insya Allah.⁹

The parallel citations above reveal the fact that the Moluccan conflict is not only fought out on the local and national level but also in cyberspace, a point that has been totally neglected so far. The presentations in cyberspace also divide along religious lines, thus contributing to the image of a religious war. We find the same cruel pictures on the Internet as we do at the local level. Some websites concerned with the Moluccan conflict show borders of dripping blood or spew fire at the visitor,¹⁰ symbolizing the numerous victims of the violence and the destruction of many buildings, often religious, by burning. The Internet provides the parties involved the means to present their views of the conflict and, at the same time, construct imagined communities and identities, to influence the conflict.¹¹ This study of the Moluccan cyberspace¹² contributes to the

⁵ See for example Abe Wade Ata, "Introduction," in *Religion and Ethnic Identity: an Australian Study*, ed. Abe Wade Ata, 1988), pp. 1-8. Paul Rutledge, *The Role of Religion in Ethnic Self-Identity* (Lanham/New York/London: University Press of America, 1985). Anne Schiller, "Religion and Identity in Central Kalimantan: The Case of the Ngaju Dayaks," in *Indigenous Peoples and the State: Politics, Land, and Ethnicity in the Malayan Peninsula and Borneo*, ed. Robert L. Winzeler (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 1997), pp. 180-200.

⁶ This goes back to the situational approach of Fredrik Barth to define "identity": Fredrik Barth, "Introduction," in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, ed. Fredrik Barth (Bergen-Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969), pp. 9-38.

⁷ <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/masariku/messages/23>, August 28, 1999, translated by the author.

⁸ <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/masariku/messages/38>, September 12, 1999, translated by the author.

⁹ <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/laskarjihad>, translated by the author.

¹⁰ See for example <http://come.to/suaraambon> and <http://listen.to/Rustam-Kastor>, both accessed in 2000.

¹¹ Even if only a small percentage of the Indonesian population has access to the Internet, its role and influence on the current struggle for democratization and stability in Indonesia, especially since the attack on the PDI Headquarter on July 27, 1996, has been outlined by several authors. See Tedjabayu Basuki,

field of cyberanthropology and the analysis of the complicated situation in the Moluccas. It is an investigation into the presentation of the Moluccan conflict on the Internet, its interconnection with the local level discourse, and the emergence of collective identities in cyberspace.

The function of the Internet as a medium during conflict has been little researched. Its potential for influencing a conflict is high since the Internet is almost uncontrollable, and its sites offer extremely selective, barely verifiable, information. The Internet enables the combination of traditional media - like print, radio, and TV—on one platform. Furthermore, it provides additional modes of communication, such as webpages, newsgroups, electronic mail, file transfer, and chat facilities. The change in spatial and temporal perceptions and the potential integration of text, images, and sounds in the same system fundamentally alter the character of communication.¹³ These aspects make online environments ideal playgrounds for the construction process of individual as well as group identities,¹⁴ the latter providing means for the imagination of communities, which constitute part of the Moluccan conflict. Many websites concerned with the Moluccan conflict have been created since its outbreak. I will focus on the Internet contributions of people directly involved in the conflict, which are rather scarce. I regard these sites as the most interesting, since they claim to provide first hand information, shaping the image of the conflict in the outside world.

The Internet in the Moluccan Conflict

This essay will analyze the performance of specific actors in the Moluccan conflict based on the content and the creative aspects of their Internet sites and postings, this way outlining the negotiation process of groups and identities involved in Moluccan cyberspace. Attitudes discussed in the next paragraphs do not represent the attitudes of *all* Christians and Muslims in the Moluccas, but rather show what specific actors claim to be definitive Christian or Muslim perspectives. With the presentations running along religious lines, differences within the Christian and the Muslim bloc are blurred for the audience, which is not directly involved in the discourse. Thus, dozens, if not

"Indonesia: The Web as a Weapon," *Development Dialogue* 2: The Southeast Asian Media in a Time of Crisis (1998): 96-103. David T. Hill and Krishna Sen, "Wiring the Warung to Global Gateways: The Internet in Indonesia," *Indonesia* 63, (April 1997): 67-89. David L. Marcus, "Indonesia Revolt was Net Driven," in *The Last Days of President Suharto*, ed. Edward Aspinall, Gerry van Klinken, and Herb Feith (Australia: Monash Asia Institute, 1999), pp. 73-75. Krishna Sen and David T. Hill, *Media, Culture, and Politics in Indonesia* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹² Throughout this paper the Internet is regarded as the main factor constituting cyberspace. Compare with Clinton R. Hicks, "Places in the 'Net: Experiencing Cyberspace," *Cultural Dynamics* 10,1 (1998): 49-70, and Pierre Lévy, *Cyberkultur*, 1996 [<http://www.heise.de/tp/deutsch/inhalt/co/2044/>], accessed September 27, 2001].

¹³ See Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed. *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, vol. 1 (Malden/Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), p. 356.

¹⁴ Anke Bahl, *Zwischen On- und Offline: Identität und Selbstdarstellung im Internet* (München: KoPäd Verlag, 1997), p. 132.

hundreds, of small, localized battles, not exclusively fought out between Christians and Muslims, become part of a single major struggle between Islam and Christianity on the presentation level. It is obvious that the Internet in the Moluccan case is not Habermas's ideal public sphere which many people dreamt might become a reality with the advent of the Internet. Even if everybody could theoretically have access to the Net, Yasraf Piliang argues that we cannot ignore the fact that the discourse in cyberspace is dominated by certain elites, leading personalities, and outstanding spokespersons.¹⁵ If we wish to make conclusions about the role of the Internet in the Moluccan conflict, then we must analyze the perception of the local context shared by those who are producing these Internet sites and examine how they present that context to the outside world. Through the style of presentation and discursive activities, like creating and exchanging messages on electronic bulletin boards, virtual communities evolve. They primarily exist as interest groups¹⁶ and as imaginations, which is indicating "the ways in which a community ... can textually produce itself, thus imagine itself—as well as present itself to the outside world, and thus produce an image."¹⁷ These communities provide powerful identities, which influence the national and international¹⁸ audience and thus the ongoing conflict.¹⁹

The so-called "virtual communities"²⁰ are among the most discussed subjects in the field of Internet research. Some scholars see them as totally separated from reality, while others either perceive them to be interconnected with it, or argue that these

¹⁵ Yasraf Amir Piliang, "'Public Sphere' dan 'Cyber-democracy': Media Internet Sebagai Kekuatan Alternatif," *Demokrasi & HAM* 1,2 (2000): 101-23, esp. 101, 116.

¹⁶ Jan van Dijk, *The Network Society: Social Aspects of New Media* (London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1999), p. 160. Steve Mizrach, *CyberAnthropology*, 1995 [<http://www.fiu.edu/~mizrachs/CyberAnthropology.html>, accessed September 27, 2001]. Stefan A. Schwara, "Ethnologie im Zeichen von Globalisierung und Cyberspace," *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien (MAGW)* 129 (1999): 259-73, esp. 271. Nessim Watson, "Why We Argue About Virtual Community: A Case Study of the Phish.Net Fan Community," in *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, ed. Steven G. Jones (London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1997), pp. 102-32, esp. 124.

¹⁷ Ananda Mitra, "Virtual Commonality: Looking for India on the Internet," in *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, ed. Jones, pp. 55-79, esp. 55.

¹⁸ The Internet is the main information provider for the international community, even for most of the expatriate Moluccans living in the Netherlands; it directly shapes their perception of the conflict.

¹⁹ Several reports even indicate a direct influence of the Internet on the conflict. Some Laskar Jihad volunteers from inside and outside Indonesia were attracted to join the fighting after reading reports on the Internet; specific clashes were provoked through Internet reports of violence and cruelty; the FKAWJ uses the Internet to search for members; and so forth.

²⁰ Their ideological father, Howard Rheingold, defines "virtual communities" as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace." Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (electronic edition, 1993), p. 5 [<http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book>, accessed August 22, 2001]. Rheingold has been frequently criticized for this vague and simplistic definition.

"communities" simply do not exist.²¹ I would like to refer to Benedict Anderson²² and his concept of "imagined communities," which is not at all that different from the hotly discussed "virtual communities." In discussing "imagined communities" of nations and national identity, Anderson focuses on print media, but the principle is the same. I argue that virtual communities are as real as Anderson's imagined ones, where traditional terms of spatial proximity are put aside and a more abstract level is applied.²³ Still, they are part of real life for the people concerned.²⁴ In other words, I think it does not make sense to confront "real" and "virtual" as opposed terms. I would rather speak of an offline and an online context. Online communities do not replace traditional ones, but they "have the potential to be just as fundamental to the identities of some people as the existing ethnic communities whose existence we have taken for granted for decades or even centuries."²⁵ Jan Fernback contends that this is especially true during times of crisis. She suggests that "the symbolic value of virtual community [may be] ... enough to sustain us in an era when physical community building is hampered by distrust or fear."²⁶

The Actors and their Strategies

There are in fact only three organized groups, which are directly involved in the conflict *and* which are continuously being represented on the Internet. Each of them employs other online communication facilities and other means and strategies to construct group identities. The Moluccan Christians are primarily represented on the Internet by the Crisis Center of the Diocese of Ambon (CCDA, Catholic) and Masariku Network (Protestant); the Muslims by the Forum Komunikasi Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah (FKAWJ, Communication Forum of the Followers of the Sunnah and the

²¹ See Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995) on the first position; Dijk, *The Network Society*; Steven G. Jones, ed. *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net* (London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1999); Daniel Miller and Don Slater, *The Internet—An Ethnographic Approach* (Oxford/New York: Berg, 2000); James Slevin, *The Internet and Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000) on the second position; and on the third position Steven G. Jones, "The Internet and its Social Landscape," in *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, ed. Jones, pp. 7-35, esp. 16; and Margaret L. McLaughlin, Kerry K. Osborne, and Nicole B. Ellison, "Virtual Community in a Telepresence Environment," in *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, ed. Jones, pp. 145-68, esp. 146.

²² Benedict Anderson, *Die Erfindung der Nation: Zur Karriere eines folgenreichen Konzepts* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1998), originally published as *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1983).

²³ Mitra, "Virtual Commonality," p. 58.

²⁴ Compare with Miller and Slater, *The Internet—An Ethnographic Approach*, p. 6; Piliang, "'Public Sphere' dan 'Cyber-democracy,'" p. 106, fn. 5; Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*.

²⁵ David J. Elkins, "Globalization, Telecommunication, and Virtual Ethnic Communities," *International Political Science Review* 18,2 (1997): 139-52, esp. 141.

²⁶ Jan Fernback, "The Individual within the Collective: Virtual Ideology and the Realization of Collective Principles," in *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, ed. Jones, pp. 36-54, esp. 40.

Community of the Prophet). The contributions of all three groups are obviously religiously oriented, even if this is not a conscious process in all cases.²⁷ While the Muslims direct their appeals mainly to the national Muslim community and the world *ummat*, the Christians plead mostly with international Christian associations, the international community, and the United Nations. The modes of communication used for presentations and calls to action on the Internet already entail a number of implications concerning the motives and objectives of these groups. Some of them are more conducive to an egalitarian and democratic discourse, others are not. Generally, the Internet supports uni-, bi-, and multidirectional modes of communication, each one serving different purposes. Unidirectional modes, for example, prevent online discussions and might be used to impose values and constructs on the user, rather than give him or her the opportunity to join the negotiation. The modes used by the actors in the Moluccan cyberspace are unidirectional newsletters and websites (with bi-directional email contacts) and multidirectional mailing lists. When examining these modes of online communication and the ways in which they function, one has to differentiate further between private and public cyberspace,²⁸ the former offering restricted access (for example, to mailing lists), the latter open access.

Websites give individuals as well as groups of people the chance to present themselves on the World Wide Web. Daniel Chandler²⁹ outlines how personal homepages contribute to the construction of identities on the Web. According to Chandler, the Web is a medium ideally adapted to the dynamic purposes of identity maintenance. These presentations can extend their author's potential influence in both time and space. The aesthetics and the building blocks of a webpage are of major importance for successful identity projects. Mailing lists are email discussion groups organized via a central operator, who distributes contributions among the members and has the option to act as moderator. Some mailing lists accept a restricted number of members only; others are open to the public. Usually this mode of communication is meant for multidirectional discussions, where communities and collective identities can evolve. Jeanette Hofmann³⁰ argues that reading of mailing lists as a research method offers scholars a totally new perspective on their subject. "Lurking" in mailing lists allows participation, which itself stays to a large extent unregistered and is much more useful than qualitative interviews or the conventional analysis of documents to find out about emic perspectives on the Internet. Newsletters have to be differentiated from mailing lists. They only offer a unidirectional mode of communication. Information is

²⁷ Especially when people simply have no access to information from the "other side." In fact, there is no neutral information in a conflict, even if the parties claim or at least try to be neutral. See, for example, Susan L. Carruthers, *The Media at War: Communication and Conflict in the Twentieth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p. 17.

²⁸ Piliang, "'Public Sphere' dan 'Cyber-democracy,'" p. 105.

²⁹ Daniel Chandler, *Personal Home Pages and the Construction of Identities on the Web*, 1998 [<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/short/webident.html>, accessed August 15, 2001].

³⁰ Jeanette Hofmann, "'Let A Thousand Proposals Bloom'—Mailinglisten als Forschungsquelle," in *Online Research*, ed. B. Batinic, L. Graef, A. Werner, and W. Bandilla (Goettingen: Hogrefe, 1998) [<http://duplox.wz-berlin.de/texte/gortex/>, accessed October 2, 2001].

provided by an authoritative center and distributed via email among the subscribers of the newsletter.

The performance of the cyberactors involved in the Moluccan conflict is characterized by diverse strategies: the choice of the mode of communication, the integration of text, image, and sound through a specific line of textual and visual argumentation partly complemented by sound files, and particular cyberstrategies of interaction. To study these performances, I observed these online communities by participating and lurking in their mailing lists and newsletters,³¹ and by analyzing their websites from the time they were set up.

Christian Internet Presentations

Approximately half of the population of the Central Moluccas is Christian, about 11 percent of which are Catholic. Catholics as well as Protestants are represented on the Internet. The Crisis Center spreads its reports via newsletter, Masariku by mailing list. Masariku was the first Moluccan group regularly to provide information about the conflict in the Moluccas on the Internet. Using Yahoo as a platform, the group was founded on August 17, 1999; the number of members hovers at around 210, and the language is Indonesian.³² The group's settings are: restricted membership, unmoderated, all members may post, archives for members only, e-mail attachments are permitted. According to its own description, the list is intended to distribute information on the Moluccan conflict and the trouble the churches in Indonesia experience. The organizers hope that the archive of Masariku will be used as a source for campaign and study efforts concerning the Moluccan conflict.³³

The different kinds of contributions delivered via the Masariku mailing list, mounting to more than 9,700 by August 2002, are: 1) Reports by the Masariku Network itself; 2) reports by other Christian organizations in Ambon (such as CCDA); 3) articles from the local, national, and international press and other Indonesian newsgroups such as SiaR, Apakabar and AmbonNet;³⁴ 4) reports, analyses, and letters from organizations outside the Moluccas, apparently dominated by national

³¹ Still, I was a legitimized observer, since the mailing lists and newsletters are not generally open to the public. You have to apply for subscription first, and the moderators can decide whether you are accepted or not.

³² All "local" contributions are in Indonesian, sometimes colored with a strong Ambonese accent. Only a very small number of them are translated into English. Contributions from international organizations and newspapers are mostly in English, only very sporadically translated into Indonesian.

³³ Original version: "Masariku mailing list adalah sarana distribusi informasi seputar kerusuhan di Maluku dan kerusuhan yang menimpa gereja-gereja di Indonesia. Mailing list ini disupport oleh Masariku Network, salah satu jaringan informasi dan kerja untuk Maluku. Harapan kami, arsip Masariku mailing list yang tersimpan dalam web egroups dapat dijadikan nara sumber berbagai upaya kampanye dan studi kerusuhan di Maluku" (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/masariku>).

³⁴ This mailing list was analyzed by David T. Hill and Krishna Sen, "Netizens in Combat: Conflict on the Internet in Indonesia," *Asian Studies Review* 26,2 (2002): 165-87.

and international Christian organizations; 5) requests to pray together and appeals to the community to join demonstrations in different parts of the world; and 6) comments in response to all the aforementioned contributions. All reports not edited by Masariku itself are forwarded by one of its members. Most of them fit the line of argumentation promulgated by Masariku. For its own reports, Masariku uses local informants and local, mostly untrained, journalists. Its contributions cover the Christians' situation almost exclusively. Messages are often concluded with a prayer or with an appeal to God. The regular Masariku Reports and Updates cover current news and analyses of the conflict. The Masariku Testimony series provides Christian eyewitness reports by refugees, by people who were attacked or forcibly converted, or by traumatized children and women. The Portret Maluku series frequently delivers photos of victims and damage to private and public property. The combination of these different kinds of reports creates an aura of authenticity and truth and enables the members to identify with the victims. A small percentage of the group members dominate the discourse either with their own contributions or by forwarding reports and articles they regard as relevant for Masariku Network and its purposes. The majority of members (perhaps 90 percent) are lurkers, just as I was for most of the time.

Being a Masariku member, you feel yourself almost pulled into the stream of the conflict by the number and the intensity of the messages that arrive in your email account every day. During escalations in the conflict, the members are confronted with an enormous amount of mail, offering detailed descriptions of the local situation in the villages concerned and in Ambon town itself, along with maps to orient oneself, and cruel pictures of the victims and acts of destruction; these images are delivered right into the homes of the Masariku members. After the arrival of the Laskar Jihad in the Moluccas in May 2000, the situation, which had just started to calm down, heated up again. The number of mail messages sent through Masariku exploded from 94 in May to 570 in June and 618 in July. One cannot help being emotionally touched by this bombardment of impressive documents of the sufferings of the Moluccan (Christian) population. Thus the events at the local level, including the contents as well as its dynamics, are directly transferred into cyberspace. Time and spatial references of the two levels are inter-reliant.³⁵

Using Yahoo as a platform for its group, Masariku also maintains a sort of webpage with very restricted possibilities. Via the archive facility, all members can gain access to messages and pictures whenever they like, so that the archives act as a pool of information and identity symbols. Masariku does not use any other Yahoo facilities, like chat, because of financial and personnel restrictions, according to the group owners.³⁶ However, Masariku has been able to expand its reach by the help from one of its members. This Ambonese man living outside Indonesia decided to join the

³⁵ The interdependence of the local and cyberspace dynamics has changed since mid-2001, when one of Masariku's subscribers, an Ambonese living outside of Indonesia, started dominating the mailing list with his contributions. Regardless of the current situation, he forwards many articles, reports, and commentaries concerning all kinds of subjects more or less related to the Moluccan situation. His special concern is the discussion of Islamic issues and the various Islamic movements all over the world.

³⁶ Personal communication in February 2002.

struggle of his Christian Moluccan brothers and created a webpage *Ambon Berdarah Online* (ABO, Bloody Ambon Online) in August 1999, whose content is mostly based on Masariku and CCDA information and the reports of an informant. This informant is a mysterious person, supposedly living in Ambon, whose identity is known to hardly anyone, not even the Masariku founders. ABO is obviously Christian-oriented, as the website is designed with a cross on top and uses unambiguous words in characterizing the Muslim “enemy.” The site is steadily hosted on <http://www.geocities.com>, but regularly changes its specific web address, always pointing to sites in the Moluccas where the Christians suffered most; for example, the address <http://www.geocities.com/unpatti67/index.htm> refers to the destruction of the Universitas Pattimura and the killing and the expulsion of many Christians there, while <http://www.geocities.com/waai67/index.htm> draws the visitor’s attention to Waai, a relatively large Christian village on the island of Ambon that was totally destroyed by local Muslims, Laskar Jihad, and military forces. The languages used are Indonesian and English. When one clicks on the “help” menu of the webpage, a window pops up, not asking for money, but just praying in two languages: “Help Ambonese by Praying for them in the name of Jesus Christ—Berdoalah di dalam Nama Yesus Kristus bagi Saudara-Saudara kita di Maluku.” The “link” menu is dominated by a photograph of one of the best known Protestant churches in Ambon town—the Silo church—in flames. As is true for his main informant, the owner of the website makes an effort to stay anonymous in order to escape any attacks from “the others” and to protect himself and his family.³⁷

To examine the process and the backgrounds of an evolving Masariku identity, it is essential to analyze the mailing list contributions of the first months. While a number of the founders and the active members of Masariku are also active members of the Protestant church, others are more active in human rights issues. All members are Christian, a majority is Moluccan—some living in the Moluccas, some in other regions of Indonesia, some abroad. Following the mailing list postings, one easily gets the impression that some contributors hide their “real” identities and backgrounds. Several members use pseudonyms. Hints concerning the social networks of the participants, networks on which the Masariku online community is based, only become apparent if one follows the discourse for a long period of time. Additionally, the founders repeatedly express their fear that materials provided by Masariku may get into the wrong hands, and emphasize that all Masariku members should take care that these are only spread internally within the Masariku circle. During the first months, the Masariku founders posted the group’s main goals several times: the mailing list was intended to provide accurate data about the conflict, thus correcting the one-sided, incomplete reporting on the unrest in the Moluccas. The perspective on the struggle of the church and the Christian community in the Moluccas shall explicitly be put in the foreground. According to the postings, the Internet was selected as a medium mainly because of its speed, which allowed an immediate checking and re-checking of data and reports posted by the members.

³⁷ Personal email communication in August 2002.

The Crisis Center of the Diocese of Ambon (CCDA) was established in July 1999 and has been delivering newsletters about the Moluccan conflict since June 22, 2000, directly from Ambon town.³⁸ The language used is English, the most effective for any straightforward address to the international community. Short Indonesian summaries are provided irregularly. The newsletters are written and maintained by a single person, who is very engaged and tries to report in a level manner. Since his contacts and informants are mainly on the Christian side, this proved to be a difficult, if not impossible, venture. By August 2002, 311 reports had been sent from this site. Between June and November 2001, hardly any reports were delivered, due to restricted Internet access in Ambon. The news sources used by the CCDA are mainly the local RRI (Radio Republik Indonesia), TVRI (TV Republik Indonesia) and the local newspapers, *Siwalima* and *Suara Maluku*. Masariku also refers to reports from these two dailies, which are accused by the Muslims of being Christian instruments.³⁹ In addition to these sources, CCDA consults local informants, reports from other parishes throughout the Moluccas, and the reports and analyses delivered by the lawyers' team of the church (Tim Pengacara Gereja, TPG).⁴⁰ The Crisis Center does not provide an archive, but re-sends old reports on request. Otherwise, the reports are accessible via several international websites related to the Moluccan tragedy. According to the author of the newsletter, these reports are further distributed by other mailing lists, which multiplies their reach enormously. Aside from its reports on recent incidents, the CCDA provides letters concerning the situation in the Moluccas delivered by the Christian church community to the president of Indonesia or to international organizations like the UN.

Muslim Internet Presentations

The Muslim perspective on the conflict is mainly presented by the FKAWJ, an Islamicist organization that was founded in 1998 and went online in 2000.⁴¹ It has

³⁸ Even if public discussion is not promoted, the author of the newsletters was always very cooperative in answering emails and requests. The communication was therefore definitively more effective than communication via the Masariku mailing list. When one placed a request, comment, or question on the list, there was absolutely no guarantee of an answer.

³⁹ Even if these dailies claim to be and try to be neutral, this is definitely not always possible, particularly when the conflict is intense. Their offices are located in Christian areas and all reporters are Christian, particularly since the editors of *Suara Maluku* launched another daily, *Ambon Ekspres*, located in the Muslim area. The FKAWJ even accuses the TVRI and RRI of siding with the Christians, an allegation which is completely unfounded, according to the head of the Catholic Crisis Center.

⁴⁰ The *Tim Pengacara Gereja* was founded by the Moluccan Protestant Church and the Diocese Ambon in 1999 and is recognized by all Christian churches in the Moluccas (CCDA Newsletter, September 26, 2000).

⁴¹ For the religious philosophy and the background of the Forum Komunikasi Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah (FKAWJ) and its leader, Ja'far Umar Thalib, see: George Junus Aditjondro, *Notes on the Jihad Forces in Maluku*, July 31, 2000 [<http://www.malra.org/posko/malra.php3?oid=234885>, accessed October 3, 2000]; Noorhaidi Hasan, "Faith and Politics: The Rise of the Laskar Jihad in the Era of Transition in Indonesia," *Indonesia* 73, (April 2002): 145-69; Noorhaidi Hasan, "In Search of Identity: The Contemporary Islamic Communities in Southeast Asia," *Studia Islamika* 7,3 (2000): 67-110; Noorhaidi Hasan, "Islamic

forty-seven branches all over Indonesia, one of them in Ambon town. The FKAJW provided a solid foundation for the formation of the so-called *Laskar Jihad*—Muslim fighters for the Holy War—who were sent to the Moluccas in April 2000. The FKAJW and the *Laskar Jihad* are regularly put in the same “ideological drawer” as many other recently emerging Islamic extremist groups in Indonesia,⁴² thus contributing to the image of a fundamentalist Islam that is in progress worldwide. In the Moluccan context, the FKAJW seems to be one of the forces co-ordinating these different groups, and it is definitely the most notable speaker and actor on the Internet.⁴³ Since the government was not able to provide a solution to the violence during the Moluccan crisis, the FKAJW stepped forward with its own proposals. They provided their organization, their staff, their soldiers, their influence, and their means to give a voice to the Moluccan Muslims, to help them against the Christian attackers, and to restore peace and order in the Moluccas according to their own ideas and prescriptions which they regards as appropriate for all Muslims in Indonesia. The head of the FKAJW and of the *Laskar Jihad*, Ja’far Umar Thalib, is the most outstanding charismatic leader on the Muslim side. There seems to be no one comparable on the Christian side, at least not in cyberspace. Moderate local Muslims do not have a voice at all on the Internet.

The FKAJW presents itself using quite an elaborate website and a newsletter. It uses Yahoo as its group platform for sending its messages, since Yahoo offers this service for free. The mailing list was founded on May 17, 2000; at the end of 2001 there were 1,351 members, and the language used is Indonesian. The group’s settings are quite different from Masariku’s: open membership, all messages require approval, only the moderator may post, public archives, e-mail attachments are permitted. By choosing these options from the Yahoo mailing list facilitator, FKAJW is able to produce a unidirectional newsletter, thus explicitly avoiding any open discussions.⁴⁴ According to its self-description on the Yahoo site, this list intends to provide regular, up-to-date information about jihad in the Moluccas and the *Laskar Jihad* to its readers. The *Laskar Jihad* and the Mujahidin in the Moluccas are the exclusive sources of information.⁴⁵

Radicalism and the Crisis of the Nation-State,” *ISIM Newsletter* 7 (2001): 12; and Kirsten E. Schulze, “Laskar Jihad and the Conflict in Ambon,” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* IX,1 (2002): 57-69.

⁴² During the last years, several “Muslim paramilitary civilian groups” have emerged (see Hasan, “Faith and Politics”). All of them have different backgrounds, various motives, and other political and religious ideas. See especially Robert W. Hefner, “Islam and Nation in the Post-Suharto Era,” in *The Politics of Post-Suharto Indonesia*, ed. Adam Schwarz and Jonathan Paris (New York, 1999), pp. 40-72, and Hasan, “Faith and Politics,” Hasan, “In Search of Identity,” and Hasan, “Islamic Radicalism.”

⁴³ When I mention “Laskar Jihad” in the following paragraphs, I am always referring to members of the FKAJW.

⁴⁴ See <http://www.laskarjihad.or.id>, Tanya Jawab (FAQ). The distribution of the newsletters via email was halted on October 4, 2001. According to the webmaster of the FKAJW, this happened because of the advertisements showing bikini-clad women that were often attached to their news by Yahoo (personal email communication, November 28, 2001). More than 600 reports were sent in between March 2000 and October 2001.

⁴⁵ Original version: “Milis Resmi Laskar Jihad Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah. Berisi berita terbaru jihad di Maluku dan Laskar Jihad Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah. Sumber berita langsung dari Laskar Jihad dan Mujahidin

The homepage of the FKAJ⁴⁶ offers the most recent news on ongoing conflicts in Indonesia in which the Laskar Jihad are involved, with focus directed on the Moluccas. When opening the webpage, one is immediately confronted with the Laskar Jihad's interpretation of jihad in the Moluccan case: the logo of the Laskar Jihad fills the background, showing two crossed sabers with the opened Koran in the center and the Islamic creed written in Arabic letters above. The site's title declares "Jihad in Ambon: Victory or Martyrdom" and is bordered by the picture of a bullet. This daily updated news page is completed by citations from the Koran,⁴⁷ a list of sponsors, and information on diverse bank accounts to facilitate donations. All material and information is exclusively provided by FKAJ members. No links to other sources are given.⁴⁸ Besides news archives (*Berita*), the site also features general information about the Laskar Jihad (*Tentang Laskar Jihad* and *Alamat Laskar Jihad*), forms for donations (*Infak*), applications for becoming a Laskar Jihad in Ambon, and email contact with the forum. The message of the FKAJ is strengthened through the addition of relevant articles (*Artikel*), press releases (*Pernyataan Pers*), authoritative treatises and fatwas concerning jihad (*Risalah Jihad*), and a section listing frequently asked questions (*Tanya Jawab*). A gallery section provides pictures and maps showing territory captured by the Laskar Jihad in Ambon; a download section offers visitors images for their use like wallpaper motifs and the logo of the Laskar Jihad (crossed sabers), and includes sound files, so that one can listen, for example, to the religious speech given by Ja'far Umar Thalib at the mass meeting (*Tabligh Akbar*) at the Senayan stadium, Jakarta, in April 2000, just before he sent Muslim fighters to the Moluccas. The voice of the FKAJ's charismatic leader is thus piped into every visitor's home, so that this extended audience comes under the influence of Ja'far Umar Thalib's impressive voice as he outlines the jihad resolution for the Moluccas. It must have a powerful impact on the visitors to the site, who can simultaneously listen to Ja'far, read the news, look at pictures of burned Muslims, make contact with the people behind the webpage by email, and fill out forms for donations or recruitment. The Internet, with its integrative potential, is able to address various senses at the same time, thus far exceeding other media in their possibilities, their effectiveness, and their reach.

The Laskar Jihad website is unmistakably a religious project, which regards the Moluccan conflict as part of a struggle against a Judeo-Christian dominance

Maluku yang disampaikan ke DPP Forum Komunikasi Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah. Berita akan di-update hampir tiap hari, Insya Allah" (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/laskarjihad>).

⁴⁶ The website was restructured in May 2002. The article refers to the former version, which was still accessible via the new website (<http://www.laskarjihad.or.id/old.htm>). Both sites were closed down in October 2002, a short while after the FKAJ officially dissolved.

⁴⁷ Al-Baqarah: 120 and 190: Verse 120 accuses the Christians and Jews of consistently trying to convert others, and Verse 190 appeals to all Muslims to fight against those who are fighting them.

⁴⁸ In the beginning, the FKAJ site provided a frame with links to other sites concerned with the Muslims in the Moluccas, to Rustam Kasor's books, and to other Muslim and Jihad websites. The links were deleted because Western visitors to the webpage claimed that these virtual links reflected actual alliances between the FKAJ and organizations that produced the other sites; this claim is denied by the FKAJ (personal communication with the webmaster of the FKAJ, February 13, 2002).

worldwide. The only authorities accepted are the sources provided by Islam as they are interpreted by Ja'far Umar Thalib, such as the Koran, the Sharia, and fatwas of well-known Muslim clerics. The Laskar Jihad website constitutes an authentic symbol of the true Islamic religion—certainly this is the way it perceives itself—and seeks to inculcate in visitors a “pure” Islamic group identity, forestalling any negotiations.⁴⁹ While most Christians try to avoid talking of a religious conflict, the FKAJ explicitly speaks of it. They often use the terms *perang salib* (crusade) or *perang sabil* (holy war) in their reports. They explicitly state that the purpose of the mailing list is to spread news about the Moluccas, the Laskar Jihad Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah, and the religious conflict that is continuing in the Moluccas.⁵⁰ The goal of the FKAJ is the Islamization of the Moluccas and the application of the Muslim law (Sharia) throughout Indonesia. Therefore, the Islamic community in Indonesia has to be purified by stamping out all kinds of misconduct, especially prostitution, gambling, and drunkenness. Accordingly, the Website and the mailing list report of several actions that were taken in the Moluccas by local Muslim organizations in co-operation with the Laskar Jihad to destroy and ban alcoholic drinks and close down places of prostitution; in one case, a man who committed adultery was killed by stoning.

Textual Argumentation

Following the discourse about the Moluccan conflict on the Internet, one can outline the different constructs of reality in the manner discussed by Niklas Luhmann. According to constructivist theories, reality is always constructed, rather than objectively given, since nobody can *know* reality by cognition; one can only observe the way people, organizations, the media, and others construct reality and then compare different constructs.⁵¹ Accordingly, each party has its own view and line of argumentation. The main argument of the Muslims is that the GPM (Gereja Protestan Maluku, Moluccan Protestant Church), the RMS movement (Republik Maluku Selatan, Republic of the South Moluccas), which is supposedly supported by the Netherlands, and the “Christian-Nationalist” PDI-P (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan) initiated the conflict.⁵² The Moluccan case is seen by the Muslim parties as part of a Christianization project going on throughout Indonesia. For them, Christianity in the Moluccas is equivalent to the RMS—sarcastically called Republik Maluku Serani (Republic of the Christian Moluccas)—thus implying that all Christians agree with the

⁴⁹ Accordingly, Hasan argued that the FKAJ elevates itself to become central authority for establishing identity by providing strong guidelines and a coherent image of Islam in times of crisis, when all other identities seem to vanish. See Hasan, “Faith and Politics.”

⁵⁰ <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/laskarjihad/links>.

⁵¹ Niklas Luhmann, *Die Realität der Massenmedien*, 2nd, extended ed. (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1996), p. 17-18.

⁵² This theory was raised on January 28, 1999 in a press conference organized by a leader of the Ambonese Muslim community in Jakarta, together with the radical Muslim organization KISDI (Komite Indonesia untuk Solidaritas Dunia Islam). See Human Rights Watch, “Report on Violence in Ambon,” A Human Rights Watch Report, 11,1 (C) (1999): 9.

RMS in advocating the sovereignty and separation of the Moluccas from the Indonesian state. This thesis was elaborated and formalized in at least three books by the retired Ambonese General Rustam Kastor, the full versions of which are also available online;⁵³ Rustam Kastor is often called the chief ideologue of the Laskar Jihad. Perhaps his “prophecies” were self-fulfilling, for at the end of the year 2000 the FKM (Front Kedaulatan Maluku, Moluccan Sovereignty Front) was founded by a Christian doctor in Ambon. The FKM connected itself to the RMS movement (the RMS was proclaimed in 1950) by an official declaration on December 18, 2000, and it has since become an important factor in the conflict; it is constantly being attacked by the FKAJW.⁵⁴

The main argument of the Christians is that the conflict resulted from the Islamization policies of the central government in the 1990s. While approximately 90 percent of the Indonesian population is Muslim, the percentages of Muslims and Christians in the Moluccas were fairly balanced for a long time. This balance was disrupted by the massive transmigration policy of the central government, during a time when spontaneous migration also brought large numbers of Muslims from outside the region into the Moluccas. Christians also tend to position the main causes for the atrocities outside of the Moluccas. According to their narrative, provocateurs are supposed to have disturbed the already weakened harmony between Christians and Muslims. The real separatists are the radical Muslims from outside the Moluccas who want to introduce the Sharia law in the region and the whole of Indonesia, giving it precedence over the national Indonesian civil law and thus discarding the Pancasila and its principle of religious freedom.

While both sides naturally refer to the same offline events, these events are interpreted and presented in totally different ways. The Christians argue that the national media in Indonesia have been biased in their reports of the conflict, only covering news of fatalities suffered by Muslims, some of which were not even true, and even fabricating outright lies to discredit Christians. The Muslims, on the other hand, are convinced that the local and the international media present and support the Christians’ point of view and totally ignore the sufferings of the Muslim population. Two outstanding and much discussed examples of ongoing events that both sides feel have been unfairly reported concern the issues of forced conversions and the FKM. Each side claims that forced conversions have taken place, but of course Muslims insist that people of their own religion are being forced to become Christian, while Christians contend that they have been the usual victims of this practice. The most prominent case involved hundreds of Christians converted to Islam on the islands of Kesui and Teor (southeast of Seram), an event which prompted several regional, national, and international organizations to visit in order to discover whether these

⁵³ The online-books are provided by Islam Net Indonesia (<http://media.isnet.org.id/ambon/Kastor/index.html>) and <http://listen.to/Rustam-Kastor>. The first book made available was published in early 2000 and became a bestseller in Indonesia: *Fakta, Data dan Analisa Konspirasi Politik RMS dan Kristen Menghancurkan Ummat Islam di Ambon—Maluku. Mengungkap Konflik Berdarah Antar Ummat Beragama dan Suara Hati Warga Muslim yang Teraniaya* (Yogyakarta: Wihdah Press, 2000).

⁵⁴ The Moluccan church and the Dutch government officially distanced themselves from the FKM movement.

former Christians were forcibly converted. Muslims maintain that these people voluntarily changed their religion. Christians deny that any forced conversions of Muslims have taken place, and so far no one has really succeeded in delivering nationally and internationally accepted proofs of forced conversions of Muslims to Christianity.

Forced Conversions

Both sides support their accusations with detailed descriptions of the conversion process and eyewitness reports. Masariku delivers several accounts of the Islamization process in various areas. In Report 131, one of the Masariku founders, a minister of the Protestant church in the Moluccas, writes about forced conversions as consequence of the Moluccan conflict: "*Peralihan Agama Secara Paksa Sebagai Dampak Kerusuhan Maluku*."⁵⁵ He refers to the violation of the victims' human rights by the culprits, the sufferings of the persons affected, and the absence of any constructive and effective measures taken to prosecute these crimes by the government, which thus fails in its responsibility of protecting one of the country's minorities, the Christians. According to him, the forced conversions have a political dimension, since this issue effectively arouses the emotions of the masses and thereby prolongs the conflict. Masariku describes several examples of forced conversions from the Central as well as the Northern Moluccas. It provides the victims' profiles, and information about how their villages were attacked by Muslims. These Muslims are described usually dressed in long white or green robes, partially with Arabic writing on them, shouting "Allahu Akbar" and throwing bombs, creating terror that finally results in the forced conversions of men as well as women, adults as well as children, priests as well as lay folk.⁵⁶

The case of Berthy, a sixteen-year-old boy from Liliama, Eastern Seram, is presented by Masariku in an especially impressive way.⁵⁷ The victim's own testimony is recorded in an extensive report, set alongside the general background information. Additionally, photos are provided showing Berthy as a laughing boy who attracts our sympathy; next to this photo, the posting confronts the audience with a close-up picture of his circumcised genitals. In other postings, Masariku provides more of these very intimate pictures, additional graphic portrayals of the unimaginable and cruel situation. In order to mark the outstanding importance to attract the attention of the national, as well as the international, audience to these violations of human rights, Berthy's testimony is recorded in Bahasa Indonesia as well as in English. His narrative

⁵⁵ "Forced conversion as consequence of the Moluccan conflict" (translated by the author), Masariku mailing list, Report 131, April 7, 2001. This message was sent via the Masariku mailing list (masariku@egroups.com) on the date mentioned, and is available for Masariku members at their Yahoo archive (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/masariku>). The same is valid for all references to "Masariku mailing list" in this essay.

⁵⁶ Masariku mailing list, Testimony 6, March 18, 2001.

⁵⁷ Masariku mailing list, April 7, 2001.

offers details of the various conversion rituals allegedly applied by the Muslims and descriptions of the traumatic experiences Berthy suffered while fleeing. According to the narrative, besides being circumcised, the former Christians had to say the *sahadat* (Muslim creed), take a bath in the river to purify themselves of the filthy dogs and pigs they had eaten, change their clothes and even their names. To reinforce its message regarding forced conversions, the Christian side forwards contributions from the international press, such as an article published in the *Seattle Times*, March 26, 2001, titled, "A War Only God Sees: Hidden from the Outside World, a Conflict of Death, Religion, Mutilation." It is a story about a young girl forced to convert to Islam:

With her home destroyed and her church burned to the ground, 14-year-old Marina Rumakur knew there was only one way to survive: Convert to Islam and submit to a painful rite of mutilation. Trapped by Muslim extremists on the tiny Indonesian island of Kesui, she and more than 900 fellow Christians surrendered. Hundreds of Catholics and Protestants were forced to undergo female genital excision or male circumcision with kitchen knives and razor blades as the island was "purified" of all its Christians. The victims ranged from a 6-year-old girl to a 74-year-old woman. "They said if we didn't convert to their religion, they would cut our throats," the teenager recounted.

These reports of hundreds of Christians being converted by force are challenged by the Muslim side. According to the FKAJW, all these people converted voluntarily.⁵⁸ In reaction to the rising number of reports describing forced conversions by Muslims of Christians, the FKAJW published an article about some Muslims who were supposedly taken hostage by Christians for more than a year.⁵⁹ One of them was able to flee and tell his story to the FKAJW; according to the reporter, he could not stop crying as he spoke of his ordeal. Following the same pattern as the Christian presentations, the FKAJW recounts the experiences of their forcibly converted Muslim brothers ("*dipaksa memeluk agama Kristen*," forced to convert to Christianity) in the Northern Moluccas, providing general information in addition to narratives illustrating the fates of the victims. The Muslims were reportedly attacked during prayer time, forced to eat pig, convert to Christianity, and sing Christian songs. Many allegedly had to watch as their wives or husbands, parents or children, were killed in a sadistic and bestial manner by Christians.

FKM and RMS

The other issue that preoccupies these websites and mailing lists has to do with the FKM and RMS. The Laskar Jihad argue that all Christians and the Church in the Moluccas are followers of the FKM or the RMS and the other way around: "*Gereja*

⁵⁸ FKAJW mailing list, webpage, December 18, 2000. This message was sent via the FKAJW mailing list (laskarjihad-owner@egroups.com) on the date mentioned, and is/was available at its Yahoo archive (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/laskarjihad>) and on their homepage (<http://www.laskarjihad.or.id>). The same is valid for all references to "FKAJW mailing list, webpage" in this essay.

⁵⁹ FKAJW mailing list, webpage, March 16, 2001.

*Dibalik RMS, RMS Dibalik Gereja.*⁶⁰ Christians are therefore labeled as *kelompok separatis* (separatist group). In all the news, reports, and messages sent via the FKAWJ mailing list or offered on their webpage, there is hardly any one who neglects to mention either FKM or RMS,⁶¹ which are regarded as the most powerful forces behind the Moluccan conflict: “RMS Terbukti Dalang Rusuh Di Maluku.”⁶² In these postings, RMS guerrillas are claimed to be responsible for prolonging the conflict, attacking school children as well as the TNI, and for slaughtering hundreds of innocent Muslims in the Central and Northern Moluccas.⁶³ The result is a quite fixed and monotonous line of textual argumentation, which is repeated again and again. For the Christian performers on the Internet, the FKM and the RMS do not figure as significant issues, since they are convinced that only a very small percentage of the Moluccan population follows the ideology of the FKM. Additionally, history shows that the RMS in the 1950s was definitely no exclusive Christian movement; Muslims were involved as well. Accordingly, one of the Masariku founders dismisses the FKAWJ complaints against the RMS as expressions of an RMS phobia.⁶⁴

Visual Argumentation

Photographs posted on the Internet by the FKAWJ, as well as by Masariku, play a significant role in presenting the conflict to the audience. Siegfried Frey⁶⁵ writes about the power of images and shows the influence of visualization in the media on the viewers. Pictures are judged by the viewer as being much closer to reality than texts, and thus they strengthen the image of authenticity. Pictures can also be used to serve certain purposes, to provoke emotions and the audience's impression that they are present at the event and share the agony of the people depicted.⁶⁶ Each religious community displays only pictures of the situation on their side. The main subjects covered are victims, refugees, destroyed houses and religious buildings, and graffiti. Both sides show pictures of wounded and dead people. The photographs from the first months of the conflict, when mostly traditional weapons like machetes and bows and arrows were used, delivered especially dreadful images. The pictures of a

⁶⁰ “The church behind the RMS, the RMS behind the church” (translated by the author), FKAWJ mailing list, webpage, February 20, 2001.

⁶¹ No difference is made between these two movements and their particular historical manifestations.

⁶² “It has been proved that the RMS is the wire puller behind the Moluccan conflict” (translated by the author), FKAWJ mailing list, webpage, December 25, 2000.

⁶³ FKAWJ mailing list, webpage, January 11, 2001; March 23, 2001; May 19, 2001; July 25, 2001; and September 5, 2001.

⁶⁴ Masariku mailing list, February 19, 2001.

⁶⁵ Siegfried Frey, *Die Macht des Bildes: Der Einfluss der nonverbalen Kommunikation auf Kultur und Politik* (Bern: Hans Huber Verlag, 1999).

⁶⁶ See for example Carruthers, *The Media at War: Communication and Conflict in the Twentieth Century*, p. 194. Miles Hudson and John Stanier, *War and the Media* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 315. Susan D. Moeller, *Shooting War: Photography and the American Experience of Combat* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), p. 4.

destroyed mosque in Northern Halmahera, which was packed with people, mainly women and children, when it was set on fire, so that many burned alive, gained sad prominence. These pictures were circulated on Java and put on the Net at the beginning of 2000,⁶⁷ understandably triggering enormous outrage among the Indonesian Muslim population and the decision of the FKAJW to send their troops to the Moluccas.

Christian and Muslim cyberactors stress the role of children both as victims and as fighters. The FKAJW proudly reports on the so-called *Laskar Rakitan* or *Laskar Plastik* (self-made, or plastic, soldiers), referring to Moluccan youngsters who try to dress like the FKAJW members and to join their struggle. Masariku publishes pictures of the Christian child warriors, the so-called *Agas*, in their *Portret Maluku* series. They are presented wearing uniforms, Bibles around their necks or in their pockets, and wooden swords in their hands; outfitted in this way, boys as well as girls are shown listening wide-eyed to someone outside the frame of the photograph. The subtitle of the picture reflects Masariku's intentions: "No One Gives Them Another Choice, so they have decided to kill or to be killed."⁶⁸ It is the sad story about a generation that has grown up during wartime and has had no choice but to accept its rules and join the fighting, or to die. Looking into these children's eyes, as another subtitle suggests, the audience is directly confronted with the hopeless and inhuman situation of these children. The Muslim websites similarly offer graphic portraits. As proof of the Christians' inhumanity, the FKAJW shows pictures of the Poliklinik in Ambon town, which had been maintained by the medical team of the Laskar Jihad before it was destroyed in an attack by a special military unit in June 2001; the FKAJW alleges the military in this case sided with the Christians and acted on their behalf. According to the Laskar Jihad, the destruction deprived all patients of their hopes to recover and to survive. On the other hand, the Laskar Jihad webpage proudly presents pictures of a destroyed Christian university (Universitas Kristen Indonesia Maluku, UKIM) in Ambon town that was set on fire by some Mujahidin in the year 2000 as a supposed counterstrike to Christian attacks on Muslims.

The religious character of the Moluccan conflict is underscored by the postings of photographs depicting destroyed and burned churches and mosques. The FKAJW website, for example, displays a picture subtitled "*Salib di Atap Masjid*" (Cross on a mosque's roof) showing a mosque that was burned down. Its minaret was exchanged for a cross and the remaining walls were covered with graffiti insulting Muhammad the prophet ("*Penghinaan Terhadap Rasulullah*," Insults to the Prophet). Masariku presents photographs of the burning Silo church, one of the central Protestant churches in Ambon town. The accompanying pictures, showing a service held in the totally burned-out church, are quite impressive and express the solidarity of the Christian community. Another photo portrays the worship service held on December 23, 2000 in Ambon for Christian refugees from Kesui and Teor.⁶⁹ Both Christian and Muslim Internet presentations show pictures of graffiti scrawled on the walls of destroyed buildings,

⁶⁷ For example at <http://www.malu.ku.org>, accessed in February 2000.

⁶⁸ Masariku mailing list, February 2, 2001.

⁶⁹ Masariku mailing list, January 25 and 26, 2001.

pictures that further strengthen the image that this is a religious war. The graffiti "messages" are often crudely worded religious insults. Christians depict inscriptions like "*Yesus Anjing*" (Jesus is a dog), "*Yesus anak babi*" (Jesus is a pig's child), and "*Tiada Tuhan yang gondrong selain Yesus*" (There is no unkempt god besides Jesus). The FKAWJ website shows messages offensive to Islam, such as "*Islam Muka Lonte*" (Islam has the face of a whore) or "*Islam Puki*" (Islam is a vagina).

The Laskar Jihad use their visual arguments as proof for their achievements (maps show territories captured by the Muslims, pictures depict destroyed Christian buildings, etc.) in the struggle against impending Christianization, and as an exhibition of the inhumanity and the power of their Judeo-Christian enemies. Masariku members active in Ambon and its surroundings regularly post photography series and announcements of their videos, explicitly stating that this visual material is used to further the Masariku campaigns in search of financial, moral, and legal support worldwide and as proof of the sufferings of their Christian brothers and the brutality of the radical Muslims. According to its postings, Masariku wants to create a database listing all destroyed churches in the Moluccan region.

Interaction between Internet Performers: Cross-posting and Flame Wars

While each side is delivering its own line of argumentation, its selected pictures and sounds, the parties involved also interact in a specific way in cyberspace. This is particularly interesting, since the cyberactors are not able to communicate or interact with each other on the local level, either because direct communication is simply not possible given the current situation, or because they don't want to. Interaction on the Internet does not take place in a direct way, as face-to-face communication, but indirectly. The two sides refer to each other's contributions, members, actions on the local level, as well as their wider communities and circles. As particular Internet strategies, they use methods like (inverse) cross-posting and flame wars. "Posting" means placing a message for distribution into a mailing list or newsgroup that one regularly attends or has officially joined. "Cross-posting" means putting the same message additionally in a list where it does not fit in, usually for provocation and in order to incite a discourse or conflict on the Internet.⁷⁰ The Internet performers in the Moluccan context use cross-posting in an inverse way. They forward messages from other mailing lists or newsgroups into their list in order effectively to comment on, criticize, or mutilate them, while remaining in a safe position (at home), or in order to elicit a reaction and support from the other members.⁷¹ Masariku is the group that most often employs the (inverse) cross-posting strategy. It frequently cross-posts news reports from the Laskar Jihad into its own list. The contents of the messages are left unchanged, but their headings ("Subject" field) are mutilated. Popular headings are

⁷⁰ Mitra, "Virtual Commonality: Looking for India on the Internet," p. 67.

⁷¹ In this way the poster strives to shape a united response in his "home-list" to communally perceived threats, which further strengthens the metaphor of community as a description for what occurs online. See Watson, "Why We Argue About Virtual Community," p. 119.

"*Laskar Jahat*" (Bad Warriors) or "*Laskar Jahanam*" (Damned Warriors) and "*Provokasi*" (Provocation) or "*Propaganda Laskar Jahat*" (Propaganda of the bad warriors), or, in English, "The Voice of Satan." Another tactic used by Masariku is to cross-post parts of the Laskar Jihad website—for example the list of donors of the FKAJ— and let those speak for themselves.

The webmaster of the site *Ambon Berdarah Online* initiated another quite brilliant strategy to inform its audience about its enemy and, at the same time, discredit them. Into his webpage he integrated a link to a mutilated FKAJ webpage, which the author called "*Jihad Jihad*" (Bad Jihad):⁷² "You are visiting the official site of Laskar Jihad: 'Jihad in Ambon,' www.LaskarPlastik.or.id." The make-up and design of the page are identical to the design of the Laskar Jihad's actual webpage, only some menus and specific contents have been strategically altered. A menu point "About Jihad"—a play on words—is added, providing information about the sociological origin of the Laskar Jihad, their financial background, their political party links, their chief ideologue (Kastor), and their military and police backing. The "Search" menu is now called "Search in Jihad." Where the FKAJ's actual gallery section shows pictures of Muslim victims only, the "Pictures of our Victims" section of the ABO version shows Christian fatalities instead, and in the section "Our Achievements," graffiti insulting to Christianity are depicted. Even if ABO gets most of its visual materials from Masariku, its presentations render the site more user-friendly to the international community, and also more suggestive, since ABO provides translations of the graffiti in English and adds English subtitles to the pictures. Additionally, historical pictures are presented offering evidence for the Muslims' participation in the RMS movement.

The anonymity provided by the Internet to anyone who wants it poses one of the main problems in Internet research and, at the same time, offers distinct strategic advantages to Internet users who prefer to remain anonymous. Anonymity can be advantageous to cross-posters, but problematic for the conflict itself. "Real" identities can be hidden from the public. People can also pretend to be somebody else and in this way try to ridicule or harm an opponent. Mailing lists (or websites) which exist for a longer period of time and whose membership is quite stable offer a way around this problem. If one follows the discourse long enough, identities and motives—"the politics of identity"⁷³—of the diverse participants become apparent to the observer. The use of pseudonyms and anonymity is common in the Moluccan cyberspace. Some people borrow the identities of others either in order to discredit the person whose name they have adopted or to add comments and insults to the discourse without fearing prosecution. Masariku, for example, warned about someone who was using an email address very similar to the FKAJ's address, differing only in the addition of a hyphen (laskar-jihad@yahoogroups.com instead of laskarjihad@yahoogroups.com); this address was used to spread insults against the Christians. Other Internet users adopted pseudonyms that enabled them to sneak into Masariku to spread provocative

⁷² http://www.geocities.com/unpatti67/jahad_evil.htm, accessed beginning of 2002.

⁷³ Lori Kendall, "Recontextualizing 'Cyberspace': Methodological Considerations for On-Line Research," in *Doing Internet Research*, ed. Jones, pp. 57-74, esp. 71.

messages and even viruses. Anonymity is also a strategy to protect an author, for example the webmaster of ABO. It annoys Muslims that they have not been able to discover who is behind this Christian cyberweapon. In a reader's letter published on the FKAJW website under the headline "*Website Parlente*" (Lying Website), a Muslim visitor complained against the anonymity of ABO, asserting that this secrecy proved the authors' bad intentions and their insincerity:

Mengapa Website atau Home Page Orang Kristen (OBET=Robert)⁷⁴ yaitu Ambon Berdarah OnLine itu tidak jelas alamat dan penanggung jawab situsnya seperti yang dimiliki oleh Laskarjihad.or.id? Sehingga seenaknya saja memuat berita yang banyak dan sangat banyak dustanya? Ataupun memang mental mereka memang hanya mental pendusta, pengecut dan parlente? Mohon dijawab segera, Insya ALLAH saya tunggu jawabannya.⁷⁵

The language used in the Moluccan cyberspace for commenting on "the other side" is sometimes quite rude. Rude, insulting contributions and comments follow the cyberspace tradition of so-called "flame wars." As Sherry Turkle explains, "a flame war is computer culture jargon for an incendiary expression of differences of opinion. In flame wars, participants give themselves permission to state their positions in strong, even outrageous terms with little room for compromise."⁷⁶ Ananda Mitra argues that "power is exercised through the process of 'flaming,' where the errant voices are 'burnt out' and subdued and quieted."⁷⁷ This seems to be a particularly online phenomenon, since several Internet researchers noticed that "many people who are perfectly polite in everyday life seem to forget their manners in their e-mail."⁷⁸ Even if the Moluccan cyberactors do not directly contact and attack each other via email, they pursue another kind of flame war. The FKAJW webpage uses a wide range of verbal abuses to insult the Christians. As mentioned above, the acronym "RMS" is translated as Republik Maluku Serani (Republic of the Christian Moluccas), which denies the fact that in the 1950s Muslims were also involved in the RMS movement. The Christian followers of the RMS are called "*Orang-orang kafir*" (unbelievers or

⁷⁴ Obet has been the label for the Christians since the broadcast of a spot on TVRI that was supposed to help to pacify the situation in the Northern Moluccas. It portrayed the story of two friends, a Muslim boy called Hassan and a Christian boy called Robert, engaging in reconciliation efforts. Unfortunately, the broadcast seems to have sharpened the divisions in the community rather than fostering reconciliation: Christians have been called "Obet" and Muslims "Acang" since then, the nicknames of these boys.

⁷⁵ <http://www.laskarjihad.or.id>, March 19, 2001. Translation by the author: "Why does the Website or the Homepage of the Christians (OBET=Robert), Ambon Berdarah Online, not provide a clear address and information about the person responsible for the site as the Laskar Jihad do on their website? In order easily to spread a lot of news that is not true? Or, is their mentality the mentality of a liar, a coward, a criminal? Please answer quickly, Insya Allah, I wait for your answer."

⁷⁶ Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, p. 13, fn. 4.

⁷⁷ Mitra, "Virtual Commonality," p. 74, fn. 11.

⁷⁸ Cees J. Hamelink, *The Ethics of Cyberspace* (London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2000), p. 42 (following Arlene Rinaldi, <http://www.fau.edu/rinaldi/net/dis.html>, no longer available). See also Jim Jordan, *Cyberpower: The Culture and Politics of Cyberspace and the Internet* (London/New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 86, and Slevin, *The Internet and Society*, p. 141.

heathens), and the Christian team investigating the Kesui case is described as the "Church Liars Team Lying Again." Especially in reference to the forced conversion debate and the RMS issue, Christians in general are named *kutu busuk* (bed bug), *anjing* (dog), or *babi* (pig), and are purported to be dirty and smelly because they consume pigs and dogs. In order to purify the Moluccas, according to the FKAWJ, all Christians must be either converted from their religion or forced to leave the Moluccan islands; for example the island of Buru: "*Insya Allah kaum muslimin akan bergerak ke pulau Buru, guna membersihkan Pulau Buru dari Kutu busuk kristen.*"⁷⁹

Reporting by the Christians is far less emotional and insulting. Nevertheless, there are also some exceptions among the Masariku members. Although they don't use profanity as frequently as the Laskar Jihad, they nevertheless know how to discredit Muslims using unambiguous words and metaphors. One contributor regularly tries to ridicule the Muslim community by making or citing jokes at the expense of Islam and its followers. Once he forwarded a narrative that compared Muslims with children asking: "Have you ever noticed how much is common between beliefs and thinking of little children and grown up Muslims?" The author asks his audience to consider, for example, that

Children believe everything in their storybooks without a question; Muslims believe everything in their religious books without a question... Children dream of visiting Disneyland one day, and when this dream comes true it is the happiest time of their lives; Muslims dream of visiting Mecca one day, and when this dream comes true, it is the happiest time of their lives... When in Disneyland, children wear Disney character T-shirts and Mickey Mouse caps and very excitedly follow big crowds to different points of fascination; when in Mecca Muslims wear special clothes, shave their heads/wear hijab and very excitedly follow big crowds to different points of fascination... Children pretend to beat the imaginary monster with a real stick; Muslims pretend to beat the imaginary Satan by throwing real stones... Children believe that all the good kids will be rewarded with candy and all the bad kids will be punished by spanking; Muslims believe that all the Muslims will be rewarded with houries and all the non-Muslims will be punished with hellfire.⁸⁰

The author concludes by making the point that children grow out of childhood one day, but Muslims don't.

Another Masariku member ridicules a letter written to a Muslim authority by a Muslim youngster asking whether it is in accordance with Islamic rules to eat in the house of a Muslim who also consumes pig and alcohol.⁸¹ Ironically, the poster comments that if Muslims are so afraid of being soiled, they should also stop buying mobile phones, TVs, radios, refrigerators, and other Western, Japanese, or Chinese

⁷⁹ FKAWJ mailing list, webpage, April 9, 2001. Translation by the author: "Insya Allah the Muslim people have to move to the island of Buru, in order to clear the island of the Christian bed bugs."

⁸⁰ Masariku mailing list, August 19, 2002.

⁸¹ Masariku mailing list, October 17, 2001.

products, since the people producing these items might not have washed their hands after having eaten food that is forbidden for Muslims (*haram*). During intensifications of the conflict, certain incidents also make feelings run high among Masariku members. In the year 2000, radical Muslims warned several times that Christmas of that year would be a bloody event, since Muslims wanted to take revenge. In December 2000, an interview with Ja'far Umar Thalib was published in the *Tempo Interaktif* magazine and forwarded to the Masariku mailing list. In the interview Thalib repeats his customary accusations against the Christians: he complains about the Christian-dominated media in the Moluccas, reasserts that all higher civil and military positions in the Moluccas are controlled by Christians, raises the separatism issue and the involvement of the Protestant church and the international community in it, and bemoans the inability of the government to stop the conflict. He concludes by offering his pessimistic views on the prospects for reconciliation in the Moluccas, especially since Christmas and Idul Fitri, the day when Muslims celebrate the end of Ramadhan, nearly coincided in the year 2000. The Masariku poster comments the interview in this way:

HEY...ANJING....!!!!
 KAMU DATANG KE SANA BUAT NGAPAIN..???
 DATANG BIKIN RUSUH, LALU BICARA MACAM-MACAM.
 HEY....BINATANG....!!!!
 CEPAT KELUAR DARI KATONG PUNG TANAH.⁸²

The war of words in cyberspace knows no limits. In two cases, cyberactors even imposed the death penalty on certain individuals of "the other side." The Masariku member involved in mocking Muslims online also writes about a special team's operation called "*Jihat makan tahi*" (Jihad eating shit). The story is full of details mainly insulting the Laskar Jihad. The author describes the plans to kill their leader, plans that failed since the attackers tried to kill him by shooting at his head and breast, fatal targets if one hopes to kill a normal human being—but this was no normal human being. According to the Christian author, the bullets should have been targeted at his bottom and knee, instead, since these are the places where his brain and heart are located.⁸³ The other death penalty in cyberspace was imposed by Ja'far Umar Thalib on a military commander, Brigjen I Made Yasa, holding him responsible for the atrocities against Muslims conducted by the United Forces of the Indonesian Military (*Batalyon Gabungan TNI*) that Thalib names "*anjing-anjing piaraan kristen RMS*," the pet dogs of the Christian RMS. The *fatwa mati* (religious decree for a death sentence) was spread by the FKAWJ's radio station in Ambon and published on the Internet.⁸⁴

⁸² Masariku mailing list, December 18, 2000. Translation by the author: "Hey...dog...!!!! What for were you going there...??? You came to cause unrest, then saying all sorts of things. Hey....animal....!!!! Quickly leave our land."

⁸³ Masariku mailing list, October 15, 2001. Once again, I want to emphasize that these are contributions of individual Masariku members, which do not necessarily represent the attitude of other Masariku members. Nevertheless, these postings also shape the audience's and the "enemies'" impression of the group.

⁸⁴ FKAWJ mailing list, webpage, June 18, 2001.

Interpretation: Cyberidentities at War

This essay has characterized the Internet actors directly involved in the Moluccan conflict and outlined their strategies. The results help to sketch the identity projects of the cyberactors who consciously strive to establish solidarity and collective identities by deliberately using the means offered by the Internet. These imagined communities emerged from the only identity markers left in the Moluccas which are able to mobilize and provide cohesion: Islam and Christianity. Even the Internet—where Muslims and Christians could have met safely, without being threatened, or even anonymously—was not able to close the deep gulf running through the troubled Moluccan society, dividing Christians from Muslims. Instead, cyberspace was used to expand and to idealize these existing communities—which in reality are not that unified and homogenous at all—thereby also influencing the conflict level by providing the basis for strengthening “real” identities. One main factor in cyberidentity politics is the use of archives. Masariku and the FKAWJ both offer online archives of all letters, news reports, and photographs posted on their website or mailing lists. The archives fulfill two essential functions. First, they outline (partly in a visualized way) the discourse through which the respective identities were negotiated by the imagined communities, providing members with symbols of identity and enabling newcomers to undergo the enculturation process whenever and wherever they want. Second, the archives constitute the history of these communities, providing all members with a common past and establishing a shared social and cultural memory.

Further, cyberspace allows the extension of existing identities, since time and space restrictions are partly lifted. Miller and Slater argue that the Internet provides both an “expansive realization,” by allowing the realization of idealized identities, which are regarded as old or “originary,” and an “expansive potential,” by enabling one to envisage a quite novel vision of what one could be.⁸⁵ Both sides, Christians as well as Muslims, use this expansive realization potential. The Christians (both Masariku and CCDA) try to expand their community and its identity through the integration of reports and letters concerning the Moluccan conflict written by international human rights, Christian, and UN organizations, and their own letters, which call for assistance, and intervention, from the aforementioned groups. This way hope in and solidarity with the United Nations as well as the worldwide Christian community is displayed. The Muslims try to reach out for something Gary Bunt calls a “global electronic *umma*,” by methods described above. As Bunt shows, it is a general trend among politically active Muslim organizations to “now regard the web as an integral part of their information strategies.”⁸⁶

Nevertheless, these online identity projects clearly have their basis in the Moluccan conflict and the religions involved in it. The FKAWJ uses a more patriarchal approach by imposing an idealized Islamic identity on its visitors, this way providing an important supporting pillar in times of identity crisis. Negotiations are neither

⁸⁵ Miller and Slater, *The Internet—An Ethnographic Approach*, p. 10-11.

⁸⁶ Gary R. Bunt, *Virtually Islamic: Computer-mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 102.

permitted nor required, since the sources for this identity—the Koran, the Sunnah, and the Sharia—are perceived to be out of reach for all humans anyway. The Masariku project is much more open, as it allows discussions between members of the mailing list. Masariku does not provide such stringent identity guidelines as the FKAWJ, but a long-term study of their mailing list shows that a few highly active contributors dominate the discourse negotiating the group's identity. The CCDA venture can hardly be called an identity project, since only one person maintains it, and it provides no archive and enables no online discussions among its subscribers.

Additional field research I conducted in Ambon and Jakarta among the actors of the Moluccan cyberspace and other people concerned by these representations provided some interesting insights into the reality of the online identity projects in the Moluccan conflict.⁸⁷ It was quite surprising how well the whole of the representations in cyberspace—comprising visual and descriptive material—reflected the situation in the Moluccas in general and how well the representations by the groups observed reflected the real attitudes of these groups in particular. The line of argumentation and the philosophy of the groups representing either the Christians or the Muslims are quite similar on the online level and the offline one. What is different in reality compared to the representative projects in cyberspace—at least at first glance—is how presentations and identities are handled; the organizational and the hierarchical arrangements that characterize cyberspace projects also differ from those that structure the “real” Muslim or Christian Moluccan communities.

One would expect people using the Internet as a means to spread information to be open-minded and eager to establish contact with others, to share information, and discuss matters. As noted above, the Masariku mailing list distributes many different kinds of contributions, but is open to a restricted circle of members, some of whom try to hide their real identities. In contrast, the mailing list archive of the FKAWJ, as well as their website, is accessible to the public. Identities are clear-cut and deliberately demonstrated to the outside world, since strong identity symbols and markers are the cornerstones of the Muslim cyberproject.⁸⁸ My experiences communicating with members of the Christian group offline were quite different from the ones encountered when I attempted to communicate with FKAWJ members. While the closed Masariku group was very open offline, the FKAWJ—open to the public online—was quite secluded offline. Active Masariku members were very open-minded and outspoken people, ready to discuss matters. They did not seem to be trying to hide their different backgrounds and their motivations. In contrast, it was quite difficult to get in touch with FKAWJ members,⁸⁹ not to mention the impediments experienced when trying to

⁸⁷ At this point I will only give some hints concerning this topic, since it will be elaborated upon more extensively in my dissertation.

⁸⁸ Besides outlining an ideal Muslim identity, the FKAWJ webpage gives also detailed insights into personal identities, for instance by outlining the life story of its leader, Ja'far Umar Thalib, or the fate of individual Jihad fighters.

⁸⁹ Outsiders are officially allowed to speak only to the head of the public relations department of the FKAWJ and its leader, Ja'far Umar Thalib, on Java. In this way, the organization intends to shield the Laskar Jihad in the Moluccas from any outside influences, which might make them waver from their

discuss controversial issues. In fact, this behavior was appropriate, given the aims of their identity project in cyberspace as outlined above: a specific, unquestionable doctrine is provided for Muslims and no deviation from or discussion of those principles is tolerated.

Concerning organizational and hierarchical matters, again there is a gap between the image the Internet presentations create and the offline situations. Following the contributions of the Masariku mailing list, one gets the impression that its members are a loose conglomeration of people unbound by hierarchies or any rigid organization. While this is true for Masariku itself, it is definitely not true for the group Masariku claims to represent: the Christians and the churches. The church in the Moluccas, as elsewhere, is strictly organized and hierarchical. Even if Masariku claims to be an independent organization that does not even seek to be recognized as an NGO and that has no official connections to the church, it is not possible to separate Masariku from church policies and activities. Masariku not only shares equipment with church organizations like the Protestant Crisis Center in Ambon, but also shares staff, information, and networks (and vice versa).⁹⁰ Contrary to the impressions of a loose Christian network online, the Laskar Jihad homepage gives the impression of a well-organized group with a fixed doctrine. While this again is true for the FKAWJ itself, it is absolutely not true of the people these presentations claim to represent: the Muslim community. The Muslims in the Moluccas are only partially organized and there is no central institution representing them. There is nobody who could function as a public spokesperson. This is one of the big problems the Muslim community in the Moluccas, as well as other people trying to find a solution for the conflict, face.⁹¹

Conclusions

In conclusion, I would like to offer some thoughts concerning the role of the Internet in a conflict like the one in the Moluccas. One might question the significance of this whole analysis, given the fact that less than .5 percent of the Indonesian population

ideological clear-cut trail (personal communication with the head of the FKAWJ's PR department, February 2002).

⁹⁰ Nevertheless, Masariku people emphasize that it is their goal to include Muslim views and experiences. But in most cases, these projects fail because of the tenseness of the situation, where Muslims are either too frightened to talk frankly to Christians or where it is just not possible to contact each other. Initially, the Masariku mailing list also included Muslim members, but they were expelled after various virus attacks disrupted the list.

⁹¹ The Central Moluccan branch of the MUI (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, Ulama Council of Indonesia) failed to function as spokesperson. According to some of my Muslim informants, the MUI became too political after the conflict broke out, and therefore lost influence among the Moluccan Muslim community. Additionally, the current head of the MUI and his conciliatory politics are not accepted by all Muslims, especially the hardliners. To unite all Muslim organizations and the Moluccan Muslim community as such, BIMM (Badan Immarat Muslim Maluku, Association that manages/coordinates the Muslims of the Moluccas, translation provided by CCDA April 17, 2002) was founded in June 2001. Nevertheless, the representativeness of this new organization is also doubted by many Muslims.

has access to the Internet.⁹² Of what importance can cyberspace and its imagined communities be in reality, and what influence can it have, given its limited audience? Are these communities not too loose, too impersonal, to be of any importance or any influence? Shall we not just forget about cyberspace and concentrate instead on searching for solutions to the “real” problems on the local and the national level? I would answer “no” to this question. Even if the democratic revolution promised by the Internet has not yet come to fruition, it still offers possibilities never existing before and as a medium it has particular, significant effects: First, it elevates local incidents and discourses that might well have escaped the world’s attention to a global level. This would not have been possible in such a detailed and intensive way through any other medium. Via the Internet, presentations of local incidents are much more multifarious, multiplied and widely disseminated; what’s more, on the Internet they are largely free of government censorship. Second, it enables the interaction with other discourses on the global level and the construction of imagined communities. Via the Internet, solidarity groups can be established, and Moluccan people living in the diaspora can be reunited in cyberspace. The Internet in the Moluccan case is not only used to exchange information, but also to broadcast cries for help, calls for common prayers and demonstrations, and hints concerning interesting events. As Wellman and Gulia have noted, a sense of belonging is generated, and companionship found, on the Net.⁹³ Many Masariku members are personally and emotionally involved, reading and contributing to the group’s list; it is their friends, their families, the religious community they belong to, or the village they originally come from that are affected by the conflict and that are the discussion list’s subjects. Third, the Internet brings together different levels of conflict and authority on the same virtual stage, thus flattening and effectively equalizing those levels and facilitating a discourse between formerly separated levels. This means that local rumors and the voices of people the world never heard before might now have the same impact as an article of a renowned online magazine or author. The globalized local information is perceived as first-hand information by the audience and is enthusiastically accepted by international interest groups. And, last but not least, the Internet itself becomes an important factor in the conflict through the different processes described throughout this essay, processes that interconnect cyberspace with the “real life.”

How long these imagined communities and identities will survive, whether they will be of any importance once the conflict ends—these questions cannot be answered yet. What is important for the moment is that these constructed identities exist and exert their influence. This is a point neglected so far in analyses of the Moluccan conflict. The

⁹² Calculated with data provided by ITU (Internet host data: Internet Software Consortium RIPE), *Internet Indicators—World*, 2001 [<http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/at-glance/Internet99.pdf>, accessed August 20, 2001]. During the last months, the number of Internet users increased tremendously. In January 2002, approximately 2 percent of the Indonesian population had access to the Internet (<http://www.nua.com>, accessed November 12, 2002).

⁹³ Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia, “Virtual Communities as Communities: Net Surfers Don’t Ride Alone,” in *Communities in Cyberspace*, ed. Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock (London/New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 167–94.

Moluccan conflict is fought out on several levels, cyberspace being one of them. The role of the Internet therefore needs to be taken into account. Research has to be conducted on *all* levels, involving *all* sorts of communities, with the online community being another added to existing traditional communities.

