TRIBAL BATTLE IN A REMOTE ISLAND: CRISIS AND VIOLENCE IN SUMBA (EASTERN INDONESIA)[1]

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1. Bloody Thursday

On November 5, 1998, there was an outbreak of violence in Waikabubak, the district capital of West Sumba. The next day CNN reported: "Tribal battle in Eastern Indonesia kills 19, police say." This news message followed:

> Thousands of rival tribesmen fought a pitched battle with spears and knives on a remote eastern Indonesian island, killing at least nineteen people, police said on Friday.
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> The fighting on Thursday in the western part of Sumba, a barren and inhospitable island southeast of Bali, had been brought under control with police reinforcements, Colonel Engkesman Ehilep, the chief of East Nusa Tenggara province, said.
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> He told Reuters that nineteen people were killed in the fighting between members of the Loli and Wewewa tribes but had no word how many were injured. Ehilep said about 3,000–4,000 people were involved in the battle attacking each other with rocks, knives, and spears. Tension mounted in the area on Wednesday after rumours spread that one tribe was planning an attack, he said. Ehilep said about 150 policemen were usually posted on the island and they had been supported by reinforcement of about sixty more troops. Some one hundred more troops were on their way to Sumba.

[1] The draft of this article was presented in the workshop "Violence in Indonesia: its historical roots and its contemporary manifestations," Leiden University, December 13-15, 2000.

> The *Jawa Pos* newspaper reported on Friday that one hundred people were believed to have been killed.
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> Sumba is renowned for its *ikat* textiles and was once a rich source of sandalwood before over-cutting brought down its stocks. But it is a hot, dry island and has few of the tourist attractions which mark other islands in eastern Indonesia.[2]

The "tribal battle" in this news bulletin was one of the first occurrences of mass violence in Indonesia after the resignation of Suharto. CNN depicts the incident as an isolated event, with no connections to political tensions on a national scale. The report reveals many of the caricatures commonly invoked to describe peripheral regions in Indonesia: remote, isolated, tribal, backward, traditional, and not very interesting to foreigners. The CNN report on this event—a violent day that local residents named "Bloody Thursday" (*kamis berdarah)*—raises many questions. How was it possible that people dared to go out on the streets to demonstrate and fight so openly? What was the reason for the tension between the two "tribes," and why couldn't that be solved with the usual, traditional methods of dispute resolution? Why did the police not separate the groups and end the violence?

Over the last two years, newspapers have described violence in Indonesia as a long series of events involving groups in society that combat each other, where the state has the role of preventing violence, or—if law enforcement arrives too late—enforcing or facilitating reconciliation between the opposed groups. Focusing on the case of "Bloody Thursday" in Waikabubak, I will show how this analysis can be turned around by revealing how, in this case, two opposing government officials (representing "the state") used groups in society to fight a power struggle at the district (*kebupaten)* level during a period in which authority of the state was fading as a result of processes on a macro scale.

According to the caricatured portrait of Sumba sketched above, society in Sumba is made up of tribals, who are engaged in primitive agricultural pursuits and always eager to fight. That Sumbanese might also be represented in the state, as government officials, is a possibility that this image does not take into account. Having roots in local society, the district elite is educated in the local culture and rituals. They know by experience that no single subject under this heading of "local culture" is static. Although the anthropologists who have meticulously described the traditions of various *suku* (clans) in Sumba[3] have created a large body of literature outlining how Sumbanese culture is supposed to be, I am convinced that there is no single, traditional Sumbanese culture. Sumbanese are very skilled at manipulating and molding the

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[2] "Tribal Battle in Eastern Indonesia Kills 19, Police Say," CNN, November 5, 1998.

[3] See for example Oemboe Hina Kapita, *Masyarakat Sumba dan adat istiadatnya* (Waingapu: Gunung Mulia, 1976); L. Onvlee, *Cultuur als antwoord* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973); Gregory Forth, *Rindi: An ethnographic study of a traditional domain in Eastern Sumba* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981); Janet Hoskins, *The Play of Time: Kodi Perspectives on Calendars, History, and Exchange* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); Webb Keane, *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997); Danielle Geirnaert-Martin, *The woven land of Lamboya: Socio-cosmic ideas and values in West Sumba, Eastern Indonesia* (Leiden: CNWS, 1992); Joel C. Kuipers, *Power in Performance: The Creation of Textual Authority in Weyewa Ritual Speech* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

elements of their culture according to what suits them best.[4] The background events that made "Bloody Thursday" possible indicate that both the "tribals" and the district elite in west Sumba use and change rituals to meet their own objectives. By changing their own rituals, they legitimate violence against (human) opponents, and the changed shape of domesticated violence creates a useful force in the political power struggle.

Political violence is a general feature that can only be understood by analyzing and comparing its specific occurrences.[5] In the next sections, I will describe the various components of the specific circumstances that made "Bloody Thursday" possible. First, I will provide some information on Sumba to complement the portrait in the CNN bulletin quoted above. Second, I present a short overview of the political history of Sumba in section three and describe the relation between state and society on this island. I will argue that ever since Sumba was incorporated into the larger Indonesian nation, the Sumbanese leaders have used the state for their own interests and benefit. The forth section deals with cultural identity and ritual violence. The battle in Waikabubak suited the interests of ritual leaders who, in 1998, faced practical problems that made it difficult to perform a type of "domesticated violence" that is an essential part of the annual cycle of rituals. They were eager to find a solution in order to maintain their authority. This fourth section describes the customs of ritual violence.

The fifth section analyzes "Bloody Thursday" in context, as a culminating event in a year of *kristal* (total crisis) on Sumba. The 1998 *kristal* comprised the monetary crisis, the climate crisis, livestock epidemics, and the uncertain political situation. Together these various types of crises contributed to the tensions that prepared people to engage in violent battle. Finally, I describe the events of "Bloody Thursday" as they were reported to me in interviews with my former colleagues and acquaintances in west Sumba[6] three weeks after the violence took place.

The conclusion concerns matters that are relevant not only to Sumba, but to other violent conflicts in Indonesia (or elsewhere). I warn against the practice of labeling parties in a conflict too quickly and conveniently—the fashion of ascribing violence to either ethnic or religious tensions—since, in this case, Christians fought Christians, and antagonism was inflated between two groups which are often comprised in one *suku*. I also conclude that concepts like "state," cultural or religious identity, or "tribal groups" or "indigenous people" are difficult to use unambiguously when one attempts to analyze processes in contemporary Indonesian society.

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[4] See for this argument Jacqueline A. C. Vel, "Umbu Hapi versus Umbu Vincent: Legal pluralism as an arsenal in village combats," in *Law as a resource in Agrarian Struggles*, ed. F. von Benda-Beckmann and M. van der Velde (Wageningen: Agricultural University Wageningen, 1992).

[5] Henk Schulte Nordholt, *Een Staat van Geweld* (Rotterdam: Erasmus University, 2000), p. 3. See also Margaret Steedly, "The State of Culture theory in the Anthropology of Southeast Asia," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28 (1999): 431-454.

[6] I lived in west Sumba for six years (1984-1990) and was engaged in development work and PhD research. In November 1998 I returned to Sumba for a short visit.

2. Sumba: A Resource-poor Island

Sumba is located southeast of Bali. With an area 210 kilometers long and 65 kilometers wide, it is about two-thirds the size of the Netherlands. Inhabitants number approximately 450,000 persons. Sumba is sparsely populated, and agriculture on this island is extensive with regard to land use and external inputs. The eastern and northern parts of the island have a dry climate, with only one short rainy season, whereas the west and middle parts have more rain; agriculture is varied in those areas.[7] A full photograph of the island shows rolling limestone hills; the larger part of this hilly area is not permanently cultivated. The soil is not very fertile, especially if compared with the volcanic soils of Bali and Lombok.[8] Only here and there have people opened up dry land fields along the slopes of the hills, where they cultivate cassava and maize, mingled with small quantities of many other crops. Of old, the dry fields are shifted every few years, but at present the fields that are situated closer to the settlements are cultivated permanently. The fallow land is not just considered "wilderness," for the Sumbanese regard it as land that can be turned into agricultural fields in the future. It also is a source of many plants, fruits, trees, and animals which can be gathered or hunted to supply the daily requirements of the local population. Most of the land is designated as *tanah suku* (clan property), unless there is convincing proof that it should be given another status. Fallow land is the grazing land for livestock. Livestock is significant in Sumba due to the need for buffaloes, pigs, and horses for ceremonial and ritual purposes.[9] Buffaloes are also very important for wet-rice cultivation. The wet-rice fields are situated in the valleys, and buffaloes are used to trample the fields. Buffaloes and cattle also figure as a Sumbanese family's capital, available to be sold when there is an emergency or to pay for higher education far away in Bali or Java.

Compared to the other areas of Indonesia, the province of East Nusa Tenggara (Nusa Tenggara Timur, NTT), of which Sumba is a part, is considered to be a poor, backward, and isolated area.[10] Economic indicators, like the Gross Regional Domestic Product (GRDP) per capita, which are used to make this inter-regional comparison, show a low value for NTT. The GRDP per capita is about a third of the national average.[11] Only 5 percent of the population has a monthly expenditure that exceeds the poverty line (Rp. 60,000 per month in 1992), whereas in Java and Bali this is about 25 percent. These figures show that the NTT on average is very poor. We must remember, however, that such macroeconomic indicators only measure "domestic

[7] An elaborate description of agriculture in the middle part of Sumba is given in Jacqueline A. C. Vel, *The Uma-economy: Indigenous economics and development work in Lawonda, Sumba (Eastern Indonesia)* (Wageningen: Wageningen Agricultural University/ Ponsen and Looijen, 1994).

[8] A geologist once told me that Sumba has to be regarded as part of the ocean floor that has risen to the surface.

[9] See L. Onvlee,"The Significance of Livestock on Sumba," in *The Flow of Life: Essays on Eastern Indonesia*, ed. J. Fox (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980)

[10] L. Corner, "East and West Nusa Tenggara: Isolation and Poverty," in *Univty and Diversity: Regional Economic Development in Indonesia since 1970*, ed. Hal Hill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 179-206; A Booth, "Counting the Poor in Indonesia," *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 299,1 (1993): 53-83.

[11] Colin Barlow, "Introduction," in *Indonesia Assessment 1995: Development in Eastern Indonesia* (Singapore and Canberra: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies/Australian National University, 1996).

product" in terms of money exchanges, and many household requirements in the rural area of Sumba used to be met without using cash, either through direct household production of necessary goods or through exchange in kind. Wealth and poverty among the Sumbanese themselves are measured in terms of houses, graves, livestock, food, and social relations.

There is no exploitation of natural resources, such as oil, gas or minerals, on Sumba, and the climate and soil are not very well suited for largescale cash crop estates. This implies that there are very few initiatives for investment on this island from outside. The only possible exception in the future could be tourism—the beautiful south-coast ocean beaches might begin to attract tourists—but the infrastructure is not yet sufficient to support the tourist trade. A relatively large portion of the GRDP is provided by the government. The central disbursements in 1992 amounted to 25 percent of the GRDP for the whole province of NTT. These are the direct, officially calculated and registered disbursements. For Sumbanese, the salaries and earnings of government employees are the major source of monetary income.[12] Most people in the rural areas and in town urge their children to go to school and hope that they will obtain a paid job (or marry someone with a paid job). The few families that have been sending successive generations of their children to school for decades by now have relatives established in town, where they hold paid jobs, most in government service. The advantages for the whole extended family include access to money, a boarding place for the children who attend secondary school, and access to politics. The higher a person rises in the government hierarchy, the larger these resources accessible to him personally, and, to some extent, to his relatives as well. Those who manage to gain a successful career usually begin with employment in the district capitals Waikabubak (west) and Waingapu (east). Next is the leap to Kupang, the provincial capital on Timor. Moving up on the social ladder means moving towards the national center, Jakarta.

3. State and Society in Sumba

The events of "Bloody Thursday" in Waikabubak were just a small part of, and were influenced by, simultaneous events taking place nationally in Indonesia. In my opinion, this was not a "tribal battle," but a case of political violence being used as an instrument by district government officials, who were attempting to stop the decline of their authority. To explain this argument, I will first elaborate on the political history of Sumba and the way in which people from Sumba deal with the state.

There are very few written accounts on the history of Sumba. Oemboe Hina Kapita wrote the most comprehensive history in his book, *Sumba di dalam Jangkauan Jaman.*[13] Kapita was born on Sumba. Starting in 1930, he worked as the assistant of the Dutch linguist and anthropologist, Prof. L. Onvlee. Kapita divides Sumbanese history into periods of outside intervention. He distinguishes the period before the arrival of the Dutch United East India Company, the "Jaman Kompeni"; then the period of Dutch

[12] Trade and business on Sumba are completely in the hands of other ethnic groups: Chinese and Muslim traders who are referred to as *orang Arab* (Arabs) or *orang Ende* (people from Ende on Sumbawa).

[13] Oemboe Hina Kapita , *Sumba di dalam Jangkauan Jaman* (Waingapu: Gunung Mulia, 1976).

colonial rule; the Japanese period; and the period of the Indonesian Republic. The second part of his book contains the history of several regions in Sumba, and there the structure is different. Genealogies and myths of origin are central to its organization. This distinction between two types of history illustrates two perspectives. The first perspective is concerned with the interaction between Sumbanese and people from other areas and with the integration of Sumba into larger political entities. The second perspective is more relevant in daily life on Sumba, since it is concerned with internal political affairs, as it describes the competition between the various indigenous rulers. Both perspectives contribute to an understanding of what happened on "Bloody Thursday." In the upcoming section on cultural identity and ritual violence, I will analyze events from the second perspective, discussing clan rivalries and the customary rules governing how fights should be conducted. In this section, I concentrate on the first perspective, because this approach provides a historical background to the relation between state and society on Sumba.

In the era before 1600, contact did take place between Sumbanese and people from other parts of what is now Indonesia. Kapita argues that when Sumba was incorporated into larger realms like Mojopahit (Java) during this era, it essentially acted as party to a trade treaty, and there were no consequences for internal rule on Sumba. Then the Dutch East India Company arrived. The Dutch East Indies government at the start of the nineteenth century was primarily interested in keeping the island out of the hands of other colonial powers.[14] In 1838, the *Resident* of Kupang traveled to Sumba in order to investigate how the island could be made safe and governable. Subsequently, one of his staff members was appointed to investigate the matter further, and this person, Syarif Abdurrahman bin Abubakar Algadri—a relative of the sultan of Pontianak—settled on Sumba. He started a profitable horse trade and grew to be a very influential person. To the Sumbanese he represented the Dutch East Indies government—he gained this status through his own initiative—and he levied taxes on every horse exported. His settlement at the north coast of Sumba later grew to become the capital of the island, Waingapu. He also was a broker in arranging external support for internal warfare on Sumba. In 1862, he provided people from Ende to the *raja* of Kapunduku to assist in warfare against another *suku* in the mountain area of Sumba.

In 1866, Kontroleur S. Roos removed Syarif Abdurrahman from Sumba and sent him back to Kupang, because his activities had involved the colonial government in internal warfare to such an extent that Waingapu had become a hostile settlement to various *suku* on Sumba. When, in 1901, the Dutch heard the rumor that Waingapu was about to be captured by the *raja* of Lewa-Kambera, the Dutch colonial government decided to defend the inhabitants of the settlement. The former policy of non-interference with internal affairs was dropped, and the Dutch East Indies government's authority was established through its (violent) campaign of "pacification" of the island, which was completed in 1912.

[14] Sources for this section on history are: J. de Roo van Alderwerelt, "Historische aanteekeningen over Soemba," *Tijdschrift voor indische taal-, land- en volkenkunde* 48 (1906): 85-316; Kapita, *Sumba di dalam Jangkauan Jaman*; A. Couvreur, "Aard en wezen der inlandsche zelfbesturen op het eiland Soemba," *Tijdschrift voor Binnenlands Bestuur* 52 (1917): 206-219. For a more elaborate description, see Vel, *The Uma-economy*.

The Dutch wished to enact four major policies through pacification: (a) slaves would be released and the slave trade prohibited, (b) internal warfare would be prohibited, and all guns and arms handed over to the government, which in turn instituted its own monopoly of violence, (c) the people would agree to obey this new governmental authority, to assist in road construction when summoned, for instance, and (d) the people would pay taxes levied by the Dutch East Indies government. Local government officials were appointed to help carry out these policies. In fact, however, the same system of indirect government rule still applied, with the only difference being that the *raja* now were subordinate to the central colonial government. The *raja* had lost warfare as a means to demonstrate and consolidate power, but taxation was a new source of suppression used for the benefit of the *raja* and his family.

Concurrent with the increase of the influence of the Dutch colonial government, Christian missions extended their area of influence to include Sumba. The various Christian missions active in the Dutch-Indies had agreed to divide territory and not proselytize among each others' converts. Sumba became the territory of the Protestant Missions, most of which were connected to the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.[15] Especially after the "pacification" was accomplished, the missions played an important role in education. Their schools were the first on Sumba, and with education through schools and church they created a new elite. The missions ran schools on Sumba, and they also provided scholarships for Sumbanese students to attend universities in other parts of Indonesia, in Kupang, Makasar, and Salatiga. The educated Sumbanese were to become the local government officials. As it happened, the traditional elite's children were the first to become educated. So, after losing warfare as a means to establish authority, the local rulers not only had taxation as a new means of gaining power, but also access to the governing institutions through their educated children, who over time were appointed in leading offices. To a certain extent, therefore, the government was appropriated by the local elite.

Following the declaration of Independence of the Republic of Indonesia, changes in government on Sumba were not as dramatic as changes that took place throughout many other parts of Indonesia. In fact, the same indirect rule remained in force, with the difference that the local rulers were now subordinate to the national Indonesian government. The missions still had the leading role in education, social services, and health care. With Suharto's *Orde Baru,* after 1965, Sumba experienced for the first time in its history the rule of the bureaucracy as it was organized and instructed from the national center, Jakarta. The New Order government invested large amounts of money in schools (every child was supposed to be able to attend primary school), in roads, healthcare, electricity, and so forth. The flow of money from "Java" to Sumba was much larger than the return flow. Suharto's administration also influenced religious developments in Sumba. Anyone who tried to pass an exam or to become appointed in government service was required to be a registered member of one of the five officially recognized religions.[16] The traditional Sumbanese religion (Marapu) was not included

[15] The best source dealing with the history of the missions on Sumba is Th. Van den End, *Gereformeerde Zending op Sumba, 1859 – 1972* (Alphen aan de Rijn: ASKA, 1987).

[16] In fact all Indonesian citizens had to embrace one of the five recognized religions. Yet, on Sumba, those who did not require official documents had no problems and could openly practice their traditional religion.

in the five recognized by the state, and therefore the easiest solution on Sumba was to register as a member of the Protestant Christian Church. Largely as a result of this political decree, more than half of the population of Sumba is now officially Protestant Christian.[17] In the Protestant Christian Church, members of different clans may belong to a single congregation, and these congregations have geographical boundaries. Members of the two opposing clans involved in the battle of "Bloody Thursday"—the Wewewa and Loli clans—all belong to the Protestant Christian congregation of Waikabubak. All clans on Sumba have their own pockets of tradition—the mother villages—where the inhabitants keep the Marapu religion and its rituals alive. The Marapu religion remains an essential, inextricable part of traditional Sumbanese culture, for it outlines the customs and rules governing weddings and funerals, rules of inheritance, and rules for settling disputes. The Christian religion does not provide an alternative for all aspects of Sumbanese culture. This fact is important for understanding why even Sumbanese Christians respect the authority of the traditional religion's leaders (*ratu).*

Understanding the specific relationship between the state and social groups on Sumba ("society") is crucial to understanding what happened on "Bloody Thursday" in Waikabubak. We will misinterpret events if we define "the state" on Sumba as a monolithic entity governing the nation from the center, because the effective "state" in this region is a much more complicated entity. Migdal argues that in order to understand states and political change, one should disaggregate the state, paying special attention to those parts located far from what is usually considered the pinnacle of power. Migdal also notes that states and other social forces may be mutually empowering.[18] To disaggregate "the state" in Indonesia from a regional perspective, we must follow the hierarchy from the top (the president) down to the very lowest governing offices at village level. We should also distinguish the various types of offices that can be included in "the state" in New Order Indonesia.[19] The state comprises the governing officials, but also includes the army, police, and Golkar.[20] In the local context—as, for example, in Waikabubak—the state most of all presents itself in these local officials. They are the brokers between central policies and local interests. They are also involved in local society, where they establish their identities in terms that are relevant on Sumba.

In summary, there has never been a single, socially accepted local ruler of Sumba, and there has always been rivalry between clans and their leaders on Sumba for access to the resources of the state. First the rivalries concerned military support by the colonial government for internal warfare; then there were struggles for the positions of

[17] Sumbanese prefer to become Christian rather than Muslim partly for practical reasons: keeping dogs is part of the culture and Sumbanese eat pork at every ceremony.

[18] Joel Migdal, "The State in Society: An Approach to Struggles for Domination," in *State Power and Social Forces: Domination and Transformation in the Third World*, ed. Joel S. Migdal, Atul Kohli, and Vivienne Shue (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 7- 34.

[19] Here I speak of New Order Indonesia, since I doubt that bureaucracy at all levels, army, and policy can be really unified under one heading. Golkar has lost its meaning as an institution representing the state in society.

[20] Rita Smith-Kipp, *Dissociated Identities: Ethnicity, Religion and Class in an Indonesian Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 87.

authority that granted leaders the right to levy taxes. Finally, the broadest and most recent competition concerns access to government offices, for such access opens the way to influence and steady sources of income.

4. Cultural Identity and Ritual Violence

In the province Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT), people define their identity in ethnic, geographic, and religious terms. The situation determines to what extent the categories defining ethnicity or religion are refined. If residents of the province are being described in opposition to other people in Indonesia, they will be referred to as *orang NTT*, the broadest ethnic category. But within the province, distinctions are made first in geographic terms—one may be *orang* Sumba, *orang* Alor, etc.—and (even more refined), according to *suku*, so that a person might be *orang Wewewa* in Sumba. As a further refinement, a person will be identified by his or her place of origin/place of birth. This place of origin (*paraingu*) is connected to a particular forefather. Every *suku*—the highest level of patrilineal descent, for which the Sumbanese use the word *kabihu*—has a founding father, the major ancestor, who is deified and called the *marapu* of this clan. Tracing the genealogy is very important, because the clearer and closer the lines of descent between a living person and the major *marapu* are, the greater his authority. This authority is valid in the domain of customary law (*adat*) and religion (*agama marapu*), and it pertains to dispute settlement and land rights. The traditional leaders derive their authority from their status in the patrilineal clan, which is determined by birth. Yet, authority can be increased or contested by clever "adat-priests" (*ratu*) who are able to make their version of history sound more convincing than the alternatives, e.g. by depicting the leader they represent as the founder of a "new path."[21]

The boundaries of an area of authority are not clearly defined. In precolonial times, the *kabihu* of Sumba used to be autonomous groups with no overall government. The *kabihu* maintained relations through marriage (endogamous marriages are forbidden), through exchange, and through dispute settlement. In the traditional Marapu religion, there are a large number of rituals. In general, the rituals are performed to ask the *marapu*'s permission or blessing, and most rituals are connected to the seasonal calendar of activities. The social meaning of the rituals derives from the gathering together of people, for on those occasions feuding parties have to reconcile with each other before a ritual can be performed; also, the ritual itself may present an occasion for dealing with emotions.

The ritual which is important for our analysis of "Bloody Thursday" is called *Podu* (or *Pidu* [Lawonda] or *Padu* [Lamboya]).[22] *Podu* is the festival that marks the start of the new agricultural year, when celebrants call for the first rains. The time for *Podu* rituals is indicated by the stars and constellations, and the rituals start three days after full moon. In the Western calendar, this takes place by the end of October. In their beautiful ethnographic film, *Ashes of Life: the Annual Rituals of Lamboya, Sumba 1996*, Danielle Geirnaert-Martin, Erik de Maaker, and Dirk Nijland show how the *Podu*

[21] Webb Keane, "Religious Change and Historical Reflection in Anakalang, West Sumba," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26,2 (1995): 289-306.

[22] Geirnaert-Martin, *The woven land of Lamboya*. The description of the Padu festival in this section is largely based on Geirnaert-Martin's book.

festival is celebrated to get rid of "bitterness and heat."[23] Traditionally, the Sumbanese believe that bitterness and heat—which cause people to fall ill and prevent animals and plants from thriving—are caused by human transgressions, such as incest and violent behavior. All the successive rituals of *Podu* facilitate a clean start of the new year socially, by getting rid of bitterness and heat, and by renewing and strengthening social bonds. Some of the rituals are very violent. In one ritual, young boys of two opposing parties fight each other in a sort of boxing match, according to specific rules which stipulate the type of fighting and the kind of fighting equipment allowed. The ritual hunting of wild pig is also part of the *Podu* festival. The hunt refers to a part of the Sumbanese origin myth in which the wild pig represents evil. Apart from the ritual meaning, hunting wild boar in this period of the year is also very important for agriculture. At the end of the dry season, when the fields are clear of crops and the least overgrown, the wild boars are relatively unprotected, and hunters can easily detect them. The new crops will suffer less damage from the boars if their population is reduced at this time, just before the start of the annual rains. Catching wild boar and the ritual consumption of its meat are very important for social purification at the beginning of the new year.

The third violent ritual relevant to this analysis is the *pasola* (*pahala*). The *pasola* is a ritual of warfare, a contest during which men on horseback throw wooden poles at one another. The participants in the *pasola* prepare themselves very thoroughly, making offerings to placate the angry spirits, dressing in their best cloths, and decorating their horses with colored ribbons. Generally, in the *pasola* men from mountainous regions pit themselves against men from communities located near the sea. Although the *pasola* looks like real warfare, this is actually domesticated, contained violence. Violence occurs among the riders only and does not reach the onlookers, who share and exchange food. The fighting is intensive, but limited in space and time. The *ratu* (*adat* priests) supervise the combat, and they sometimes verify the weight of the wooden poles and indicate both the start and the end of the contest. Geirnaert-Martin reports that in Lamboya the police, and sometimes the army as well, have taken on some of the traditional supervisory responsibilities from the *ratu*.[24] This can perhaps be explained by the fact that the *pasola* has grown to be a major tourist attraction on Sumba, and every year there are thousands of spectators, both indigenous and from outside.

My short description of *Podu* rituals focuses on those aspects that I consider important for understanding what happened on "Bloody Thursday." These descriptions provide a glimpse into the complicated culture of the Sumbanese, which is guided by numerous rituals, exchanges, and rules meant to regulate social life in a society that is organized around relatively autonomous clans that compete to claim their shares of land, water, and wives. I have selected three rituals that are clear examples of domesticated violence. In every case, the acts of violence are meant to be completely bounded by rules, and the authority of the *ratu*—to set the rules and indicate the end of the fight—is accepted by all parties involved. Also, I have noted

[23] Erik de Maaker, Dirk Nijland and Danielle Geirnaert-Martin, *Ashes of Life, the Annual Rituals of Lamboya, Sumba 1996* (Leiden: CNWS, 2000), an ethnographic film.

[24] Geirnaert-Martin, *The woven land of Lamboya*, p. 293.

the significant ritual connections between certain natural, seasonal phenomena (the position of stars and moon, the start of the rainy season) and practices in agriculture.

These connections are very important, because they set the preconditions for a proper ritual celebration. The film *Ashes of Life* shows us how the ritual of *Podu* was celebrated in a particular year, by a specific group of people, but aspects of the *Podu* ritual are repeated from place to place, year after year, in the appropriate season. Implicit is the assumption of continuity in preconditions. Thus, every year, celebrants expect that all material requirements for the rituals will be available, that the climate will be appropriate to the ritual—for instance, that the rains will actually start by the end of October—and that the authority of the traditional leaders (*ratu*) will govern the celebration and limit the violence of the ritual contests. In the next section, I describe how these preconditions were not fulfilled in 1998. The types of crises I will discuss contributed to a "ritual crisis" that forced the ritual leaders to find a new, creative solution to guard their interests.

5. 1998: A Year of Crisis

In 1997–1998, *krisis* was the shorthand expression Indonesians used to refer to a wide variety of problems. *Krismon* was the local expression for the financial crisis that had troubled the country since August 1997, leading to a dramatic devaluation of the Indonesian currency, rising consumer prices, and loss of employment. The year 1998 was also a period beset by extreme weather conditions, with long droughts that alternated with shorter periods of abundant rainfall and floods. El Niño was blamed for those troubles. And 1998 was the year in which Suharto was forced to resign from office, so that it marked the commencement of the political crisis that continues to this day.

Kristal—the total crisis—established the context in which "Bloody Thursday" could occur.

5.1 The Climate Crisis on Sumba

The main source of insecurity in agriculture on Sumba has always been the rainfall. At times the rains are abundant, and the crops drown in the floods. More often rains are short, and then the island grows dry and barren. Most agriculture on Sumba, even the paddy cultivation, is rain fed. Given these conditions, people are used to uncertainty, and it seems that every year has it own period of weather-related crisis.

Yet in 1997–1998, the rain pattern was completely disturbed. Usually, the rainy season starts in October or November and lasts until April. During the rainy season, the rain falls regularly: every day there is a shower which lasts for an hour or two, and in January a week of continuous rain. In 1997, the first rains only came in December and after a few weeks they stopped again. As in other parts of Indonesia, El Niño brought long periods of drought. On Sumba, two successive maize harvests failed for lack of rain, yielding only between a quarter to half of the usual amount. The first months of 1998 were therefore hard for the population on Sumba, who had to deal with small harvests and rising prices for necessary goods, due to the *krismon.*

In July, which should be the heart of the dry season, it rained on Sumba. In this season, people tend vegetable gardens irrigated from wells or springs. Due to the abundant rainfall, the vegetables suffered from rotting and fungus. The rain's effect on paddy was not similar in all fields. Because transplanting paddy is an activity that lasts several months, fields will be in different phases of growth simultaneously, and the impact of drought or abundant rainfall on each field will vary depending on the state of its crops, whether they are young or more fully grown. The total volume of the paddy harvest on Sumba in 1998 was much less than usual.[25]

This occurrence of rainfall in the dry season also prevented villagers from burning the wastelands. Usually in August the villagers burn the (fallow) fields to get rid of the old and dry grasses and shrubs (and trees!) so that fresh grasses can grow and livestock will have good fodder again. In 1998, the fields were so wet due to the July and August rains that they could not be set afire. The grasses, weeds, and shrubs did not die and instead grew thick and tall.

When the time to celebrate *Podu* arrived, the ritual hunting of wild boar was to be part of it. Wild boar live in the wastelands, and hunters traditionally run over the hills and chase these boar with spears and knives. In November 1998, there could be no hunting, because the wastelands were overgrown with weeds, blocking the paths and the view and giving shelter to the wild boars. The cancellation of the ritual hunt caused problems for farmers who have their dry land gardens located adjacent to the wastelands, because the increased population of wild boars proved destructive, as they scavenged in the gardens, ruining the crops. The cancellation of the ritual hunt also posed serious problems for the *ratu*, because the hunt is an essential part of the annual cycle of rituals.

The *ratu* also faced another threatening effect of El Niño. Their type of knowledge and authority is partly based on reading the stars and constellations as points of reference in the local calendar to indicate the start and end of seasonal periods. The periods in this calendar are associated with specific activities, local activities. Every ecological area has its own variant of the calendar, referring to plants that grow in that area or activities that the inhabitants usually perform. The start of the planting season, and other moments in the agricultural cycle, are connected to the phases of stars and constellations. But now that the pattern of rainfall was so radically different from usual, the local calendar lost its meaning as a guideline for agricultural practices. The old knowledge of the *ratu* could not give appropriate guidance for agriculture. Farmers on Sumba had to get used to listening to weather forecasts on radio or television, and make individual decisions in planning their activities.

When, in the first months of 1998, drought continued, and real food shortages occurred on Sumba, many food aid programs were designed for the province of NTT. In November, during my visit, I heard that some of the funds meant to help the victims of the early 1998 drought had still not been received in the villages. For example, the World Bank Program (*Padat Karya*), which had a budget of fifty million Rupiah earmarked for West Sumba, had not yet begun to distribute aid. The coordinator of the program had already been assigned, and people feared that funds might be lost

[25] Yet, in Lawonda (the area where I lived from 1984-1990), the harvest seemed to have been substantial, and during my visit many farmers were saying that they sold or were planning to sell a surplus.

somewhere before they reached the villages for which they were meant. In general, the most substantial aid funds designated to assist victims of the drought in Sumba were largely consumed not by the villagers, but by corruption. It appears that the officials assigned to handle the funds took this as an opportunity for solving their own, individual financial crises.

While the distribution of aid for the drought victims was still being processed by the bureaucrats, in November some parts of the province NTT were suffering from abundant rainfall. So another consequence of the climate crisis was that district government officials were criticized for their inept management of the successive food aid programs.

5.2 The Monetary Crisis on Sumba

The financial crisis—*krismon*—that hit Indonesia started in August 1997. The Rupiah was devaluated. Prices of imported products rose precipitously, and consumer prices for basic household needs increased every day. In industry, many businesses had to be closed down, and their employees laid off from their jobs. These negative consequences by themselves were good reasons for protest. They intensified the frustrations that could eventually lead to violence.

On Sumba, the effect of *krismon* was not so entirely negative. Most people in the rural area are self-employed and produce their own food. The farmers are producers, and paddy farmers, especially, benefited from rising prices for the crops they sold. During my visit in November 1998, I noticed that the farmers were continuing to build new houses, evidence of relative prosperity. The most amazingly large house was built by a man who earns his income from selling candle nuts and edible bird's nests. Since the latter is an export commodity, his earnings were comparatively enormous, and he could afford to build a large house with a zinc roof.

In town, the situation was worse. Those who depend on salaries faced difficult times because of rising prices. Local businessmen found that the number of government commissions for construction of buildings and roads was decreasing. Job opportunities were dwindling in the towns as well.

One of the consequences of the *krismon* on Sumba was that the position of people from the rural areas–whose dealings involved land, food, and economy in kind—was improving relative to the position of people in town, who received salaries in money and now faced uncertain employment prospects.

5.3 The Political Crisis on Sumba

During my visit to Sumba in November 1998, I was amazed by the change in political awareness and the political climate in this area of Indonesia. Compared to the region's situation in 1990, communication with the world outside the island had increased enormously. The introduction of television, especially, made a difference. In the 1980s, only the one or two villagers who owned radios were somewhat aware of what was happening on Java and knew something about national politics. In 1998, many people on Sumba watched the national television news broadcasts every evening. The words *krismon* and *reformasi* were used in everyday conversations on

Sumba, as in other parts of the country. Discussions about politics—both national and local—were frequent and open.

The term "uncertainty" best characterizes the political climate in this region of Indonesia by the end of 1998. Most government officials still held the same positions as they had before the start of the *krismon* and before president Suharto stepped down from office. Yet, their authority was decreasing. That part of their power and authority generated by distribution of central government funds was fading, because the funds were running out. The crisis in national politics created uncertainty about the national framework into which local politics fit; people wondered what political party would take charge in the near future, and whether members of the Golkar party would maintain or lose their influence. At the local level, there started to be much more room to criticize politicians, and demonstrations became an accepted and legitimate means for civil protest.

6. "Bloody Thursday" in Waikabubak

Many people in Sumba are convinced that the best strategy for avoiding worry about income and food and other material requirements, and for gaining respect, is to become a government official. Therefore, the results of the selection tests for applicants to fill some of these positions, which were announced on October 24, 1998, disappointed many people who had applied and were rejected. In the Province NTT, there were 27,000 candidates who competed for 1,400 assignments as *pegawai negeri* (government official).[26] The number of candidates eventually selected in Waikabubak turned out to be very low.

When it became clear that some candidates who earned a low score were selected, whereas others who had a higher score were not accepted, participants grew furious.[27] On October 26, 1998, thirty university graduates demonstrated in Waikabubak in front of the parliament building, protesting about the systematic corruption of the civil service examinations that cheated them out of the jobs for which they had trained. There was no response from government side, and so another demonstration followed that same day, October 26. The protest became more directed against the abuse of power by those office-holders who had used their influence to secure jobs for their relatives. When the *bupati* of West Sumba, Rudolf Malo, declared that solving the corruption problem at the provincial level was not within his capacity and accused the demonstrators of being politically suspect, the demonstrators heckled Bupati Malo and accused him personally of practicing *KKN* (corruption, collusion, and nepotism). By October 29, the ongoing demonstration had grown to two hundred participants, who demanded that the *bupati* accept responsibility for corruption and step down from office. In other parts of NTT (in Alor, Flores, and Kupang) there were similar demonstrations.

This was not the first time the *bupati* of West Sumba, Rudolf Malo, was severely criticized. Since he was first assigned to the office in 1996, he had often been accused

[26] Source of the data for this section: *Pos Kupang*, November 13, 1998 and November 15, 1998, and personal interviews.

[27] See also David Mitchell, "Tragedy in Sumba," *Inside Indonesia* 58 (April-June 1999).

of making poor decisions, failing to win enough food aid, and distributing funds inefficiently. Although he has a Sumbanese ethnic background (having been born as member of the *Wewewa suku*), he was generally regarded as an outsider during those times when people were dissatisfied with him, since he had lived most of his life in other parts of Indonesia and was married to a woman from another island. His strongest opponent was the chairman of the parliament of West Sumba, Toda Lero Ora SH, a member of the Loli clan, that originates from Waikabubak,[28] who has been in office there for a long time, much longer than the *bupati*.

On October 29, the *bupati* felt really threatened, threatened by the demonstrators as well as by the parliamentary faction controlled by Toda Lero Ora, who might well use this disturbance to his advantage. On October 31, again there was a demonstration in Waikabubak, and this time the demands of the demonstrators were even stronger. They insulted the *bupati* by calling him by his ancestor's name, an action considered to be extremely rude, since it tends to highlight and ridicule a person's ethnic background. The demonstration had evolved from a protest against KKN in civil service examinations to become a protest against Bupati Malo and his supporters and relatives. The first demonstrators were not predominantly made up of *orang Loli*, but were united by their shared experience as victims of corruption. But as the demonstrations grew, more Loli participants from town and neighboring villages joined. This Loli mob stoned and burned houses of many Wewewa people in town.[29]

In the past there had been several clashes between *orang Loli* and *orang Wewewa*, the last major one, in 1991, concerning a land dispute. That conflict was settled with a peace-making ceremony in which each side swore an oath—using traditional ritual speech—never again to invade the territory of the other. At the peace-making ceremony in 1991, the *bupati* of West Sumba in office at that time, Drs. Umbu Jima, was prominently in attendance, as were leaders of the Christian Church. In daily life there was antagonism between the two groups in town, because many people from Wewewa work in town as petty traders and small shopkeepers and are more successful in business than the Loli clan members in Waikabubak. Many members of both groups are Christians. The Loli group that adheres strongly to the traditional Marapu religion of Sumba is very prominent and visible because their dwellings are located on the hill top in the center of Waikabubak, in the old *kampong* Prai Tarung, the Mother Village of Loli.

On Monday, November 2, 1998, five hundred people from Wewewa came to Waikabubak on trucks to stage a counter demonstration. In town they stayed at the homes of relatives of the *bupati*, and this raised suspicion that the *bupati* himself had invited the *orang Wewewa* to come and protect him. This would have been an unusual action, since it is the police's responsibility to guard the safety of people and the *bupati* in town. The rumor quickly circulated that five hundred hostile *orang Wewewa* had entered town, and that the police had confiscated all their knives and other weapons. Since the parliamentary chairman, Toda Lero Ora, maintained strong ties with the Police Commander, rumor also predicted that the police would protect Waikabubak's

[28] Loli is the name of the clan residing in the area of Waikabubak and its surroundings. This geographical area is also referred to as Loli or Lauli. Wewewa also refers to a clan, and to the area associated with this clan, west of Loli.

[29] Mitchell, "Tragedy in Sumba," p. 2.

inhabitants (especially Loli) from attacks by Wewewa raiding parties. Tension in town grew.

On November 4, report reached Waikabubak that one of its own residents, an *orang Loli,* had been murdered at the market of Ombarade in Wewewa. This was the last straw for the *orang Loli,* and they decided to get ready for action. That night they gathered in the old *kampong* in the center of town, where they held a *marapu* ritual. As I described above, November is the month of *Podu.* It is a holy month (*karamat*). It is the month for hunting wild boar. At the ritual in *kampong Loli,* the *ratu* asked their gods for permission to substitute *orang Wewewa* for the wild boar. The *ratu* took a leaf of a palm tree and split the long leaf in two. If the right part of the leaf broke off first, this would be taken as a sign that the *marapu* agreed to the substitution; if the left part broke off first, this meant "not agreed." Thrice the right part was first. Strengthened by this clear sign of approval of the *marapu, orang Loli* prepared for a battle. They felt strengthened as well because they had been told that the police would not harm them. To distinguish them from others, *orang Loli* had to wear a white head band or a string of palm leaf around their heads.

Early on the morning of November 5, some two thousand Wewewa men arrived at the borders of Waikabubak. According to their version of events, they came "to protect their relatives in town"; according to the Loli interpretation of events that day, they came "to raid and burn Loli houses and finally attack Prai Tarung."[30] Loli men went out and started to burn houses of *orang Wewewa* along one of the main roads from town. Fighting soon intensified, centered on the market place (*Pasar Inpres*), where a large number of people were killed. According to eye witnesses, groups of *orang Loli* left their *kampong* in shifts to go to the area in town where *orang Wewewa* reside; these groups entered the houses of Wewewa, smashed up everything inside and killed the inhabitants who had not yet escaped. According to official reports, "Bloody Thursday" resulted in the destruction of 891 houses and the death of twenty-six people.[31] The number of causalities was, in fact, much larger. Many bodies could not be identified, were hidden, or were taken home immediately by relatives.[32]

After this *kamis berdarah,* many inhabitants of Waikabubak left town because they were afraid. Rumors circulated that *orang Wewewa* would take revenge and burn the whole town. The consequences were felt for a long time. The town's economy suffered, since many traders no longer visited Waikabubak. The prices of food rose. *Orang Wewewa* did not feel safe going into town anymore, and therefore had no access to services that were only provided in town, such as hospital and postal services. Among the refugees who fled Waikabubak were many government officials, so that their offices were also unoccupied. Government personnel did not receive salaries for several weeks, because the money from Waikabubak was transferred to Waingapu for safety. Worst off are the families who have lost their fathers and husbands.

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[30] *Pos Kupang,* November 15, 1998, pp. 4-5.

[31] These data were published in *Pos Kupang,* November 15, 1998.

[32] The problem with identifying the casualties was also said to be due to the fact that the victims were decapitated. The Sumbanese tradition of head hunting makes this sound convincing, but I do not have proof for this rumor.

The *bupati* did not step down. Local elite and Christian leaders from Kupang tried actively to restore peace. In their peace-making efforts, they used *adat* ceremonies to try and effect a reconciliation, and they appealed to the Christian brotherhood. A hundred policemen (*brimob*) were transferred from Kupang and stationed in Waikabubak to guard the safety of the citizens.[33] By the end of November, the people in West Sumba had become frustrated by the extent of the devastation. What's more, they feared that a similar "incident" could easily happen again. In fact, the only ones who benefited from this battle were members of the political elite in Waikabubak. All others, and that is by far the majority of the population, suffered from fear and the destruction of their property.

7. Conclusion

The battle of "Bloody Thursday" could take place because, by the end of 1998, there was a vacuum of authority on Sumba. The strong and repressive New Order regime had ceased to exist, and therefore it was no longer self-evident that all demonstrations would be prevented, nor that public violence would be impossible. Between 1965 and 1998, the Indonesian police and army monopolized violence, with the exception of the domesticated violence involved in traditional rituals; this sort of "tamed" violence was allowed by the Sumbanese government and even encouraged because it attracts tourism.

Therefore, after the fall of Suharto, the *bupati,* being the highest district government official, could no longer derive sufficient authority from his office exclusively. He also needed to call on the power inherent in his second identity, as an important person within his clan, and therefore he became more involved in the protection of his fellow clan members. This strategy was similar to the strategy employed by the Sumbanese *raja* used toward the end of the nineteenth century: he gathered as many men around him as possible to build up his strength in case of war. The fact that the *bupati* did not choose to capitalize on his identity as an officer of the Army also reveals that strong unity within the state apparatus, so often presumed, did not actually exist in Waikabubak by the end of 1998.

In the political history of Sumba, there has never been a single, socially accepted local ruler for the whole island, and there have always been struggles between social groups and their leaders for access to the resources of the state. Members of the local Sumbanese elite have always competed for the benefits that could be derived from the state. First, competitors vied to gain military support from the colonial government to enable them to conduct internal warfare; then members of the elite struggled for the positions that gave them the right to levy taxes; and the broadest and most recent competition has concerned access to government offices, which opens the way to influence and steady sources of income. In this sense, the state on Sumba is strong rather than weak.[34]

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[33] The transfer of this brigade of *brimob,* in turn, facilitated the violence which occurred in Kupang on November 30 and December 1, 1998.

[34] John Sidel attacks the well-established ideas of Joel S. Migdal on "strong societies and weak states." Midal's arguments are outlined in Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations*

Sumba does not have (any more) valuable natural resources that can be profitably exploited by parties from outside the island. Land is the primary source of livelihood for the Sumbanese people, and conflicts between social groups on Sumba can often be traced to disputes over land. Employment by the government and access to government funds are the main sources of monetary income on Sumba. This implies that, for the Sumbanese, it is best to avoid an oppositional relationship with the state. From the perspective of the "dominant ethnic groups in national society," there is no incentive to suppress Sumbanese culture, since it does not threaten national unity or national economic interests.

"Bloody Thursday" cannot be explained as a revolt of indigenous people against the state, but it started with a demonstration of frustration ignited by people's perception that their opportunities to appropriate the state—i.e. to gain access to government offices—had been blocked by corruption and nepotism.

The absence of conflict with the state is one of the reasons why I think it is appropriate to analyze Sumbanese society in terms of multiple identities rather that dissociated identities,[35] since different identities do not necessarily have to conflict with each other. The *bupati* and the chairman of the district parliament could both resort to their identities as important figures within their clans, and call on the assistance of trusted religious leaders.

The "traditional" leaders on Sumba, the *ratu*, also seek support for their position of authority in other domains. The story of "Bloody Thursday" reveals how the *ratu* of *Loli* found a solution for their own crisis of authority in the conflict that started in the political and economic domain. The battle in Waikabubak can therefore partly be understood as a modified purification ritual that occurred at the start of the new agricultural cycle. This could explain why traditional rules concerning dispute resolution were not applied to prevent the violence of "Bloody Thursday."

When "Bloody Thursday" is compared with the occurrences of violence in Indonesia that succeeded this event—especially the violence in Ketapang and Kupang later in November 1998—the religious explanation is missing. In Waikabubak, Christians were fighting Christians, and therefore one cannot interpret this event as part of the struggle between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia. The battle in Waikabubak reveals that there are many more variables at stake in local political violence. I am convinced that even in the cases were violence was actually occurring between groups with different religious identities—as was the case in Kupang[36]—other variables were more important in explaining how massive violence could start. I hope this case of a "tribal battle in a remote island" contributes to making these variables visible.

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and State Capabilities in the Third World (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). Sidel argues that the contexts in which local strongmen thrive are shaped at least as much by the nature of the state as by that of society. See John Sidel, "Local Bosses and Mafias: Brokers of Votes and State Power in Provincial Southeast Asia," unpublished paper, 1999.

[35] Rita Smith-Kipp, *Dissociated Identities: Ethnicity, Religion and Class in an Indonesian Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

[36] Mass violence occurred in Kupang on November 30 and December 1, 1998.