



Hard-fisted piety: Christian militias in the Minahasa

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The Minahasa in North Sulawesi is a majority-Christian area in predominantly Muslim Indonesia. Following the fall of Suharto and inter-religious fighting in Central Sulawesi and the nearby Moluccas, Minahasans set up several regional militias in anticipation of the arrival of militant muslim groups in their area. The Muslim militants never came – scared away by the Minahasan militias, or so these maintain- giving the militias a *raison d'être* as permanent guards against militant Islamic groups.

Religion is, however, but one of the pillars which these groups apply to empower and justify their existence. Drawing on civil society discourse they have taken poor governance, corruption and crime as evils to fight, while simultaneously emphasizing their democratic functioning and social engagement. Thus putting themselves in line with the values professed by the national state, and declaring themselves loyal Indonesian citizens, as the constitution requires of all organizations within the nation. Moreover, the moral power of religion is shaped and sustained by the invocation of ethnic, magic and ancestral powers preceding Christianity and weakening its discourse of forgiveness. Minahasa militias are pious and legal, as well as violent and potentially deadly.

In this paper I argue that religion functions as one, but not the only, normative parameter directing militia's societal behaviour and reputation. Taking Taussig's (1992:2-4) 'nervous system' as a theoretical baseline, I will argue that religious arguments are on an equal plane with those based on good governance and popular ideas of justice. If we should look for the sovereignty of these militias in the tension between the will to arbitrary violence and the existence of bodies that may be killed off (Hansen and Stepputat, 2005) this balance is profane, at least as much as it is divine .

Dr. Laurens Bakker studied cultural anthropology at Leiden University and received his Ph.D. (2009) from the Radboud University Nijmegen (law faculty) with a thesis titled: *Who owns the Land? Looking for Law and Power in East Kalimantan*. He is the author of some two dozen articles and book chapters dealing with land, law and identity in Indonesia and with sharia and specialized courts of law in the Netherlands. His current research projects concern the role of militias in contemporary Indonesia, and Arab investments in land and natural resources in Indonesia and the Philippines. He works at the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Studies (Radboud University Nijmegen) and at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Amsterdam.

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