

Book review for *Ethnos* of Bräuchler, B. 2005. *Cyberidentities at War: Der Molukkenkonflikt im Internet*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

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This book is a study of the religious conflict that pitted Christians against Muslims in the Moluccas (Indonesia) from 1999 to 2002, killing thousands of people. Directly based on a PhD thesis in social anthropology recently presented at the University of Munich, the focus is on the Moluccan 'cyberspace' created around the conflict. The book opens with an impressive survey of the Internet and anthropological/sociological literature and with an overview of the conflict (chapters 1-3). This is followed by the detailed case studies of three influential Internet agents, namely the mainly Protestant mailing list Masariku, the Catholic e-newsletter CCDA and a mailing list linked to the Islamist organisation FKAWJ (chapters 4-6). The final section of the book draws together these case studies by contrasting their online strategies (textual and visual rhetorics, viral attacks, flame wars, cross-posting, etc) and considering the offline contexts of their various positionings in cyberspace (chapters 7-10).

This clearly written study has much to commend it. Unlike much of the existing Internet literature, it is based on long-term ethnographic research, most of it carried out online owing to the dangerous conditions on the ground, but with an interesting offline dimension as well (chapter 9). The author navigates effortlessly a sea of primary and secondary sources in English, German, Indonesian and Moluccan vernaculars. Through painstakingly analysed case studies, she explores some of the practical possibilities and constraints of various Internet technologies at a time of war. Thus, the contrasting uses of Yahoo mailing lists is striking: where the Masariku group exploit the many-to-many 'affordances' of this technology to exchange information and analyse the unfolding events, the FKAWJ Islamists use their list as the one-to-many extension of a hierarchical, top-down organisation. Each side of the story is successfully spread across the region and beyond through multiplying techniques such as mailing list cross-posting and web forum messages. In contrast with most studies in North Atlantic countries, in the Moluccan cyberspace 'flaming' (a heated exchange that usually entails abusive language) takes place not within an online group but rather across enemy lines.

One central area of analysis is the question of online identity formation – a key interest of Internet researchers since this network was created. Bräuchler is particularly interested in processes of online identity formation and community building (*Vergemeinschaftungsprozesse*). She demonstrates empirically that such processes are far from homogeneous, as they will vary greatly depending on the specific Internet technologies being used (MUDs, IRCs, web forums, etc) and the socio-political context. She rightly stresses, however, a fundamental difference

between individual and collective identity projects. Whilst the online identity performances celebrated by postmodern theorists in the 1990s allowed individuals much room for playful experimentation, the online collective identities sought by Moluccan activists were strongly constrained by their subordination to political and military imperatives. In wartime, playfully ambiguous identities are not in high demand.

There are problems, nonetheless, with this study's approach to community building. The most recent anthropological source on the concept of community used in the analysis – besides the 'cyberanthropological' texts -- is Cohen's (1985) *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. We have, of course, moved on since Cohen's influential text, most recently with Vered Amit's critiques of community as an analytical concept, yet these developments are not woven into the analysis. For example, the Masariku activists saw themselves as more than merely the providers of first-hand information on the Moluccan conflict; they were also the leaders of an international 'action network' aimed at producing tangible results, i.e. peace and justice in the Moluccas (p. 110). In other words, their aims were very different from those of Howard Rheingold and other communitarian authors in the West rooted in the 'hippy' countercultures of the 1960s who set out to build 'virtual communities'. The Masariku network could be better described not as an 'online community' but rather by the anthropological notion of *sodality*, that is, an ad-hoc group that cuts across existing divides of geography and social formation in order to attain a common goal. Sodalities are prone to disintegrating once their goal is accomplished or abandoned. Indeed, once the Moluccan peace treaty was signed in 2002, most Masariku members became dormant (although the list is still in existence), whilst FKAJ's online initiative closed down. Searching for online 'communities' under such fraught circumstances may not be the most productive line of inquiry.

At any rate, *Cyberidentities at War* fills a huge gap in the ethnographic record on the war uses of Internet technologies. It is a very valuable contribution to the thriving research area of 'media anthropology' at a time when few anthropological monographs are being published. It is a strong addition, in particular, to the three main ethnographic studies of the Internet to date, all of which are now six years old, namely Miller and Slater's (2000) *Internet: an Ethnographic Approach*, Hine's (2000) *Virtual Ethnography* and Zurawski's (2000) *Virtuelle Ethnizität*. It will be essential reading for scholars and students of Internet studies, religious studies, political science, media anthropology and the anthropology of Southeast Asia (although closer attention to recent debates on the role of the middle classes in political reform across the region would have been helpful). Given this broad appeal, the book fully deserves an English translation in order to reach an international readership, not least in Southeast Asia. In the meantime, Anglophone readers may wish to consult the following:

Bräuchler, B.

2003 *Cyberidentities at War: Religion, Identity, and the Internet in the Moluccan Conflict*. *Indonesia* 75 (April 2003): 123-151.

2004a Moluccan Cyberactors. *Antropologi Indonesia* XXVIII (73): 40-57.

2004b Public Sphere and Identity Politics in the Moluccan Cyberspace. *Electronic Journal of Communication* 14 (3/4).

http://www.cios.org/getfile/01438_EJC

2004c Islamic Radicalism Online: The Moluccan Mission of the Laskar Jihad in Cyberspace. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 15 (3): 267-285.

2005 Introductory statement on Researching the Internet to the EASA Media Anthropology Network, 27 September - 4 October 2005

<http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/workingpapers.htm>