

The 1999–2004 Ambon Wars: Embodied Experiences, Stories and (Re)Memories

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Abstract

This essay addresses embodied experiences of the wars involving Christian and Muslim communities in Ambon that started on 19 January 1999 and lasted until 2004—wars that were made possible by the existing (religious) segregation put in place since (Dutch) colonial time, which in turn exacerbated that segregation and left marks on Ambon—both the city and its people. Starting from embodied experiences of the 1999-2004 (religious) wars in Ambon, in this essay, I argue that wars are not mere events or concepts to discuss, debate, and draw policies from. Wars are experienced in/with the bodies of those who were unlucky enough to go through them. Wars are embodied experiences of people and city(ies). The trauma and haunting (re)memories of wars and their aftereffects remain with the people and the cities visited and touched by wars. And as we walk through a particular city that has experienced wars, chances are we might bump into these (re)memories.

The 1999–2004 Ambon Wars

19 January 1999. First day of Eid. *Idul Fitri*, or *Lebaran* as we know it in Ambon. The morning Eid prayer was followed by *silaturahmi*, where people visit each other extending well wishes of Eid while enjoying refreshments prepared in the homes of those who celebrate Eid after the *Ramadhan*'s fast and served exclusively during Eid.

The spirit of festivity did not last long, though, for soon after noon tensions rose. A fight broke out in Terminal Mardika; but unlike countless similar incidents in the past, this one triggered other violent incidents that spread across the city faster than any of us could have anticipated. And so, Ambon entered a period of warfare that did not cease until 2004. In the latter half of that day, violence broke out in various parts of the city. Several houses were burned to the ground by groups of men unknown to the locals. Tensions were building, and many of us who lived in areas between Christian and Muslim-dominated territories were preparing to leave should the situation worsen.

Living in one of those border neighbourhoods, my family and I slept fitfully on the night of 19 January 1999, as we were fully prepared to flee should the violence approach our neighbourhood. There was already an emergency signal put in place: the beating of a metal rod on a metal electricity pole meant danger was approaching, and people hearing this should run for safety. Many Ambonese who survived the wars will most likely tell you, that this sound has the power to trigger panic and awaken deep-seated trauma of wars long after the violence stopped. Back to the night of 19 January 1999, we survived the night without harm. Nevertheless, not long after dawn, we heard loud voices up the hill across from our home. Peeping through our front window, I saw people running up the hill, shouting as they arrived, followed by flaming arrows aimed at houses in that area. The danger had arrived. And so, we fled. Together with our neighbours, we walked quickly to the main street, and crossed over to enter a small alley that would take us to a Christian dominated area. As we were crossing, less than 200 metres to our right we saw a group of people approaching; the blades of their *parang* reflecting the early morning sun. In silence, we hastened our pace. Within five minutes, we arrived at a Christian-dominated area where our family and friends were waiting, ready to shelter us. There, with *parang* at hand, stood a group of men ready to defend their homes should the enemy approach. My family and I found shelter in that area, less than one kilometre from our home throughout the wars. Although we occasionally managed to return between battles, almost a decade would pass before we returned to our home for good.

In 2010, I returned to Ambon for my research. More than ten years after the start of the wars and more than five years after the battles stopped, tensions were still in the air as Ambon dealt with the remnants from the wars. Relocations of those internally displaced, rebuilding of public facilities damaged or destroyed, rebuilding broken trust amidst the trauma of wars, reconnecting two communities, Muslims and Christians, almost totally segregated during the wars, so that they can learn to live together again.

Upon this return to Ambon, I found that the face of the city which had barely changed throughout my childhood had now changed so much that I sometimes felt disoriented. The big old mango tree, once a landmark of our neighbourhood was no longer there; the family who lived there had sold their plot and moved to a Christian-dominated area. On its spot was a new three-storey building. Across the street was a new iron gate decorated with a Christian cross at the mouth of the small alley that we passed to safety back in 1999. The gate was built during the wars to mark the border between Christian and Muslim territories, and help defend the area from attacks. On the wall of a tall building nearby were bullet marks from one of the many battles in Ambon between 1999-2004.

The iron gate, the bullet holes, the changing face of the city, the anxiety triggered by the sound of steel rods on steel poles, and nightmares of blades reflecting the sunlight; these are only a small portion of the remnants of wars. The marks left by five years of the bloodbath that are now embodied by the city of Ambon and its people. Not to mention the scars people bear on their bodies from wounds sustained during the wars, nor the scars deep in their hearts from the loss of loved ones to the wars. The 1999-2004 wars divide time and life in Ambon into ‘before the wars’ and ‘after the wars’.

In this essay, using embodied experience of the 1999-2004 wars in Ambon as my starting point, I will draw attention to the fact that for those who lived through the Ambon wars, wars is not a mere concept, theory to debate and draw policies from. (The) wars are historical, embodied experiences that left long lasting impacts on the life of people touched by them. For many, (the) wars alter their-our life trajectories, their-our present and their-our future.

Writing: Resisting/Re-Existing From the Body

This essay is written as a reflection on how the 1999-2004 wars in Ambon affected the city and its people. It is an attempt to look back across the little more than two decades since the start of the wars, to put together stories and (re)memories in order to build and curate (a) decolonial archive(s) on the Ambon wars and its aftermath. In a way, as a Malukan scholar-

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practitioner who embodied the Ambon wars through my own experience of it as well as those who are dear to me, writing this essay is my way of reaching through the interstices between theories and realities, to authenticate my voice (Alexander), to talk back (bell hooks) to those who theorise wars from the abstract position of a detached, non-embodied, non-positioned researcher. Through the stories and (re)memories (Rhee) of wars, I am writing this essay to resist ¹ epistemic erasure—intended and unintended—that comes with theories of conflict and peace developed *about* (Barbosa da Costa et al.) us and imposed on us.

On Looking Back, Stories, and (Re)Memories

Sam Okoth Opondo in his afterword to the book *Politics of African Anticolonial Archive* (Malik and Kamola), extended an invitation to look back and to listen otherwise (Opondo), as a task of (anticolonial) archiving, which is to be understood as “archives in processes of production with no end” (Kamola and Malik 5). In their introduction to the same volume, Kamola and Malik explain, that the task of anticolonial archiving is not about looking back nostalgically or double-checking for authenticity (Kamola and Malik 5). Instead, we look back to forge relationships, that is “a relationship between a historical moment, its actors and locations, and the present historical moment” (Kamola and Malik 5).

In her work ‘Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back’, Leanne Simpson narrates how the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg resisted colonialism, how her ancestors “resisted by holding onto their stories” (Simpson 5). Stories indeed play a very important role in indigenous ways of knowing. Through stories we learn about our land, our people, where we come from, what is our purpose, and where we will head to after serving our purpose in this life. In stories, we find knowledges about ourselves and the world around us. At the same time, in the context of colonised people, stories are at the centre of resistance.

Stories and storytelling also involve (re)memory, and (re)memory involves both remembering and forgetting (Rhee) as we also remember what we do not remember (Alexander 278). And so, in sharing our stories, sometimes we bump into memories that we thought forgotten, yet were not. Those (re)memories remain, floating around places and people, and we might bump into them from time to time (Rhee; Soukotta, *Past in Present*).

“We had to flee to a refugee camp”. “I did not flee my house, did not go to the refugee camp. So, we had different experiences”. “Yes. That was why back then I really hated Christians. Because of my experiences in the refugee camp. Therefore, at the beginning when they contacted me to join

[the peace initiatives], I hesitated, it was not easy for me”. “Yes. Because she was in the refugee camp”.²

These are pieces of conversations (Soukotta, *Past in Present* 118) that I had with some of the women who initiated *Gerakan Perempuan Peduli* (abbreviated GPP, or Concerned Women’s Movement in English), a peace initiative started by women from both Muslim and Christian camps during the early year of the wars, and its off-shoot, Maluku Ambassadors for Peace (MAP). These conversations usually took place in between sessions of the peacebuilding workshops they organised for peace actors on the ground. Conversations like these are times where stories were shared and (re)memories were exchanged. From these exchanges, we see that different people went through different experiences of the same wars. In this case both women were Muslim, yet they went through different trajectories and embodied the wars differently.

The sharing of stories and (re)memories also helps to understand how both communities fell victim to provocations during the wars. One of the stories shared was what I will refer to here as the night terror— incidents where people were attacked in their homes.³ These usually occurred randomly in the middle of the night when it was raining hard and there was a blackout. People in the Christian communities believed these attacks were done by the Muslims, while the Muslim communities believed that the Christians did these. Neither camp was aware that the other also experienced similar attacks. They only learned about them when stories and (re)memories of wars were shared in conversations.

Sharing stories is part of everyday life in Ambon. It is how we generate knowledges about ourselves and about the world around us (Soukotta, *Past in Present*). Our sharing of stories often involves (re)memories about people, places, events, and relations. It involves our remembering and forgetting, including our remembering what we do not remember. As we look back and (re)memory in our sharing of stories, we might realise that our recollections of things and events are different from one another. Memories are not meant to be accurate. People might have different recollections of the same event. After all, our memories of a particular event are often our record of it interwoven with our hopes, dreams and fears surrounding it. This also applies to our (re)memories of wars in Ambon. The point of looking back and (re)memory here is not about finding and double-checking facts, but rather about understanding each other’s experiences of the wars and learning from them. It is about relating to each other—in María Lugones’ words, travelling to each other’s worlds (Lugones).

On Wars and Violent Conflicts: What Is In The Name?

The bloodbath that took place in Ambon between 1999–2004 has many different names. On the ground, the most popular name is *kerusuhan*. Riot. *Kerusuhan*, however, is not a local term. This term comes from the news of turmoil in Indonesia surrounding the fall of Suharto's new order regime in May 1998 marked by the riots (*kerusuhan*) that emerged in different parts of Indonesia, from Jakarta to Kalimantan, to Sulawesi, and of course, Maluku. The term Ambonese usually used for a situation involving unrest of unclear nature would be *baribot-baribot*, or in the case of the 1999–2004 violence, *prang*, meaning war. Through the national media repeating the government discourse labelling the violence that occurred around the fall of Suharto, the term *kerusuhan* was accepted as a name with which we refer to the violence in Ambon that started on 19 January 1999.

Another name commonly used to describe this period of time in Ambon is *prang*. War. Although commonly used on the ground to refer to the violence in Ambon between 1999 and 2004, this is not usually used among scholars writing on the Ambon wars.

Among scholars who work on conflict and peace studies, as well as those whose work focuses on Indonesia, the bloodbath that started in 1999 and lasted for the next few years is generally labelled as communal or religious conflict (Goss; Sudjatmiko; Sumanto Al Qurtuby). The term conflict, or *konflik* in the Indonesian language, is also a popular name for the Ambon wars. However, just like *kerusuhan*, the term *konflik* was also a term that entered Ambon through media discourse reflecting scholarly and policy language around the theory of liberal peace. Although not popular, a few scholars use the term war to refer to the violence in Ambon (see Hatib Abdul Kadir 187; Soukotta, *Past in Present* 24).

In this essay, I chose to use the term wars, in plural, for (1) wars, *prang*, was a term used on the ground, (2) it reflects the intensity of violence in Ambon between 1999 and 2004 that involved the use of sophisticated weaponry and mass killing, and (3) the use of plural wars reflect the many different interests involved in the wars, as well as the entanglement of actors, issues, events, and relations on the ground that go beyond religion and ethnicity debates (Soukotta, *Past in Present*).

Using the term wars instead of *kerusuhan* (riot) or *konflik* (conflict) also feels right, for riot implies uncontrolled chaos while in the case of Ambon the chaos was orchestrated and filled with interests (Soukotta, *Past in Present*). On the other hand, the term conflict does not do justice to the violence that Ambon and its people went through between the years 1999 and 2004, as it reduces five years of open wars involving sophisticated

weaponry resulting in at least 3,000–4,000 deaths within the first year only (Klinken, *Communal Contenders* 130) to a situation of incompatible goals (Soukotta, *Past in Present* 127–9).

On Embodied Experiences, Knowing and Resisting From/Through the Bodies

Taking a distance from the Cartesian view that disregards the body while privileging the mind (see Cruz; Mignolo, *Coloniality*; Soukotta, *IR from Below*), here I value bodies and everyday experiences that these bodies go through in encountering the world as a way of knowing and making sense of the world. Aligning myself with black, Chicana and decolonial feminists (e.g., Lugones; Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*; Anzaldúa & Keating; Alexander, *Pedagogies*; Icaza; bell hooks, *Remembered Rapture*; *Talking Back*; Moraga & Anzaldúa; Lorde; Wekker; Motta; Trejo Mendez) who theorise from “embodied (transgenerational, ancestral) knowledges, experiences and realities” (Soukotta, *Past in Present* 59), I understand embodied experiences as experiences that we go through with and in our bodies.

We cultivate knowledges through our bodies (Cruz)—bodies that work together (Barbosa da Costa et al.), walk together (Icaza & Aguilar), learn together (Lugones).

At the same time, it is also from, through and with our bodies that we interact with and respond to the world around us. We experience violence through our bodies, and from/with them we resist à la Fanon (see Mignolo, *Coloniality*; Soukotta, *Past in Present*).

Understanding Wars as Embodied Experience

As exemplified by the vignette at the beginning of this essay, people in Ambon experienced the 1999–2004 wars and the almost total segregation of the city into Christian and Muslim territories with and in their bodies. Bodies that left their homes behind, fled the approaching attacks, were pierced and wounded by blades, arrows, and bullets, endured the loss of loved ones, and are still reminded of the traumas of wars long after the violence stopped. These bodies experienced the wars and segregation in Ambon in their/our flesh.

Just as the wars were messy and chaotic, so were our experiences. This messiness, the different nuances on the ground experienced by the city of Ambon and its people are realities of wars that the theories written by distant, disengaged observers failed to perceive/receive.⁴ And so, in academic, scholarly narratives of the Ambon wars, we often see a clear separation between Muslims and Christians as enemies (see for example

Klinken, *Bringing Society*), as well as clear linear progress between conflict and peace separated by a peace agreement signed in 2002 (Soukotta, *Past in Present*). This peace agreement, the Malino II, was initiated by the government through the hand of Jusuf Kalla. Signed by the representatives of the so-called conflicting parties invited to the peace talk in Malino, Sulawesi—hence the name of the agreement, Malino II is seen as the end of the conflict, and the period following it is considered post-conflict. Therefore, in the mainstream narrative of the Ambon wars, the conflict is generally understood as taking place between 1999–2002, despite the reality on the ground showing incidents of violence continued until 2004 (Duncan; Soukotta, *Past in Present*).

On the ground, although there were clear borders separating Christians and Muslims, there were still interstices, the spaces inbetween, where people from these two communities met each other to initiate peace. In the chaos of the battleground, wars and peace processes overlap. The same bodies that warred were also those that reached out to each other for peace. The peace process in Ambon did not start with the Malino agreement. It started long before amidst the bloodbath. GPP as a peace movement was initiated in early 2000 (Soukotta, *The Past in the Present*). These women from both Muslim and Christian backgrounds distributed green ribbons on the streets of Ambon to call for the end of violence. From there they organised workshops and training for peacebuilding, while violence was still at its peak. Similar stories of people reaching out to each other for peace are shared in the book *Carita Orang Basudara* (Manuputty et al.) published in 2014 as part of the peace initiatives of *Lembaga Antar Iman Maluku* (LAIM), Maluku Interfaith Institution.

In *Carita Orang Basudara*, Ambonese from various backgrounds who went through the wars share their stories and (re)memories of how they experienced the wars, the segregations, as well as how they transgressed borders and revived the relationality of *orang basudara*—people who come from the same source—to build peace on the ground (Soukotta, *The Past in the Present*). In this book, they take into their hands the task of resisting the mainstream narrative of the Ambon wars through stories and (re)memories of their embodied experiences.

Stories and (Re)Memories of Wars as Epistemic Resistance

In the globalised world of today where coloniality as the underlying logic of colonisation outlived the European colonial administration and remains “the most general form of domination” (Quijano 270), ‘The West’ still claims superiority to ‘the rest’ not only in political, economic and socio-cultural

aspects of life but also onto-epistemologically—in views of the world and how knowledge is produced about the world around us (Soukotta, *IR from Below*). When it comes to knowledge production, coloniality means only European culture is deemed as rational and therefore can assume the position of subjects (Quijano 174; see also Soukotta, *IR from Below*). The rest are deemed inferior, and therefore can only be assigned the position of objects (Quijano 174; see also Soukotta, *IR from Below*). In the context of (academic) production of (scientific) knowledge about Ambon wars, Ambon and its people are assigned the position of objects of study, to be spoken about, not to speak for ourselves.

The embodied knowledges generated in Ambon by people who went through the wars fall outside the category of scientific knowledge, and their-our narratives of their-our embodied experiences of the wars are reduced to mere ‘stories’ vis-à-vis the scientific theories of wars where the same stories and experiences are carefully collected using valid methods of data collection, sieved through a rigorous process of analysis involving sophisticated theories developed by esteemed scholars, and therefore elevated into the realm of theory. Inherent in this difference is the Cartesian dichotomy (see Cruz; Mignolo, *Coloniality*; Soukotta, *IR from Below*) that separates mind from body and theory from experience, where theory that comes from the mind is valued more as compared to the body and what it experienced.

In this context, sharing stories from the ground of the wars in Ambon, be it stories of wars as well as stories of people reaching out to each other to initiate peace amidst the wars, is a form of epistemic resistance. It is where those assigned the position of object rise up, and assume the position of subject, talk back to those who produced them as objects in the first place. The publication of *Carita Orang Basudara*, stories of peace from the battlegrounds of Ambon, is an example of this epistemic resistance. Through these stories and (re)memories, those who contributed to the book provide nuances on the ground not visible from the bird’s eye view of those who wrote about the wars from a safe distance.

Rudi Fofid, a Malukan journalist and activist, places this epistemic violence—biases in information and mistakes in capturing facts burying significant truths—together with the direct physical violence—the fires that destroyed houses and villages, swords, spears and bullets that pierced through the hearts—that Ambon experienced during the wars (Fofid 37). Fofid continues, that it is important that we write our own stories, otherwise a thousand fairy tales will appear in the future telling stories of a whole generation down on their knees back in 1999 (Fofid 37).

This epistemic resistance, this undertaking to speak of our own embodied experience, is what Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa refers to when she suggests that “it is *vital* that we occupy theorizing space, that we do not allow whitemen and women solely to occupy it” (Anzaldúa, *Making Face* xxv). Only by entering the “forbidden territory” (Anzaldúa, *Making Face* xxv) that is the “theorizing space” (Anzaldúa, *Making Face* xxv) bringing with us our worldviews and our ways of knowing to the space where knowledge is produced about us (Soukotta, *IR from Below*), can we “transform that theorizing space” (Anzaldúa, *Making Face* xxv).

Towards an Understanding of Wars and Violent Conflict Otherwise

New buildings stand on streets that are busier than before. New faces everywhere. Those who were children during the wars are now grown-ups. Children born after the wars might learn about the wars from stories and (re)memories of their parents and grandparents. How they see the recent wars is perhaps similar to how my generation feels about the Second World War.

After the wars, Ambon experienced development projects and economic growth, today’s panacea for ‘(post)conflict’ societies. Yet marks of the wars, scars left deep in the flesh of Ambon remain. Experiences of wars that we go through with our bodies remain. No amount of development projects and economic growth could ease the pain and the trauma the city and its people carried on/in/with their-our bodies. (Re)memories of the experiences of wars and the scars left behind float above the city and its people. And when we walk past certain places or people in Ambon, we might bump into these (re)memories of the 1999-2004 Ambon wars.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Resisting/re-existing (Mignolo & Walsh) from the body a la Fanon (Mignolo, *Coloniality*; see also Soukotta, *Past in Present*)
- ² Pieces of conversations with members of Maluku Ambassadors for Peace during a workshop in 2010 from fieldwork notes, August 2010 (Soukotta, *Past in Present* 118).
- ³ From fieldwork notes, November 2014.
- ⁴ The production of academic/scientific knowledge in general is based on an intellectual exercise that implies objective gaze of a distant observer. Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues against this idea of research as "an innocent or distant academic exercise"; instead, it is "an activity that has something at stake" (5). Along the same line, Walter Mignolo also proposes another way of generating knowledges, that is different than "the report of a detached observer" (*The Darker Side* 123). To be involved and engaged in research as a way to generate knowledges mean that researchers need to be aware of how we are positioned in the world, that there is no such thing as a neutral position with regards to the knowledges we generate. On this Vazquez posits, that "[p]ositionality undoes the universal validity claims of non-positioned knowledge" (xxvi). Positionality here refers to how we positioned ourselves body-geo-politically in relation to the knowledge we produce, as well as our awareness of the colonial difference between researchers, the 'subjects' located in the 'North' and the 'objects' of their research located in the 'South' (see Quijano; Trejo Mendez; Soukotta, *Past in Present*).