

Conflict History between Lotas Villagers of Timor Tengah Selatan District and Lotas Villagers of Belu District

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Abstract

This research has two interconnected goals. First is a descriptive attempt at comprehending underlying causes of conflict that has dragged both local communities into long-standing dispute. Second is a critical assessment to the failure or defects of the already practiced conflict resolution that deemed unable to overcome the conflict in sustainable ways.

By drawing on descriptive-qualitative method whose basic traits are understanding and explanation, the writer performed his inquiry in such direct way that both communities were taken seriously, including state officials from both districts, community's prominent figures, and neighbor communities who, in some extent, have shared common knowledge, or better to say, common narrative about the conflict. This scientific investigation comes up with a number of field findings, which, among others, indicates that peaceful efforts such as mediation, negotiation, and arbitration have been in practice unable to bring sustainable and equally acceptable solution for both conflicting parties. It is also evident that traditional conflict resolutions are hardly put into practice partly because third party inclines to employ conflict resolution methods alien to both communities.

Keywords: Conflict history, intra-community's narrative, common narrative,
Traditional conflict resolution

Prologue

Conflict between Lotas Villagers of Timor Tengah Selatan District and those of Belu District has taken place since the remote past up to the present time. It has also in many occasions, interrupted development process, human-public security and order in both villages. In closer inspection, the conflict could be classified into three parts or phases whose underlying leitmotif remains alike: (1) conflict at the time of ethnic-based monarchy, (2) conflict at the Dutch- colonialist period, and (3) conflict that has taken place since Indonesian Independence up to the present time.

Conflict at first phase took form of conflict among ethnics who resided along borderline between Lotas Community of Timor Tengah Selatan District and Biudukfoho community of Belu District. In the Dutch-colonialist period, conflict between both communities took form of land acquisition and conflict over forest's natural resources. While conflict in post Indonesian Independence the conflict began with the dispute between Fetor Noemanumuti's clan and Talelu's clan, and then in the passage of time turned to have been conflict over border territory where both communities defended their assumed rights over land at all cost.

In response to the first and second phases of the conflict, King Amanatun and King Malaka held a meeting to issue borders of both communities' territory in 1912, but the conflict still went on. The conflict culminated in 1917, and the rule or agreement on the land borders did not work at all. To prevent violent conflict or warfare among sub-ethnics/clan as well as to respond to the development of conflict issues, King Amanatun and King Kefetoran Noemanumuti (in Timor Tengah Selatan District) and King Malaka (in Belu District) reenacted borders of both territories under the supervision of Dutch colonial administration. Later on, both communities lived in peaceful coexistence as they were subject to the agreement set up by their respectful kings.

This seemingly harmonious situation, in fact, did not survive the test of time. In 1951, six years after Indonesian Independence, the conflict erupted again when Fetor's group was about to force locals to pay taxes in Lotas, Kefetoran Noemanumuti territory. Knowing that they were not welcome, Fetor punched with his fist Tonas Talelu, one of the prominent figures in the community. This violent and disrespectful act then resulted in the exodus of the inhabitants into Belu District's area.

It should be clearly noted here that the relocation has become propelling force of conflict between two communities. The newcomers, that is, locals from Kefetoran Noemanumuti, resolutely assume that the new area they now reside in is an integral part of Belu's Lotas, whereas locals in Timor Tengah Selatan defend their narrative that the area is under their District's jurisdiction. This then marks a somewhat new source of the conflict, which in tandem with other factors has prolonged their dispute up to the present.

This inquiry was carried out in most part to engage with the question of why such conflict has taken place in the long course of time. Equally important is the question of why many conflict resolution efforts deemed to failure or at least, did not work effectively. These two leading questions cast clearer light on the ways this inquiry then arrives at field-findings and makes more plausible the very roots and dynamics of the conflict across three phases and over generations of conflicting parties. There is also a wide range of options for conflict resolution, which might be of great significance in resolving the conflict, whether for the conflicting communities or third party whose intervention should be crafted in an effective and all-embracing way.

Research Method

As already mentioned in Abstract, this research made use of descriptive-qualitative method, which puts strong emphasis on description, explanation and evaluation of social facts in the light of unbiased mode of inference. This method, however, is more suitable because it engages with the problematic of interpretation shared by both communities particularly their conflicting narratives about the land borders. Most of the conflict issues revolve around the true or false interpretation, that is, true and false narrative that has put them in a long-standing dispute.

In order for the data to be more accurate, researcher applies both literature and field-research. Literature reference takes from books, journals, and other written documents related to the research's main topics. On the other hand, field research was conducted by directly collecting data in research field (Lotas Village), while respondents interviewed are prominent or leading figures, traditional leaders, and noble families who are all involved in the conflict. State officials at district and sub-district level were also interviewed. It is clear that this

inquiry combines primary and secondary data in its attempt at highlighting the roots and dynamics of the conflict.

Analysis

Conflict over forest's natural resources and land borders between Lotas Village of Timor Tengah Selatan and Biudukfoho Village of Belu District stems from the fact that either party holds strong conviction that they bears the overall rights over forest and land in the border area. In fact, there is no clear borderline, which, if ever existed, could prevent them from falling into the conflict. Both villagers have since long relied their economic and cultural activity on the forest and border area, be it for extraction of forest's natural resources or agricultural activity. Such an activity has in effect shaped their social and cultural existence with the disputed land as the centre from which follows the dynamics and characteristic of their social wellbeing and commonality.

Forest's resources such as honey, candle's ingredients, Cendana woods, and other types of wood for house construction become main resources favored by locals in Timor Tengah Selatan District. In the remote past, these natural resources had been taken as trade products bought by Dutch-colonial administration, also as obligatory endowment from the locals to their kings and Dutch colonialist. Moreover, they inherit a belief from their ancestors about the invisible existence of Faut Kanaf (Stone of Names) and Faut Oe (Stone of Water) that lies hidden in the forest for which tribes perform rituals in appointed time. The inhabitants/performers believe that this practice grants them with magical and physical power that makes other clans/enemies dare not to intrude and attack.

Land has become the most pivotal aspect for the locals in Timor Tengah Selatan District. Most of them earn their living from agricultural activity and livestock. As we already know, these two activities depend on the availability and access to land. The more the land is available, the more opportunity will be for them to open up or extend land scope, which enables them to provide ample stock of food for more or less one year. Rocky land and savannah are also of great value for their livestock activity. Both conflicting communities have since long shared this interest and shaped their own narrative and social existence in accordance with this unavoidable necessity.

In order to enact land management, ethnic chiefs from both communities held a meeting and came up with the decision that whoever or whatever community wants to extract

natural resources in the forest and perform agricultural and livestock activity should have gained permission from clans who already reside in the area. In daily practice, this decision proved less effective, and conflict between both communities went on mainly because each community assumed their own privileged rights over the land and the forest.

In 1929, this conflict seemed to end when King Kollo Banunaek from Timor Tengah Selatan and King Liurai Rabasa from Belu performed traditional pledge as to resolve the conflict and determine the borderline between two communities. This meeting, supervised by the Dutch-colonial administration had succeeded in bringing about an agreement on territorial borders of both communities. However, the agreed borders did not differ from what already issued in 1917. The 1929 agreement just completed the latter due to the escalation of the conflict.

Borderline could be traced as follows: starting from the meeting point of Noil Okan River and the back part of Besnam Hill, the line goes on reaching the river's branch, Mudik Nononiti. From this point, the line drawn across the peaks of Funiti and Fatu Biuduk hills, and from opposing direction, it passes through Bubneo Hill up to Nono Manleni River. This river flows alongside Hau Honi Hill, and reaches Noil Sapnala River splitting To Aba area. From the latter, the borderline draws into Naikun area next to Noil Okan Temutu River up to the coast of Timor Sea.

In 1951, almost two decades after the last agreement, the conflict reemerged. It was triggered by a trivial incident when Fetor Noemanumuti slapped Tonas Talelu's face with his bare hand. This violent act humiliated not only the victim but also all community members because he was one of the leading figures in the community. From the hearsay that now still spreads among the locals, it is known that, Fetor and his group, who were about to impose taxes on the locals, felt humiliated by the unfriendly welcome shown by the Tonas and other villagers.

As response, Tonas together with half number of the villagers removed to new area under Belu Swapraja/district's jurisdiction. It is since the time of their relocation that they no longer offer obligatory endowment to the king and taxes to the government district of Timor Tengah Selatan. On the contrary, they offered endowment to the king whose authority reached their new territory and paid taxes to the Belu District Government.

The problem then came out because though they have occupied new territory, they were facing a lack of land availability for agricultural and livestock activity. The condition became worse when building a house was an expensive matter due to the lack of woods. As

consequence, and not to live in such penury, they went back to their former land in Timor Tengah Selatan (TTS), while still residing in Belu. In other words, they carried out economic activity in TTS while assuming their residence in Belu. TTS's people and TTS district government could not accept this attitude and has then led them in many ways against Tonas and his fellowmen.


The conflict indicates the problem of interpretation over to whose district the area belongs. For Tonas and his group, the area they now inhabit is an integral part of Belu District and that they should comply themselves with the regulations under the District's jurisdiction. In contrast, TTS administration and locals in its territory hold a firm consideration to assume Tonas' area as an integral part of Timor Tengah Selatan District.

Reflecting on historical data and official agreement, the disputed area (Lotas) remains under the jurisdiction of Timor Tengah Selatan. It is based on an agreement among the kings on December 20th 1929 under the supervision of the Dutch-colonial administration. This research, however, also takes into account the dynamics of conflict issues that historical data might not be able to encompass particularly those incidents in the period after Indonesian independence. Both historical data and official agreement are of greater importance in terms of legal and political consideration, but less significant in understanding issue development sprang from this long-standing dispute.

Theory employed here is Early Warning System (EWS). This theory highlights three main factors that, in their specific undertakings, have brought about and sustained the conflict: (1) Structural Factors, (2) Accelerators, and (3) Trigger, that is, incident or event that brings underlying conflict into surface.

What we call structural factor consists of root causes and early condition of social conflict. In practice, this factor can take form of the disturbance or demise of political system, injustice leading to extreme poverty, weak government institutions or bad governance, unequal composition of populace in terms of ethnic, religious, and other social measurement, economic crisis, and other factors leading society into violence, insecurity and disorder.

There are 4 structural factors embedded in the conflict:

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- (1) Unmanaged competition over forest's natural resources
 - (2) Unclear borderline between both communities
 - (3) Hatred which is sustained in their communal narrative and inscription

(4) Poverty or low level of income

The following are 4 accelerating factors of the conflict:

- (1) Government policy less sensitive to the conflict
- (2) Social jealousy as result of the economic disparity or difference in economic well being
- (3) Contest of political power
- (4) The existence of two district administrations in the disputed area

Triggering factors are quarrels among villagers from both communities particularly by the time of planting season and pillages of harvest. The most influential among others is the so-called Tonas' incident when Fetor Noemanumuti punched Tonas Talelu. It is until now that this incident remains unresolved, and no party performs initiative to show pardon and forgiveness.

A number of peace efforts have so far been employed to resolve this conflict, but no promising results come in turn. Below are peace efforts that already put into practice:

1. Arbitration and Mediation

Both communities share common hope that the king could play his role by way of reconciling Fetor and Tonas as an preliminary step for further complete conflict resolution. The king, on the other hand, failed to do justice to the problem mainly because he took into his account only one version of the conflict story while neglected another standpoint. In so doing, the arbitration process did not meet its fundamental tenet, that is, uniting two conflicting parties in public meeting upon which he could draw unbiased conclusion and just decision reflecting on the considerable amount of information from both parties.

Such defect also applies to mediation process. District Government, as mediator, has exerted its role too excessively that left no room for the conflicting parties to solve their own conflict. This fact contradicts the basic principle of mediation through which both parties called for inventing solution for their own conflict. Responsibility in this effort needs to be at their hand, while mediator is neither arbitrator nor negotiator. The only task of the mediator is to keep the process on the planned track. Looking at the mediation efforts already performed, it is undeniably

clear that the efforts have failed, and even worse, turned to be an obstruction in the search for peaceful solution.

2. Negotiation

Negotiation process initiated by third party, particularly the district government, proved less effective mainly due to the lack of commitment for problem solving on the part of conflicting parties. Lotas Village's officials (in Belu District) and community in their territory always incapacitate agreements or negotiation results. This study arrives at firm conclusion that negotiation efforts did not work effectively.

3. Local Wisdom

Local wisdom signifies culture-based conflict resolution through which traditional leaders from both communities perform meetings or rituals leading to integration, mutual trust, and fairly accessibility and distribution of land and forest's natural resources. Though this effort has succeeded in reintegrating them, there remains a few number of villagers who do not obey the traditional rule. They are, as this field study find out, influenced by irresponsible yet disappointed parties whose interests in the conflict are going to disappear, or see no advantages on his/her part by the implementation of traditional conflict resolution. However, both communities have accepted the practice of local wisdom with which they have since long engaged, but it still needs to be empowered to obtain maximum results.

Concluding Remarks

In regard to the conflict dynamics and issue development in the conflict between Lotas Villagers (Timor Tengah Selatan District) and Lotas Villagers (Belu Districts), this research has found out that the conflict in the remote past had been influenced and sustained by quarrels and struggling for natural resources acquisition among clans located in along borders between Malaka and Amanatun Kingdom. Land and forest's natural resources became two propelling sources of the conflict.

This conflict over natural resources continued up to the Dutch colonialist period. Under the colonialist supervision, the borderline was set up December 20th 1929. Amanatun King from Timor Tengah Selatan and Malaka King from Belu wrote

down the agreement, and it is since that time that peaceful coexistence seemingly prevailed. Both communities exploited natural resources as they prevented themselves from falling into unnecessary violent conflict. Their obedience to the kings and common understanding that land and forest constituted common goods rather than one's privileged assets had kept them in social harmony for several decades afterwards.

Conflict reemerged in 1951, twenty two years after the 1921 Agreement, when Fetor together with his group punched Tonas Talelu with his bare hand. This act did underestimate the pride not only of Tonas but also of his community in general. As response, Tonas and half of his villagers removed into Malaka's territory. It is also clear that the dispute between two big families escalated into communal conflict particularly because both Fetor and Tonas were prominent figures in their respective community.

From the overall course of the conflict, it could be grasped the change in the conflict sources, from the mere economic pressure to the juridical problematic of residence to what district Tonas and his fellowmen should adhere. From this follow two derived problems, namely, first, the growing ambiguity about borders and second, the reluctance shown by Tonas and his fellowmen to pay taxes to the Timor Tengah Selatan Administration.

In the light of Early Warning System Theory (EWS) is relatively more applicable in comprehending a considerable number of cases in the conflict, this study has been made capable of finding out important but repressed data and setting a contour of conflict analysis that permits the adoption of the theory as both deconstructive and reconstructive lens. Three types of factors (Structural, Accelerator, Triggers) are not completely separate either in the treatment of this study or in its very nature, but as comparable to each other as building blocks of a coherent conflict analysis.

A considerable number of peace efforts have already been employed since its inception. Mediation, arbitration, and negotiation proved less effective due to the lack of commitment on the part of conflicting parties and the intervention of disappointed parties. Search for equally acceptable solution also takes form of traditional conflict resolution. In comparison, the latter seems more acceptable because both communities have since time immemorial shared common tradition until the conflict appeared and splits them in two opposing camps. Despite its

promising results, the practice of traditional conflict resolution remains open to revision to comply with the issue development in the conflict. In short, it is not the characteristics of the methods improper or less applicable in such conflict context, but human intention to encounter themselves ardently with their own problem. As already indicated in the section Analysis, basic principles of those methods are violated at their will and they themselves bring no prospect for complete resolution.

Recommendation

Reflecting on the underlying sources of the conflict, which are laden but changing in scope over generations, this study proposes four points of recommendation:

1. Any search for conflict resolution needs to trace its efforts back into the very roots of the conflict. It should deal firstly with the Tonas incident before extending its scope into others conflict sources. There must be introduced a traditional approach or mechanism toward the rehabilitation of Tonas and his group's reputation. This necessitates the sincere intention and concrete act of requesting for pardon on the part of Fetor and his clan. If not directly taken, there must be third party whose unbiased standing and role is highly recognized by both parties.

Another human aspect worth taking is that either party should put aside their self-centered pride and position and learn to forgive other's misbehaviors. It follows that both parties need to realize that the disputed borders remain under the jurisdiction of Timor Tengah Selatan as had been decided by both kings in 1929.

2. Traditional approach or mechanism should be carried out in persistent ways through which informal leaders, including religious leaders, can play pivotal role. Locals in Timor Tengah Selatan have been accustomed with traditional approach and folk wisdom that in the conflict context could be the so-called social capital for integration, tolerance, and problem solving. Respect for traditional values stems in most part from its repertoire of rights and obligation. If there are individuals violating the agreement, they have to face risks of physical exclusion and symbolic excommunication from the entire course of traditional practice within the community.

3. Third party whose intervention is highly recommended should be welcomed by both parties and equipped with skills proper for mediation and facilitation. Without such skills, they will contribute nothing but obstacles for peace process. Charismatic figures do not suffice if not equipped with skills and eloquence in gathering both parties and building mutual trust toward conflict resolution.

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