STATEMENT OF PROPOSED RESEARCH

INDONESIA, ANTHROPOLOGY

RELIGIOUS RELATIONS, TRANSNATIONAL NARRATIVES AND ETHNIC IDEOLOGIES IN MINAHASA

Building on my Master’s research regarding Christianity and identity formation in Indonesian churches founded by ethnic Minahasan immigrants in the Eastern United States, this dissertation research will explore how a local organization in North Sulawesi dedicated to the maintenance of religious harmony, Badan Kerja Sama Antara Umat BerAgama (BKSAUA, Committee For Cooperation Between Religious Communities) is informed by local history, ethnic ideologies, and links to global religious networks, even as it functions as a vehicle through which ethnic Minahasans see themselves connected to Indonesian national ideologies. This research will focus on an account of the way that connections with transnational religious narratives are localized and influence people’s understanding of, and efforts to maintain, harmonious religious relations in North Sulawesi. Furthermore, in response to current scholarship that highlights the political and structural aspects of the maintenance of religious harmony in Indonesia (Henley et al 2007), this project takes a unique anthropological and discursively centered approach to assessing the way in which ethnic ideologies that are linked to transnational religious narratives annex global religious frameworks into the local impetus to prevent religious violence (Appadurai 1996:4)

This project relates to current literature and major themes in Anthropology and Southeast Asian studies not only by elucidating the way in which the historical development of ethnic identities with strong ties to a transnational religion facilitates the incorporation of global religious debates into regional expressions of national ideologies, but also by further problematizing formulaic assumptions about the nature of religious conflict between Christians and Muslims in Indonesia (Bertrand 2004, Mujiburrahman 2006). Gaining an understanding of how an Indonesian nationalism can be imagined as connected with the ideological principles of Christianity and the West, and yet still remain valid in a country with a predominantly Muslim population, references the indigenous imaginings and
reconfigurations of local practices that facilitate regional incorporation with centers of power in Southeast Asian States (Anderson 1991, Tsing 1993, Rutherford 2003, Siegel 1997). Since this research focuses on Christianity as interpreted by a specific ethnic group, and the way that those interpretations have been developed historically and through the influences of both colonial power structures and the modern state apparatus, it answers a call to explicitly address what it means to people to be Christian (Fennel 2006:5) and the ways in which Christianity is inhabitable and practicable (Keane 2007:31) as filtered through historically specific forms of understanding (Robbins 2003, Scott 2005).

However, this project is unique in that it not only assesses indigenous Christianities in their regional context, but also in their connections with transnational religious narratives. This is responsive to criticism aimed at the fields of transnationalism and studies of transnational Christianity, which claims transnational social fields (Glick Schiller 1997) are not only constituted where diasporic or displaced populations are located but also in the “sending” states in where the flow of transnational goods, ideas, symbols and remittances influence local lives (Marcus 1995). This dissertation will connect a number of disparate and yet interrelated themes in Anthropology and Southeast Asian studies in regards to issues of Christianity, nationalism, ethnicity and transnational religious connections. Regionally, at a time when much of Indonesia looks toward a pan-Islamic community as a connection to international politics, those in the region of Minahasa have adapted an ideology of religious harmony, which both situates them globally and legitimates their particular ethnic history in the context of Indonesian nationalism. Exploration of the processes that shape religious relations in Indonesia at the local level are an important consideration in a country where causes of religious violence are often complex manifestations of the intersection between ethnic identity, national identity and regional concerns.

Through the research and writing of my MA thesis in Anthropology I have developed both the connections and regional knowledge necessary to undertake this dissertation research in Indonesia. My focus on how Minahasan informants in Indonesian transnational Christian churches in New England utilized both their
ethnic identity's historical affiliation with the West and fluency in global Christian narratives to establish connections in the United States and re-invigorate their national identity in multi-ethnic Indonesian church setting references many of the same themes that I hope to address in this dissertation research. My long-term connections with the New England Minahasan community facilitated preliminary research connections in Minahasan during a trip there in 2006, and increased my knowledge of Minahasan identity formation through in-depth interviews (in Indonesian), participant observation in Indonesian transnational churches and historical research on Minahasa. I have also undertaken language training in a common local dialect (Bahasa Manado) with a tutor from the region, and will have completed a year of Arabic language training to help facilitate my entrée into discussions with Minahasan Muslims. However, in conducting discursive and event-centered research in North Sulawesi with BKSAUA, I will be able to expand the preliminary stages of this research into a more complex theoretical treatment of the themes I addressed above by assessing the way Minahasans utilize their ethnic identity and ties with transnational religious narratives to frame maintenance of religious relations in a way that incorporates them with the Indonesian nation without invalidating their imagined ethnic history and the strength of their transnational ties.

The region of North Sulawesi known as Minahasa provides access to important data because it occupies a unique position in the project of Indonesian nationalism. As the largest predominantly Christian administrative unit in Indonesia, ethnic Minahasans define themselves against neighboring Muslim provinces to the South and contra to Muslim Javanese, the predominant ethnic group in Indonesian politics. Much of their ethnic identity centers on their willing adaptation to the Western cultural mores introduced by the Dutch during the colonial period, most importantly their early conversion to Christianity as subaltern colonial elites during the period of Dutch occupation. Dutch missionaries employed selected traditions from the original tribes in the region as an overarching ethnic identity that stressed the principles of Christian brotherhood (Henley 1996, Watuske 1985, Roeroe 2003, Van Klinken 2003). These efforts are resonant in the construction of modern Minahasan identity, where informants often
site the principle of “torang samua basaudara” (We are all brothers) as one of the defining features of their regional identity.

However, both the dominance of Islam in Indonesian national politics as well as the existence of Muslim Minahans (Babcock 1981) makes the historical and religious aspects of this ethnic identity precarious ones. As historian David Henley notes, Minahasan elites joined the fight for Indonesian independence in expectation of securing a federalist system in which Minahasa could continue to maintain regional autonomy and its close relationship with the Dutch (Henley 1993:93). When early nationalists rejected the federalist model, Minahasa was faced with the problem of aligning an identity strongly associated with the departing colonizers, the perceived Western character of Christianity (Jacobsen 44:2002), with a new national identity. Although indigenized Christianity was promoted by the Indonesian state as a means for development during the New Order period (Aragon 2000:156) the unique history of North Sulawesi that produced a strong Minahasan “ethnic nationalism” and the subsequent disenfranchisement of Minahasan colonial period elite from positions of power in post-independence era Minahasa to become the center of a movement for regional autonomy known as Permesta, which was violently suppressed by the central government (Harvey 1977). In post New Order Indonesia, where minority groups use Christianity to indicate their modernity and inclusion in the nation and yet have to do so carefully in order not to impugn the Muslim majority (Aragon 2000:24). Minahasans struggle to convince themselves, and the central government, that their Western-facing Christian province has an important role to play in Indonesia’s future.

Efforts towards religious harmony are seen by ethnic Minahans to exemplify how the Christian principle of brotherhood is a key ethnic trait that can overcome the type of religious divisiveness that has plagued other areas in Sulawesi. This idealization of the supra-religious bond extends into Minahasan people’s perception that the relative harmony between Muslims and Christians in the region proves their exemplary implementation of the national ideologies of religious harmony. In my preliminary visits to the BKSAUA offices in Manado in the summer of 2006, employees of the organization implied that the success of the organization is a direct result of the unique Minahan
ethnic character. Informants frame the maintenance of religious harmony in Minahasa as a validation for the position of their ethnic group and region in Indonesia’s future and future relations with the West, adeptly refuting their limited political influence in the sphere of national politics.

BKSAUA is an organization related to local government efforts to promote religious harmony that was founded in 1965 as a result of the regional cooperation between Muslims and Christians during the Permeuta period. The link between ethnic identity and the work of BKSAUA is explicitly expressed in the narratives of Minahasan informants, as individuals both within and outside the region that I have interviewed in the period between 2005-2007 often used the organization as a concrete example of what it means to be Minahasan\(^1\). Furthermore, the considerable financial support provided to BKSAUA by local government offices and regional elites is indicative of how BKSAUA is seen as an important and visible symbol of the regional implementation of national ideals and represents the implementation of global Christian ideals of brotherhood to the world. The Governor of Sulawesi Utara province, Dr. Sinyo Harry Sarundajang, recently announced plans for the development of a new BKSAUA center in Minahasa in 2008, stating that: “our region needs a BKSUUA building to remind us that Sulawesi Utara has already become an example of harmonious religious relations in Indonesia.”\(^2\) Participation in the planning and implementation of this new BKSAUA center will provide an opportunity to document the way that BKSAUA is constructed, both literally and figuratively, as a symbol of regional identity viable at the national level.

In addition to facilitating access to the activities and attitudes of local government, the BKSAUA offices also serve as mediators for social events in Minahasa where religious identities have the propensity to spark discord. The organization is often charged with organizing cross-religious committees to protect religious sites during holiday celebrations, and to serve as representatives for public events in which the ideals of ethnic brotherhood, and the

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\(^1\) Minahasan informants in Indonesian churches who I interviewed for my MA research cited the work of BKSAUA as an indicator of the nature of Minahasan ethnic identity as often as informants currently residing in Minahasa did.
connection of those regional ideologies to Indonesian national identity, are reaffirmed through framework of “Christian brotherhood and love.” These events are an excellent opportunity to explore how Minahasan identity continues to be a “product of historically specific and inherently contingent moments of representation” and rely on “performances that evoke emergent abstractions, yet unfold in particular times and places, through the mediation of particular words and things” (Rutherford 2003:11). Since BKSAUA functions as an institutionalized expression of the way historical formations of ethnicity are juxtaposed with modern adaptations of the Christian doctrine of “loving they neighbor” to frame religious relations and locate Minahasans in the national milieu, the social gatherings they facilitate are useful sites to explore the way that past events become “moral stories” that create agendas for social action in the present (White 2000:497).

Working with BKSAUA, I will demonstrate the way in which efforts to preserve religious harmony are heavily influenced by the politics of identity in the region, and also the way in which sometimes discordant global Christian narratives are re-worked to fit with local agendas. For instance, idealization of religious relations in Manado proper through the auspices of organizations such as BKSAUA can also obscure the presence of religious tensions, as was evident in the summer of 2006 when a group of itinerant Muslim vendors was forcibly evacuated from their long-time position in one of Manado’s central markets. The lack of action by BKSAUA regarding this contentious and somewhat violent relocation is telling of the way in which BKSAUA is informed by local ideologies despite claims that they are dedicated pan-Indonesian, and global Christian, ideals of religious harmony. Local residents claimed that this particular event was not subject to the ideals of religious cooperation, since the vendors were transplants from outside the Minahasan region. This freed them from assessing the disjunction between the ideology of “love for your brothers” and the employment of violence to protect regional peace. Coverage in the media at the national level framed this issue as the ejection of a Muslim group from a Christian region, unaware of the subtleties at the local level.
I will attempt to document the way that local residents frame interactions, in what ways they employ transnational Christian narratives, and juxtapose them against actual activities on the ground in central Minahasa by employing a number of methodological approaches. Participant observation in BKSAUA activities, ethnographic interviews with BKSAUA workers and Minahasans of different religious backgrounds involved in BKSAUA efforts, and short semi-structured interviews with local participants in BKSAUA run events will be augmented by methods of cultural domain analysis. These models can be used to verify schema and cultural models pertaining to Minahasan identity emergent in the ethnographic context\(^3\), its links with current narratives of global Christianity, and to juxtapose people’s projected cultural models against activities and behaviors in public context in the region. For instance, these methods will help me to assess to what level Muslim Minahasans employ transnational Christian narratives in their apprehension of religious relations in Minahasa. Since I am concerned with the way that informants employ religious narratives in their understanding and assessment of local religious relations, ethnographic interviewing and discourse analysis of transcribed texts, as well as textual analysis of media coverage on local events, are essential to my research. Archival research on development of Minahasan identity with the assistance of scholars Universitas Kristen Indonesia Tomohon will also be employed to provide historical perspective.

Contacts that I have made in the region will support dissertation research that has a strong applied component within Indonesia that will help to facilitate future work in the region regarding issues of nationalism, ethnic identity, religious relations and international relations between the West and Islamic nation-states. Due to my contacts with the SEKOT (City Secretary) of Manado and his family, I will be able to gain access to local government offices to document discussions regarding public religious events that often involve BKSAUA and the representation of Minahasa at national and international levels. My contacts with the SEKOT Manado also will allow me access to events and associated with the GMIM (Gereja Masehi Injil Minahasa or Minahasan Protestant Church), which forms the central institutional focus of Minahasan identity (Henley et al 2007:312) and is also a conduit for connection

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\(^3\) These methods have been provisionally implemented with Minahasans in New England during the course of my MA research, and cultural models constructed from the New Hampshire community will also serve as a basis for comparison with quantitative models produced during dissertation research.
between Minahasa and international Christian groups. Furthermore, investigation into the state of religious relations in Minahasa and its link with Minahasan history is of great interest to Minahansans themselves, as is evinced by the letters of support I have received from the head of BKSAUA Manado, the office of the Mayor in Manado, and Universitas Kristen Indonesia Tomohon. Interest in my research topic within Minahasa and the larger field of Indonesian studies will provide opportunities for collaborative work, and I intend to produce a number of short articles in Indonesian in collaboration with local researchers that can be used to support the work of groups such as BKSAUA during the period of my research. I will also furnish a copy of my finished dissertation to the head of BKSAUA Manado, Universitas Sam Ratulangi in Manado (UNSRAT), Universitas Kristen Indonesia Tomohon (UKIT), and to the Association of Indonesian Protestant Churches of America (PGGPI).

As a basis of comparison with activities and discursive formations in Minahasa surrounding the interaction of ethnic histories, religious relations and national identity, I will travel to Jakarta to conduct interviews within several Minahasan dominated churches. Approximately three months out of the 12-month period of dissertation research will be spent gathering comparative material with the large population of Minahasan emigrants who are active participants in Christian communities in central Java. I have an open invitation to conduct research within these churches through my connections with the individuals in the New Hampshire Minahasan community, many of which have family currently living in Java. Conducting similar research in Jakarta with Minahasans living outside of the ethnic Minahasan homeland will illuminate the way that attitudes about religious relations are structured through regional ethnic foundations within Minahasa, by comparing them to formations of ethnic identity and religious cooperation in a situation in which Minahasans are in the minority both religiously and ethnically. I project that attitudes towards Muslim-Christian relations will be markedly different in the Jakarta Minahasan community, and will access very different global Christian narratives than those used to promote religious harmony in Minahasa, providing a useful comparison to the use of such narratives in Minahasa.
Two of my MA committee members who have supervised the development and completion of my MA project will continue to oversee me through the dissertation stage, including the completion of comprehensive exams in October 2008 and assisting me with development of a detailed research proposal that will have full committee approval before I depart for the field in November of 2008. I will be returning to the University of Hawai‘i to complete the dissertation writing under the tutelage of my committee. My current approval for field research in Indonesia and New Hampshire granted through the University of New Hawai‘i will be renewed and expanded to encompass any danger to my informants, and to improve the quality of my informed consent for working across religious groups.