

# Preventing Future Ethnic Conflicts in West Kalimantan

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## Introduction

The West Kalimantan province is located in the western part of Borneo in Indonesia. There are several ethnic groups in this province, including the Dayaks, Malays, Chinese, Javanese, Bugis, and Madurese. There have been instances of ethnic conflict in West Kalimantan, especially between Dayaks and Madurese since the 1950s.<sup>1</sup> Peace processes involving Dayaks and Madurese have taken place several times, finally leading up to the signing of a peace agreement in 1999. Since then, the parties to the agreement have successfully managed to avoid further outbreaks of violence.

However, based on the region's history of recurring conflict, it is still crucial to better understand how future conflict in West Kalimantan can most effectively be prevented. This paper analyzes the history of ethnic conflicts as well as previous strategies for conflict resolution and peacebuilding in West Kalimantan, with the aim of contributing to the prevention of future ethnic conflict in the region. The findings of the analysis demonstrate that traditional dialogue and mediation involving Dayak and Madurese leaders, as well as the Government and local communities is essential to resolve conflict issues based on local cultures and avoid repeating such conflicts in the future.

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1 For a list of the conflicts see Davidson 2002, Giring 2003, Abas 2002, and Tanasaldy 2008.

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## Methods of Research

This paper is based on a qualitative case study of the Dayak and Madurese conflicts and peace processes over time. Data was generated by interacting with relevant parties, including victims who were affected by the conflicts, during in-depth interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic research. This primary data was complemented by secondary sources such as books from libraries, Government offices, research centers in West Kalimantan, and internet sources. The data was analyzed, drawing on content analysis. A historical approach was essential to investigate conflict dynamics and peacebuilding for the Dayaks and Madurese conflicts over time and to draw conclusions from this history regarding how future conflict can be prevented.

## Ethnic Conflicts in West Kalimantan: The Dayaks and Madurese

There are several ethnic groups in West Kalimantan, including the Dayaks, Malays, Madurese, Chinese, Javanese, and Bugis. Ethnic conflicts in Kalimantan have arisen from rivalries between the dominant indigenous group, the Dayaks, who are Christian, and the newly arrived Madurese, who are Muslim. The Dayaks are non-Muslim indigenous peoples of the island of Borneo, most of whom traditionally lived along the banks of the larger rivers. Dayaks have traditionally lived in longhouses and made a living through agriculture and manual labor in urban areas.

However, this pattern has been modified in recent years, partially through Government efforts to modernize the Dayaks. Most are now settled and cultivate rice, though some, such as the Penan, remain nomadic hunter-gatherers.<sup>2</sup> The Penan are an indigenous people from the forest of Sabah and Sarawak. They live in smaller numbers in Kalimantan and Brunei. At the time, West Kalimantan had a total population of about 3 million. The two major population groups in the province are the Dayaks and the Malays, each constituting about 40% of the population.

In the past, the highly developed and complex religious practices of the Dayak people involved numerous local spirits and omen animals. Intertribal warfare was common, with headhunting being a major feature. Since the mid-20th century, however, they have steadily

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<sup>2</sup> <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/dayak/> Accessed by Dec 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019)

adopted Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism; by the early 21st century, the vast majority of the population was Christian.<sup>3</sup>

Ethnic conflicts between the Dayaks and Madurese have occurred since the 1950s. For the Dayaks, including Malays, prevalent stereotypes of the Madurese contributed to fuel conflict. These were based around three main issues. First, the Madurese were seen as prone to start a conflict with others, as they were seen as regarding combat as necessary to protect their dignity. Second, the Madurese had the custom of carrying the sickle in social functions or upon entering someone's house, contributing to perceptions of them as violent. Third, the Madurese were believed to be inclined to encroach on their neighbor's land.<sup>4</sup> The Madurese were also often associated with unscrupulous economic practices and petty crimes.<sup>5</sup>

According to a Madurese scholar, these perceptions have some basis in a Madurese social system that respected and rewarded violence, particularly if it was carried out to protect one's dignity. Crime statistics suggested that the Madurese community was generally more violent than other ethnic groups in Indonesia because of the higher incidence of serious crimes in Madura itself. Serious criminal cases in Madura in 1994 were double the rate of East Java, and one-and-a-half times higher than the national average.<sup>6</sup>

While the ethnic conflict in West Kalimantan has primarily involved Dayaks and Madurese, the Melayu Sambas have also, at times been involved in episodes of conflict. The Melayu Sambas people live along the northern coastline of West Kalimantan Province in various districts of the Sambas Regency. These districts are Selakau, Tebas, Sambas, Sejangkung, Teluk Keramat, Paloh, and Jawai. In their area, the Sambas people live alongside Dayak and Chinese. The Sambas people are the descendants of the inhabitants of the Sambas Kingdom. The Melayu Sambas are an agrarian people, who depend on the yield of crops from their farmland as well as the harvesting freshwater and saltwater fish. They cultivate rice, coconuts, and rubber. Some Melayu Sambas also work as civil servants or traders. Efforts to grow citrus trees have restored agricultural business in the area and yielded substantial crops of fruit.<sup>7</sup>

Many of the Malays are descendants of members of indigenous groups

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3 <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dayak> (Accessed by Dec 27, 2019)

4 Abas 2002; also Purwana 2003; Soetrisno and others 1998; Suparlan and others 1989; Davidson 2002.

5 Soetrisno and others 1998.

6 Wiyata 2002.

7 [https://joshuaproject.net/people\\_groups/20289/ID](https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/20289/ID) (Accessed by Dec 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

who converted to Islam under the influence of various sultanates along the coast, such as the sultanates of Sambas and Pontianak. Although some Malays still remember their Dayak ancestry, once converted to Islam, they became Malays and were no longer regarded as Dayaks. Malays are found in greater numbers on the coastal plains, whereas the Dayaks are more numerous in the interior regions. In addition to these two main groups, about 13% of the population is Chinese, living mainly in urban areas, like the town of Singkawang that is predominantly Chinese. The province has one of the highest concentrations of Chinese in Indonesia, which is the result of large-scale migration during the gold rush of the late 18th and early 19th centuries when this part of Borneo was one of the world's major gold-producing regions.

The history of conflict between Dayaks and Madurese started during the 1930s when the Dutch colonial powers initiated a 'transmigration plan' to move people from densely populated islands such as Java to the less populated islands in Kalimantan. The transmigration program in West Kalimantan made the region more ethnically diverse. The population came to consist of a diverse range of trans-migrants from other parts of Indonesia, most of whom were resettled there during the height of the transmigration programs in the 1970s and 1980s. These include the Madurese as well as Javanese, Bugis, Batak, and Balinese.

In the 1960s, the Government granted the Madurese deforestation rights to clear lands for palm oil cultivation. This conflicted with the local Dayak tribes' traditional way of life and destroyed a large portion of the rain forest. As the rainforest was cut down and replaced by palm oil and coconut plantations, the indigenous tribes, such as the Dayaks, found themselves at the bottom of a complex hierarchy of different groups, unable to continue their traditional patterns of agriculture and slow to adapt to new types of employment. Therefore, Dayaks came to feel that the Madurese had taken their land. This has been the core issue at the heart of the conflict between the two groups, as has Dayak demands for greater land rights and representation in Government.

The tensions between the two ethnic groups has resulted in more than ten episodes of violent conflict between 1950 and 1999, with major eruptions of violence in 1996 and 1999.<sup>8</sup> Most recently, there were two waves of conflict toward the end of the Suharto era from 1996-1997, when communal violence broke out between the Dayaks and Madurese, resulting in the displacement of over 20,000 Madurese and the deaths of

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8 The Inventory of Conflict and Environment, Dianne Linder.

around 500.<sup>9</sup> In 1999, also in West Kalimantan, violence broke out between both Malays and Dayaks against the Madurese. This second conflict resulted in a reported 186 deaths and over 26,000 displaced Madurese.<sup>10</sup>

The core grievances underlying the conflict between Dayaks and Madurese were rooted in the systematic marginalization of the Dayak community. There have been ten instances of conflict between the Dayaks and Madurese ethnic groups and one instance for Malays and Dayaks versus Madurese. As a result of the conflict in Sambas in 1997 and 1999, the Madurese were placed in IDP camps around Pontianak, the capital of West Kalimantan. The camps in Pontianak also face hostility from the primarily Dayak and Malay population who oppose extended stays in the IDP camps.

Prior to the violence in 1997, there had been at least seven violent clashes between the Madurese and Dayaks in the province since the 1970s. These often started with the alleged murder or rape of a Dayak by a Madurese, which in turn led to Dayak retaliation. In all these cases, the violence was quickly contained and remained localized, and the number of casualties was limited. The worst such incident occurred in 1983 close by Pontianak and led to the death of 12 people. This pattern changed in January 1997 when the conflict engulfed a large part of the province, particularly in Sambas and Sanggau districts, and left about 500 people dead and more than 20,000 displaced. This incident triggered a full-scale ethnic confrontation that engulfed wide areas of West Kalimantan when Dayaks and Madurese attacked each other's settlements and set up roadblocks, hunting down each other.

According to H. Urai Sabirin Saleh, who happened to witness the conflict between Dayaks and Madurese, one episode of the conflict started because the daughter of the Malayunese leader, who was also descendant of the Dayaks, had been killed by Madurese when she was going back home from her university graduation. Another conflict also took place when the Madurese got into the bus owned by the Dayak without paying the ticket. Later on, the Dayak driver was even killed by the Madurese, who refused to pay. This back-and-forth revenge continued until mediation and dialogue started between the Dayaks and the Madurese. These stories exemplified the dynamics of recurrent eruptions of ethnic violence in West Kalimantan (based on the author's interview with H. Urai Sabirin Saleh, September 2019).

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9 Human Rights Watch (1997), and Bertrand (2004, pp. 47-8).

10 3 International Crisis Group (2001a)

According to a lecturer of the Tanjungpura University of Pontianak, H. Syafaruddin Usman, the conflicts between the two tribes (Dayak and Madura) were based on grievances resulting from economic, social, and cultural inequalities. In his opinion, the Madurese came to West Kalimantan in 1920 as rock workers, rickshaw riders, canoe drivers, and hard laborers who were employed by the Dutch colonial power. In the 1930s, many Madurese married with local people in West Kalimantan. Between 1930 and 1950, there was no conflict in West Kalimantan, as different ethnic groups could live side by side peacefully. Since then, however, the conflict between the Dayaks and Madurese began to arise due to political issues, such as the election process.

In Usman's assumption, there were many ethnic conflicts in West Kalimantan because of the strong power of ethnic movements. Nonetheless, he was optimistic that the conflicts could be minimized by means of local wisdom, such as protecting and preserving inheritance. He argued that comprehending each group's cultural values and norms was essential to end the conflict. Although a peace agreement was reached in 1999, conflict still occurred, especially in Sambas. For instance, the people in Sambas, including the Dayaks and Melayunese, do not let the Madurese have landed in the Sambas area. Since 1999, Madurese houses have been burnt down, and the Madurese have moved to other parts of West Kalimantan, the Madurese do not stay in Sambas anymore. Currently, there is still conflict about the ownership of the land in Sambas.

In the years after 1997, there was a series of outbreaks of ethnic violence that were highly sensationalized in the national and international media at the time because they involved instances of apparently archaic and conspicuous forms of violence, such as headhunting and cannibalism.<sup>11</sup> This tragedy drew attention to the conflict and prompted international and local researchers to investigate the roots and dynamics of the conflict between Dayaks and Madurese. This includes the previously mentioned communal violence in March and April 1999 further north from Pontianak in Sambas. The clashes left 200 dead and about 35,000 Madurese displaced, most of whom found safety in refugee camps in Pontianak.

However, the ethnic conflicts in West Kalimantan had been solved by cultural diplomacy, the conflicting parties could discuss the peace process easily because the traditional cultural and social norms in West Kalimantan are still held. This traditional dialogue was the correct way to solve ethnic conflicts in West Kalimantan.

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11 "Bloody Borneo", TIME, 12th March 2001.

There were several violent ethnic conflicts that had happened since 1950-1999 in West Kalimantan, and traditional dialogue had been used to solve the problems in each period of conflict.

**Table 1. Eruptions of Violent Ethnic Conflicts in West Kalimantan Over Time<sup>12</sup>**

No	Time	Ethnic Community	Place
1	1950	Madura vs Dayak	Samalantan, Sambas
2	1968	Madura vs Dayak	Tarap, Toho
3	1976	Madura vs Dayak	Pontianak
4	1977	Madura vs Dayak	Bodok, Sanggau
5	1978	Madura vs Dayak	Samalantan, Sambas Sungai Pinyuh
6	1979	Madura vs Dayak	Pontianak
7	1983	Madura vs Dayak	Samalantan, Sambas Sungai Ambawang
8	1993	Madura vs Dayak	Pontianak
9	1994	Madura vs Dayak	Pontianak, TumbangTiti
10	1996/1997	Madura vs Dayak	Ketapang, SanggauLedo, Sambas
11	1999	Madura vs Malay and Dayak	Sambas

Source: Kalimantan Review, 1999

## **The Peace Processes of the Dayaks and Madurese Conflicts**

Since the start of the violent ethnic conflict between Dayaks and Madurese in West Kalimantan, there have been several local peace processes seeking to establish dialogue and resolve conflicts. Traditional mediation practices have been the main strategy used in peacebuilding efforts. The Government has been involved in the peace processes between the Dayaks and Madurese to an extent by which the peace process agreements have primarily been done through traditional rather than official mediation to solve these ethnic conflicts in West Kalimantan. This is partly due to

<sup>12</sup> Purwana, Bambang Hendarta Suta, "Konflik Antar Komunitas Etnis di Sambas 1999; Suatu Tinjauan Sosial Budaya", Page: 2-3, Romeo Grafika, Pontianak, 2003.

low levels of local trust in the Government; most respondents reported that the police could not solve the conflict between the Dayaks and Madurese due to limited capacity and the limited presence of police officers in the region, as well as high perceived levels of corruption (Author's interviews with locals conducted in September 2019 in West Kalimantan). Thus, the Government and the national justice system were mistrusted and seen as inaccessible during the conflicts.

By contrast, a peace process through traditional mediation is normally carried out informally and locally outside the court system. This means that issues pertaining to conflicts can be discussed between leaders of both conflicting parties without a compulsion to restore the situation. In the peace processes in West Kalimantan, a local mediator has had an important role. Peace processes have been put into place in the traditional forums following the cultural traditions in Dayak, Madurese, and Malay communities. The leaders of each ethnic group in West Kalimantan gathered to have a peace dialogue to solve and halt the conflicts. This process thus requires support from informal institutions and local community leaders. However, the role and effectiveness of informal local mediators in bridging inter-group conflicts in West Kalimantan have also been constrained in situations when their influence was limited to only one particular ethnic or identity group, and when they did not have trust from or legitimacy with the other groups involved in the conflict.

In 1999, traditional mediation and dialogues finally achieved a peace agreement signed by representatives of the conflicting parties. The agreement was signed in the presence of local authorities, national police, district administrators, village chiefs, and community members, including representatives from the justice institutions, community groups, youth groups, students, and local NGOs. By signing the peace agreement, they agreed and stated that they forgive one another and that they wish to end their attitudes and actions that could cause conflict in West Kalimantan in the future. While formal Government institutions have generally had limited success in mediating inter-group reconciliation in West Kalimantan, Government leaders had more success in addressing inter-group problems when they worked through, and recognized, inter-village community forums with representatives from each ethnic community rather than seeking to manage the process.

Thus, although conflict has recurred over time, step by step, traditional mediation practices have managed to minimize the conflicts between the Dayaks and Madurese and to successfully end violence after 1999.

Thus, this traditional form of dialogue should be continued regularly to prevent future ethnic conflict between the Dayaks and Madurese in West Kalimantan. By drawing on traditional customs, peace and reconciliation can be strengthened through the power of public agreement.

## Conclusion

In the various peace process which has been conducted to resolve recurring ethnic conflicts in West Kalimantan between 1950 and 1999, traditional dialogue and mediation proved to be the most successful strategy to resolve conflict and prevent further outbreaks of violence. Through traditional dialogue, violent conflicts between the Dayaks and Madurese had no longer taken place since 1999. Consequently, traditional forms of dialogue should be regularly conducted to provide forums to address conflict non-violently and at an early stage to prevent future eruptions of violence. In addition, building peace monuments in conflict sites, establishing peace museums, peace forums, and other activities for reconciliation, rehabilitation, and reconstruction—all of which could contribute to continued dialogue and long-term transformation of attitudes towards conflict.

Similarly, establishing local truth commissions involving these Dayaks and Madurese, but also Malays, can meet the public demand for truth-telling from the victims. In this aspect, truth commissions could contribute to conflict transformation by creating spaces where people feel safe and can honestly talk about their fears, hopes, hurts, and responsibilities. In addition, regular peace conferences and institutional innovations for peace-agreement monitoring that involves local communities could also play a role in building on the strengths of traditional mediation practices that have proven effective in ending the conflict in West Kalimantan.

In contrast to traditional mediation by informal local leaders, the Government has been less able to effectively intervene due to low trust and high corruption. This demonstrates that to take a more active role in future conflict prevention, the Government needs to urgently address corruption within the security and law enforcement agencies. If the police are to fulfill their official role as the main agency responsible for managing local conflicts, they need to have the trust of the people in their authority to do so. However, if the police continue to respond to crime in corrupt ways, the community will never trust them to

mediate conflicts. The Government needs to address the lack of trust from the Dayaks and Madurese community toward local Government and between different levels of Government. Higher levels of Government need to communicate their policies on conflict to the local level. In the context of provincial and district level conflict mediation or reconciliation, it would be useful if the Government supported information dissemination to impacted communities. This could easily be done through the Government hierarchy. Further, for effective reconciliation to take place, higher levels of Government need to consider grassroots-level initiatives to understand local situations by getting more information about the context of the situation and condition of the ethnic conflicts in West Kalimantan.

Moreover, to address grievances at the core of this conflict, marginalized groups should be included rather than targeted by emergency aid projects. The Government needs to put a system in place whereby development or emergency assistance funds for populations displaced by conflict are shared by both host and displaced communities—targeting aid toward the displaced community fuels intergroup tensions and resentments. Collective decision-making between host and community groups over emergency funds would help to reduce tensions between the Dayaks and Madurese. The process of inter-group negotiation on the allocation of local funds within a community can also help to bridge a good communication between the Dayaks and Madurese.