

# Minahasa Identity: A Culinary Practice<sup>1</sup>

Gabriele Weichart

(University of Heidelberg)

## Abstract


*The geographic area I will focus on is the Minahasa region in North Sulawesi. There, in the eighteenth century the eight 'tribes' inhabiting the area were united into a single 'ethnic group' known as 'Minahasa' until today. Not only the Dutch colonial government but also the Protestant church put great efforts into this unifying and homogenising process that was supposed to create a common identity for all Minahasan people. The effectiveness of those efforts can hardly be denied. Nevertheless, internal differences have continued to exist and they are based not only on 'traditional' concepts that divided the 'original' Minahasan tribes but also on the local population's experiences with immigrants from other parts of Indonesia and overseas (e.g. the Philippines and China). Although this is not a recent phenomenon, political and socio-economic developments during the last few years have had further impacts on demographic conditions and relations between different ethnic and religious 'groups'. Thus, the Minahasa—like other 'ethnic groups' in Indonesia—are confronted with a double binding of supposed needs and requests for diversity under a unifying umbrella—on the regional as well as national level. The paper will address the 'problem' from the perspective of a rural community in the south-eastern part of the region. Hence, local concepts of identity, their constructions and markers in everyday life, as being manifested in food and clothing for instance, will be given special consideration. It will also be taken into account that the media (esp. television) plays an important role in the formation and representation of ethnic and religious identity. The paper aims at showing how 'unity' and 'diversity' in this context are produced and reproduced on the village level and its relation to the national discourse.*

## Introduction

'Why have you chosen to do research on such a mundane topic as food instead of focusing on more important issues in Minahasa society?', I was asked after a lecture I had pre-

sented at the Christian University in Tomohon (UKIT, *Universitas Kristen Indonesia di Tomohon*) towards the end of my fieldwork in 2002. The question did not really come as a surprise to me because Western scholars, too, sometimes find it difficult to accept and see some value in academic preoccupation with people's everyday lives. In my view, such attitudes tell less about the relevance of the research itself but rather reflect certain peculiarities of Western intellectual traditions (which can also be found in countries like Indonesia) that give priority to mind over body and ex-

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the paper presented at the panel on: 'How will Eastern Indonesia Maintain "Unity in Diversity"? Responses to Religious-Ethnic Discord, Refugees and Regional Autonomy in East Indonesia' at the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Symposium of the Journal *ANTROPOLOGI INDONESIA: 'Rebuilding Indonesia, a Nation of "Unity in Diversity": Towards a Multicultural Society'*, Udayana University, Denpasar, Bali, 16–19 July 2002.



clude everyday affairs from the research agenda. Alternatively, such ‘matters of little importance’, which are often categorized as belonging to the ‘domestic sphere’, are left to female researchers.

In the following paper I will show that food does not necessarily and exclusively belong to the ‘private’, ‘domestic’ or ‘female’ spheres. On the contrary, the processes of production, distribution and consumption of foodstuffs are very much part of ‘public’ life (if we want to stick to this ‘classical’ dichotomy), and are therefore of social, economic and political significance. Although I had never actually doubted this, even before starting my own fieldwork in Minahasa, I was still positively surprised about the emphasis that local people themselves placed upon food and nutrition as primary determinants of social life and identity.


Ethnicity is generally in the foreground in discourses on collective identities in Minahasa. The political and religious tensions and even violent outbreaks in neighbouring provinces and elsewhere in Indonesia have further contributed to local arguments for ethnic identification and differentiation. Being a Christian enclave in a, from a Minahasa perspective, overwhelmingly Muslim country, Minahasa people stress various and partly overlapping levels in their respective discourses: first of all, they emphasize distinction from Muslim people generally, second, from other Indonesians, and third, on a political level, from the central government in Jakarta.

In the present text, I will first give a general and historical overview of Minahasa ethnic identity. It should become clear that a number of variables have been significant in the various processes of identity creation and maintenance. The peculiar food habits, which have become well-known beyond the Minahasa borders, are only one, albeit important, category that has served Minahasa people as an apt

vehicle to invent, shape, represent and justify their own identities and the corresponding boundaries towards Others. Traditions and contemporary habits connected to food and eating can be linked with prominent signifiers of Minahasa identity such as land, the ancestors, postcolonial history and religion. In this article I will illustrate my argument with specific examples of preferred and regularly consumed Minahasa foods and demonstrate the complexity of identification in relation to everyday practices. I will further show that in the present context of political decentralisation, conflict and violence, where notions of ‘identity’ and ‘difference’ have become central issues in public as well as private discourses, food traditions and eating habits play important roles in defining and reinforcing ‘sameness’ and ‘otherness’ between Christian and Muslim populations.

### **Becoming Minahasa: A brief history**

When talking about ‘Minahasa’, we may refer to a geographic area, a political entity or to the dominant ethnic group living in that particular region. Geographically, the region of Minahasa occupies the northernmost tip of the main island of Sulawesi. For political and administrative purposes, the Province of North Sulawesi is further divided into regencies, or *kabupaten*, and more or less independent cities (*kotamadya*). At the time of writing this paper, the original *Kabupaten* Minahasa was still in the process of being split up into three smaller regencies (North Minahasa, Central Minahasa and South Minahasa) and a third *kotamadya* (Tomohon) was added to the two already existing ones (Manado and Bitung). The tendency of subdividing fairly small entities into even smaller units was one of the long-term results of the national policy of *otonomisasi*, i.e. to grant more regional autonomy to certain areas.<sup>2</sup> The officially pro-



claimed political goal of this step at the regional level is to raise the efficiency of administration by being able to address local issues more directly. It is further expected that such a change would increase local politicians' sense of responsibility towards their political districts and their inhabitants as well as make them more approachable for the latter. Such expected benefits, and the future will show whether they will come true, are more likely to be achieved at the cost of political unity. How this will ultimately affect people's perceptions of themselves, their identification as 'Minahasa' and sense of 'unity' is difficult to foresee.

Minahasa unity does not have a long-standing history as it is. Early missionaries and government officials reported unanimously that Minahasa lacked an overarching political organization or leadership and that *walaks* were the largest political, ritual and social units that worked effectively on a daily basis in decision-making processes etc. These *walaks* were compounds that consisted of several villages. As endogamous and self-sufficient units, the different *walaks* existed side by side and in rivalry with each other. Hostilities and warfare between *walaks* were not uncommon and, hence, social relations across *walaks* were limited and the inhabitants of other *walaks* were generally met with suspicion. When in 1679 Robertus Padtbrugge, the VOC (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie) governor of the Moluccas, signed a treaty with the Minahasa district chiefs (*kepala walak*), which should guarantee them protection from the neighbouring *raja* of Bolaang, it was the first sign of a communal act beyond the *walak* level, at least the first one that had been documented.<sup>3</sup>


<sup>2</sup> The whole area including its major cities does not count more than approx. 1,300,000 inhabitants.

<sup>3</sup> See Schouten (1998) for a detailed account on the development of political structures and leadership in Minahasa.

The term 'Minahasa', however, was not commonly used by then. It first appeared in Dutch records in 1789, referring only to the council of chiefs (*landraad*). It was probably not until around 1820 that the term was used in a geographic or ethnic sense by being applied to the colonial *landstreek van Manado* (Henley 1992:69). The exact etymological origin of the word 'minahasa' is unclear but there is unanimous agreement among scholars and laypersons that the various cited linguistic sources, e.g. *mina-esa*, *ma-esa*, *maha-esa*, all refer to the unification of previously separate and culturally as well as linguistically diverse groups into a single overarching unity, to the process of 'becoming one' (see Godée Molsbergen 1928:7; Graafland 1991:9–10; Schwarz 1908:46). This happened during the Dutch colonial period and the colonizers did not remain aloof from this movement. By contrast, colonial administrators did their best to support and accelerate this process of unification because it was in the interest of Dutch administrators and missionaries to unite all 'tribes' under a central government in order to 'pacify' the region and make it 'administrable'. They also knew that, in order to become successful and sustainable, the project needed the support of the local population. Identification with the colonizers' goals could most easily be expected when these goals corresponded with the people's own identification.<sup>4</sup>

Since the early nineteenth century, the NZG (Nederlandsch Zendelinggenootschap) Protestant missions played a crucial role in this process. Great efforts were made, for instance, to establish schools throughout Minahasa. Although, in the beginning, they were not always accepted with enthusiasm by the local population, over the years they proved to be very

<sup>4</sup> See Henley (1992) for an overview on Minahasa unification on different levels.



successful and largely contributed to Minahasa's exceptional position among the East Indian colonies (Riedel 1836; Schouten 1998:112–125). Within less than a hundred years since the first schools were opened, large numbers of Minahasa actively participated in administration, trade and the Dutch military. Illiteracy was very much reduced and Minahasa came to be known as one of the regions in the East Indies with the highest level of education across the whole population. However, Minahasa also gained the rather dubious reputation of cooperating closely with their 'oppressors' or colonizers. The schools provided a forum not only for the training of useful skills but also for the formation of a colonial consciousness. Emphasis was laid upon the presentation of a common Minahasa culture and history. Legends like those about Lumimuut and Toar, the original ancestors of all Minahasa people, and the story of the division of Minahasa territory at Watu Pinawetengan, both symbols for Minahasa unity, were convenient tools in this undertaking.

The schools were also useful institutions in overcoming the linguistic barriers posed by the multitude of languages spoken throughout Minahasa.<sup>5</sup> As a teaching language, Manado Malay, beside Dutch, quickly and effectively rose to the status of a regional *lingua franca* and has maintained its importance till the present day (Henley 1992:103–111; Schouten 1998:112–121).


However, the probably strongest external impact in this process of Minahasa identity-building came from the Protestant Church and its efforts in spreading Christian faith. Today, the majority of Minahasa are nominally Christians and, among them, the Protestant Church of Minahasa (GMIM [*Gereja Masehi Injili di*

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<sup>5</sup> Until now, there are eight different languages and many more regional dialects spoken in Minahasa.

*Minahasa*]) is the biggest congregation. The construction of identity, on individual and collective levels, is always a dialectic process between recognizing sameness and difference and, consequently, between inclusion and exclusion (see Jenkins 1996). This has also been the case in Minahasa where 'outsiders', such as foreign administrators and missionaries, as well as increasingly 'insiders' too, as for instance local political leaders, were striving for Minahasa unity through processes of internal homogenization and differentiation from Others (Kosel 1998; Schouten 1998). Religion has played a major role in it since Minahasa has become a Christian dominated enclave in an otherwise predominantly Muslim country. Although Muslim minority populations have been present in Minahasa territory for several centuries, they are still regarded as 'strangers', as 'non-Minahasa', who are not always welcome. Apart from the occasional Muslim traders who came to Minahasa and settled in the coastal areas, Muslim VOC soldiers from Ternate arrived in the seventeenth century. Two hundred years later, Imam Bondjol from western Sumatra and Prince Diponegoro from Java sought refuge in Minahasa. These events and their lasting implications are still very much part of Minahasa local history and collective memory. Although the followers of these political leaders counted relatively small numbers, their descendants today still cultivate their 'heroic' past and identity and express it through their continuing adherence to Islam.

In their pursuit of unifying Minahasa, the Dutch were searching for commonalities in history, culture and tradition. The plan did work out and local differences within the region became less important or were sacrificed in order to gain a new and larger identity. However, as I have said above, identity is based as much on exclusion as on inclusion and—although an all-embracing Minahasa identity may have




helped to reduce local conflicts resulting from real or imagined local differences—the general attitude of dissociating themselves from Others remained.

Non-Minahasans were and still are those people who do not share the main signifiers of Minahasa identity. These are, as broad categories, history, ancestry, territory, religion, language and culture. Such categories of distinction are not unique for Minahasa but can be applied to other ethnic groups too. History, as a common past that is captured, synthesized and relived in written and oral texts and performances is vital in order to vest the supposed collective unity with an adequate time depth. A particularly memorable period in recent Minahasa history, that many people still vividly remember, are the years of *Permesta* (1958–1961) when Minahasa stood up against the national government of the then young Republic of Indonesia and fought for greater autonomy or even independence. Despite the final defeat of the ‘rebels’, *Permesta* is recalled as a time when Minahasa heroes were united in order to fight a common external enemy. Although *Permesta* is often given as an example of Minahasa unity and its strive for independence, the local population was far from united at the time but divided into followers and opponents of that political and military movement (Harvey 1977).

After Indonesia’s proclamation of independence in 1945, the new common ‘external enemy’ of Minahasa was the national government in Jakarta. This has also been the case in other regions of the archipelago where people have experienced political centralization as being linked with economic exploitation and cultural hegemony. Since power and wealth is perceived to be locally concentrated on the island of Java, the above-mentioned fears and resentments are extended towards ‘all Javanese’. The fact that the majority of people living in Java

are Muslims further adds to such negative feelings and attitudes. The general mistrust of Christian communities towards Islam is nourished by the latter’s dominant role throughout most parts of the Indonesian archipelago. Recent political developments in Indonesia, e.g. the violent conflicts in the Moluccas and Central Sulawesi as well as overseas, especially in the Middle East, have brought Islamic fundamentalism more to the forefront and heightened the previously latent tensions between Muslims and Christians. The majority of national political leaders are Muslims and some of them even support the idea of Islam as the official national religion. Christians and other religious minorities feel threatened by the prospects of an Islamic state. To sum up: anti-Javanese and anti-Islamic feelings seem to be causally related to each other. While the former have partly increased due to the rise of Islamic activism and Islam being identified as the dominant religion in Java, anti-Islamic feelings to some extent derive from long-term Javanese hegemony.

Identifying themselves as an eastern Indonesian and Christian ethnic group, Minahasa dissociate themselves on the one hand from western Indonesia generally, and particularly from Java, and on the other hand from all Islamic societies, even from those being located in eastern Indonesia. While the ready acceptance of Christian belief helped Minahasa to gain a privileged position during Dutch colonial administration, it proved to be less advantageous after Indonesia’s independence when Minahasa’s pro-Western attitude was regarded with suspicion. Until today, there is a tendency to identify and search for links with Western countries rather than with some of their neighbouring Islamic regions and provinces. Gorontalo’s split from North Sulawesi in 2001, is certainly *not only* but *also* the result of mutual avoidance among populations and politicians within the Christian-dominated province.



Thus, colonialism and its institutions have not only acted as integrative but also as divisive forces and the emphasis on 'Minahasa-ness' stands as much for separation as for unity.

Although historians have dated the origin of 'Minahasa' as a political and social entity as fairly recent (perhaps less than 200 years), folk stories claim a common descent of all 'original' Minahasa from one mythical ancestor couple, Toar and Lumimuut. The latter is not only responsible for the physical birth of the first Minahasa people but also for their division into different language groups that inhabit different territories. According to various versions of the classical legend, Lumimuut divided the whole land of Minahasa into 3 or 4 territories among her descendants. By being separated from each other, each group created its own 'tribe' with languages and cultures drifting apart as well. Such present linguistic and cultural diversity notwithstanding, the core of Minahasa is believed to have developed out of a common origin being physically embodied in their 'mother' Lumimuut.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the unification efforts undertaken by Dutch as well as Minahasa were justified even on historical grounds. They could claim to having reintroduced the 'original state', although under very different circumstances and by including also later immigrants. At the time of Dutch colonization, the region of Minahasa was already populated by eight different language groups. Some developed out of previously fairly large


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<sup>6</sup> The sources differ on the question whether 3, 4 or 5 'language groups' were the original inhabitants of Minahasa. The term 'language group' is fairly problematic in the Minahasa context, like in many others, since they are no groups in the sense of a number of persons acting together. However, out of convention and lacking a more suitable alternative, I will apply the term whenever considered useful throughout this paper. See Eeuijwik (1999:273–275) and Tauchmann (1968:31–56) for summaries on the various versions and interpretations of the myth.

Minahasa 'tribes' while others came from neighbouring areas such Bolaang-Mongondow or the Sanghir-Talaud Islands and took possession of certain tracts of land. Although the 'newcomers' have been fully integrated and in popular understanding, as well as in official records, they are all subsumed under the category 'Minahasa', in specific discussions on ethnic origin, history and identity collective memory still distinguishes between 'original' Minahasa and those of supposedly other descent.

When those early immigrants arrived, there was obviously enough empty land available for them to settle down and cultivate it. Together with the first 'real' Minahasa, they shared the preference for and orientation towards the highland regions in the interior of the island and rather avoided its coastlines. The latter were 'reserved' for other immigrants, often Muslims (but not exclusively), who specialized in fishing and trading and, thus, needed access to the sea. The coastal settlements partly developed out of necessity because land became increasingly scarce and later immigrants could not always afford or were not permitted to buy land. Until today, and perhaps increasingly so in recent years as a result of anti-Islamic attitudes, Muslim settlers are confronted with restrictions regarding land ownership.

Over the centuries, more and more Minahasa, too, moved from the inland to the coast and many towns have a mixed population in ethnic as well as religious terms. However, the spatial and social separation has mostly not ceased to exist with Muslims living in different districts than Christians and only limited social contacts across physical as well as ethnic and religious boundaries. It is therefore not surprising that inter-confessional marriages, and especially those between Christians and Muslims, have strongly been discouraged. Consequently, most people of Muslim descent



cannot claim Minahasa ancestry, inheritance of land, knowledge of a local language and adherence to a local cultural tradition and, therefore, they do not qualify as *orang Minahasa*. More than other ‘immigrants’ and even after several generations of residence in Minahasa, Muslims are seen as ‘outsiders’ who should not enjoy the same rights of citizenship and access to resources as Minahasa or even other Christian immigrants.


### The ‘history’ of culture

As I have tried to show, Minahasa ethnic identity is closely linked to history and the past, and ideally to a common ancestry as well as to a particular territory. It is, however, the so-called ‘cultural stuff’ that often fills those categories of and identities with past and present persons, places and events with meanings and that makes people *feel* their identity, belonging and difference. Thus culture is one of the signifiers on which ethnicity is grounded, in Minahasa as much as elsewhere. Time as much as place, is an important factor in legitimizing ethnic identity and the longer a history can be claimed by an ethnic group, the more convincing and justified its existence may appear. When representing an ethnic group, the corresponding culture has to be equally old and, although modifications and modernizations over the years and sometimes centuries may be allowed, it should be possible to trace its origins back to those past times. Culture is hence intertwined with tradition which, at least in popular understanding, stands for age, continuity and completeness.

The situation in Minahasa is no exception. The frequent references to the mythical parents of all Minahasa, Toar and Lumimuut, and to other ancestors in historical accounts and legends as well as in people’s family histories show the significance of descent combined with historical depth. Whether these ancestors once

were historical or mythical persons, they supposedly shaped Minahasa political and social history and laid the foundations of Minahasa culture(s). However, the Portuguese, Spanish and especially Dutch colonizers, who with increasing intensity and success ruled the country and educated its population for more than 400 years, substantially participated in weaving the patterns of Minahasa traditions. Local *adat* as much as a broader and encompassing Minahasa culture is therefore as much a product of Western influence as of pre-colonial ancestral customs. Due to the considerable time-depth of the various waves of colonization and their cultural by-products, Minahasa people have comfortably amalgamated the latter with the rest of their cultural stuff. This can be witnessed in the elaborate marriage customs, for instance. Church ceremonies and the main wedding feast, in particular, are very reminiscent of European weddings, whereas some of the accompanying rituals, such as the negotiation and hand-over of the bride price (*antarharta nikah*), and the reciprocal assistance of relatives and neighbours in the contribution and preparation of food for the guests, called *mapalus*, show more specifically Minahasa origins.

While the European influence on wedding celebrations and other cultural events is unmistakable to an outside onlooker, however, most Minahasa would still include them in their definition of Minahasa tradition and local *adat*. Colonial and mission histories are constitutive parts of Minahasa history and identity, in political as well as cultural terms. This is not to say that Minahasa people do not differentiate between various kinds, levels and origins of tradition and that all modern influences are indiscriminately incorporated into the cultural body. In fact, prominent factors of distinction between rural and urban people and even among the rural population itself are the de-



gree and quality of ‘authentic tradition(s)’ that are still observed and practised in the respective localities. Despite the general receptiveness towards foreign cultures and influences and, consequently, the noticeable changes in Minahasa society over the last 150 years, in particular, great value is attributed to age and continuity in cultural manifestations, i.e. to ‘tradition’. In order to illustrate this more clearly, I will focus on aspects of food consumption and their relation to ethnic identity in particular contexts in the following section.

### ‘Typical’ minahasa food

Foodstuffs, their substances and ways of consumption are given key status in discourses on Minahasa culture and local *adat*. Although I am aware that food and eating are relevant in all societies and cultural traditions, I would argue that the situation in Minahasa stands out in the sense that food there has become a primary marker of culture and identity.

Most people in Minahasa and many more in other parts of Indonesia would probably agree on the existence of something that can be called ‘Minahasa food’: ingredients and dishes that are considered being characteristic for the whole region and which, therefore, constitute elements of ‘Minahasa culture’. At a second and third look, however, it becomes evident that considerable local differences do exist and that not all kinds of food classified as ‘typically Minahasa’ are equally and to the same extent consumed in all parts of the regency. The annual celebration of the fictive birthday of Minahasa on 5 November is an occasion where local cultural differences are highlighted and culinary specialities of each district (*kecamatan*) are presented to distinguished guests. The dishes on display show that beside certain ingredients that are characteristic for a particular area, it is the diversity in preparation styles that provides such a wide


range of different plates. This is especially noticeable when looking at the offered cakes and sweetmeats. Events like the one mentioned aim at proclaiming the national Indonesian dictum of ‘Unity in Diversity’ on a smaller and regional scale by emphasizing local diversity within the framework of Minahasa culture.

Contrary to this localization, which is seen, at least in parts, as a result of cultural diversity within Minahasa, it may be surprising that differences and boundaries between the various Minahasa language groups are fairly irrelevant in the nutritional context. This can be explained from two angles: firstly, these language groups are not culturally bound units since cultural similarities and differences do not strictly conform to linguistic boundaries. A second, and perhaps even more convincing argument is that, due to the fact that many of the foodstuffs consumed on a daily basis, and particularly in rural areas, are locally produced, local economies and ecologies play a significant role when it comes to availability and distribution of as well as access to food resources.<sup>7</sup>

The probably broadest but nevertheless useful distinction we can draw on this basis is that between coastal and mountain areas, between seaside and inland regions. As it could be expected, the diet of coastal dwellers is, beside rice, almost entirely based on saltwater fish while the latter consume larger quantities of meat and occasionally freshwater fish. However, even in inland areas, saltwater fish is easily available at markets, often cheaper than meat and form a substantial part of daily food. Despite the strong focus on a rice and fish diet and people’s daily preoccupation with getting

<sup>7</sup> Since I am focusing in this chapter on conditions in rural and semi-urban areas, I will not elaborate on food habits in the major cities of Manado and Bitung. There, the availability of fast foods and Western foods etc. as well as generally different lifestyles have led to a wide range of diverse consumption habits.





enough fish for the whole family, either at local markets or from street vendors or from their own catch, the different varieties of dishes based on fish caught by locals near the Minahasa coast may be seen as regional specialities but not as ‘typical Minahasa food’.

This leads us again to the following question: what is (typical) Minahasa food in the eyes of Minahasa people themselves and in the eyes of outsiders? Interestingly, both views seem to be quite compatible on this topic, at least when we remain on a superficial level of categorization. Three main characteristics of Minahasa food are most frequently mentioned:


1. the abundant usage of chilli (*rica*)
2. the preference for game and dog meat
3. the vegetable stew called *tinutuan*

Let us start with the first: chilli peppers are frequently and more or less generously used all over Indonesia but Minahasa people indulge in them even more than most others do. Minahasa food is known for being particularly hot and visitors from outside who are invited for a meal—and since Minahasa seem to love food more than anything else, visitors can hardly ‘escape’ such invitations—are judged according to their ability of coping with that spicy taste. A frequently asked question is therefore: ‘Can you already eat Minahasa food?’ (*Sudah bisa/tahu makan makanan Minahasa?*) If the answer is yes, the person is considered being suited for life in Minahasa.

Many other Indonesians may simply believe that Minahasa people’s consumption of chilli in exaggerated quantities (in the views of Others) is just another proof of their lack of modesty and inclination to show-off and they may actually find the second characteristic more difficult to accept: the prospects of finding little pieces of dog, rat or bat at the dinner table. Again, the more Others seem to be shocked by the apparently ‘strange’ menu and distance themselves from such habits—even

in a physical way—the more their Minahasa hosts may insist on presenting such kinds of food as ‘typical’ specialities and offering them to their guests. What makes these meat dishes even more outstanding and ‘Minahasa-like’ is the fact that they are prepared with extra-large portions of chilli. Minahasa people, and even ‘*aficionados*’ of game and dog meat, explain this habit with the originally ‘strong taste’ of those kinds of meat which needs to be subdued by spices. This frequently results in such an overdose of chilli that the eater can hardly taste anything else except that it is very hot. Thus, when friends home in Europe asked me about the actual taste of rat, dog etc., I could only give vague answers because it was simply not possible to make out any characteristic taste of its own that had not been killed by the chilli peppers.

Despite the obvious connections between chilli and game or dog meat, there seems to be a fundamental difference between both types of ingredients in contemporary Minahasa diet. Chilli is one of the most important spices in Minahasa cuisine and being added to most dishes (except sweets of course). Although it is especially dominant in the cooking of game or dog meat, vast amounts of these little peppers can also be found in other, less conflicting, meat and vegetable dishes that constitute people’s everyday diet. Chilli peppers are readily available at the markets and in most other food outlets and they grow in many private gardens. Nevertheless, the local harvest is dependent on the climate and seasons and the price asked for *rica* may vary considerably throughout the year (e.g. between Rp 4.000 and 14.000 per litre in 2002). Off-season when prices soar, the amounts of chilli being used in daily food preparation may be reduced but they would not be left out completely. Like rice, chilli is considered a fundamental ingredient that should not be missed at any meal, and likewise



the prices of chilli and rice are a favourite topic of discussion among women, in particular, who are responsible for food purchases for the whole family.


Dogs and forest animals (especially wild boar, snake, monkey, bat and rat—and everybody emphatically insists that no house rat ends up in the pot), on the contrary, have largely disappeared from the daily menu of most Minahasa families. A main reason for this is their reduced availability. These animals, or parts of them, are not always and not everywhere offered for sale. It is generally easier to buy them in the interior highland regions than in the coastal areas where most of the land is densely cultivated and the gardens reach down to the sea. However, even inland forests have become increasingly scarce and with the loss of their habitat and excessive hunting practices it is not surprising that less and less of those ‘wild’ animals are found roaming around and, at a later stage, on the plates. Some Minahasa take the luck in their own hands and hunt with rifles and traps in the nearby gardens and forests. Getting dogs for butchering is an even more obscure undertaking because the number of animals especially bred and sold for consumption is apparently not sufficient and, therefore, dogcatchers regularly raid villages at night in search for easy prey. Despite their taste for dog meat, many Minahasa would not like to sacrifice their own dog for a delicious meal and they make an effort to prevent their dogs from being stolen. The fact that dog and game have become less available has certainly added to their image as ‘extraordinary’ foods. As a result, today such meat dishes are mainly reserved for special occasions, such as birthdays or other private parties and more formal receptions. Restaurants have also reacted to the dilemma between desire and availability for the average person and offer such hard-to-get foods to their hungry customers. Most of these

eateries are located in the highlands and at the mountain plateau around Lake Tondano and some have become well known all over the regency for their ‘traditional’ and ‘typical’ Minahasa cuisine.

*Tinutuan*, the stew prepared on the basis of maize, rice and sweet potatoes with vegetables added, seems to be a different kind of food altogether. Its ingredients are fairly cheap and easy to get and *tinutuan*, which is equally easy to cook, is more or less regularly served in most households. Additionally, it is a popular dish to be consumed in the late morning hours at a *warung* or small restaurant. However, when we compare *tinutuan* or *bubur Manado* (Manado porridge), as it is also called, with the types of food mentioned under 1) and 2) as characteristics of Minahasa diet, we may be puzzled. *Tinutuan* does not seem to qualify as ‘exceptional’ food in any particular way. On the contrary, judging from its preferred context of consumption, being offered along with various kinds of soup at small and inexpensive public eateries, it rather evokes the image of being quite an ordinary dish of which similar ones can be found in other parts of Indonesia. Like other stews and soups generally, *tinutuan* is first cooked in a very mild way and the consumer can add spices like chilli sauce or little peppers, tomato sauce, vinegar, salt etc. according to his/her own preference.

### **Food from the Land**

We may now ask, and quite rightly so, how this seemingly arbitrary collection of foodstuffs and dishes have come to represent Minahasa ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’ more adequately than others—at least in the eyes of those who make use of such forms of categorization? And if so, is there a perhaps hidden similarity between the three at first glance quite divergent ‘categories’?




Instead of comparing these categories with contemporary food habits, which obviously does not lead us very far, I would suggest to look at the origins of the various foodstuffs. Together with the ingredients used for *tinutuan*, chillies are products that grow in abundance in private gardens and on commercial farms throughout Minahasa. However, depending on soil and climate, the main areas for vegetable production are the interior highlands. These gardens as well as the nearby forests are also the hunting grounds for game and it is rather the mountain people than the coastal dwellers who provide the basis for traditional dishes. This is no coincidence. The hinterland is the land of the ‘original’ Minahasa people and still considered the heartland of the region with the most ancient and strongest traditions. It is the land of the forefathers of today’s population and of many honourable ancestors whose diet would have rather consisted of vegetables, tubers and game than on saltwater fish. The definition of ‘hinterland’ is less based on the actual spatial distance of a certain place from the sea but rather on the morphology of the landscape and on its suitability for agriculture.

An example is the village of Waleo and its surroundings at the north-eastern coast of Minahasa. Despite the fact that the village is located only a few minutes walk from the beach, the majority of its population are farmers who make a living by working in their nearby gardens. Although young people increasingly take up jobs in other towns and cities and dedicate less time and energy towards gardening, land ownership is still a major source of pride and identity. People in their thirties and forties fondly remember the times when they were young (about 20 years ago) and village life was very different from today. A major indicator was the amount of time they spent in the gardens and the intensity of work they had to invest in

their cultivation. Most families remained the whole week, from Monday to Saturday, living and working in their gardens and would return to the village only on Sunday. During the week they mainly lived of garden products, i.e. tubers, maize, vegetables, smaller amounts of rice, eggs, the occasional chicken or dog and hunted game. Salted and dried fish was sometimes added too, but fresh fish was reserved for Sundays only. Changes in work patterns, places and lifestyles have also brought changes in food habits. Today, a standard diet of fish and rice, both mostly being purchased, has largely replaced the old food habits. Tubers, maize and vegetables are added in smaller quantities only and mainly less affluent people go through the efforts of planting and harvesting their own foods. *Tinutuan*, one of the most famous dishes of Minahasa cuisine, is considered the ‘poor person’s food’. The porridge-like mixture of garden products is thus said to have been ‘invented’ during the times of Japanese occupation when food was rather scarce and could not be wasted. Furthermore it was easy to cook and a convenient dish to prepare when living in the gardens where all the ingredients were at hand. While in the old days *tinutuan* was prepared out of need by farmers, the town folk eventually discovered it as a tasty second breakfast dish and elevated its status to a regional speciality.

In short, what these undeniably quite different foodstuffs or components (chilli—game—*tinutuan*) have in common is their origin. They themselves or their ingredients respectively, are not sea but land products that are hunted and collected or harvested in the gardens and forests of the hinterland. As hunters, collectors and gardeners, Minahasa people carry on the (culinary) traditions of their ancestors, who had occupied the mountain areas, and they thus qualify as ‘true’ descendants of the original Minahasa. As landown-



ers and cultivators, and by demonstrating their profound knowledge of certain regions and localities, Minahasa prove their attachment to and rightful possession of the land. Ancestry is tied to land and vice versa and both are linked in myths and 'histories'. Although it is rather the mountain people who enjoy the privilege of being identified as the most 'authentic' Minahasa inhabitants, coastal dwellers may reach an almost equal level and status if they can prove their roots and positions in Minahasa history and links to tradition that are, at least partly, inscribed in the landscape. Thus, by producing as well as by consuming certain kinds of food, Minahasa people make a statement about their social status and positioning and about their cultural identity. When they choose garden and forest products as representatives of their culture and society, they not only affirm their ties to their ancestors and the land inhabited by them, but they also distance themselves from Others who may live inside or outside the Minahasa borders.


Despite today's overall focus on fish as a primary foodstuff (next to rice) and the fact that quite a number of people in Minahasa make a living as full or part-time fishermen, fishing is not considered an activity of as high a status as farming and gardening. Peasant communities distance themselves from fishing communities for a number of reasons. Claims for tradition are linked to ancestral ties and land ownership. Fishing is not only a 'non-traditional' kind of work (and fish, therefore, do not qualify as traditional Minahasa food) but it is rather carried out by people with little or no possessions of land. Fishing communities are often, but not exclusively, inhabited by 'Outsiders', i.e. people of non-Minahasa descent whose access to land and its resources may be quite limited. Furthermore, the majority of Muslim people in Minahasa live in coastal areas, many of them in fishing settlements, and often work

as fishermen. The division between peasants and fishermen is, therefore, although not always and everywhere to the same extent, also a division between traditional versus non-traditional people, landowners versus landless people, Minahasa versus Non-Minahasa and Christians versus Muslims.

### **'WE eat pork whereas THEY eat beef'**

In the previous chapter I have dealt with so-called 'typical' Minahasa food, i.e. with food-stuffs that are seen as regional specialities and are linked to traditional ways of production and consumption. Although feasts are ideal venues for presenting and performing cultural traditions in the eyes of the local population, these kinds of typical food, interestingly, are not offered as main components on such occasions. There, despite local variations in the menus, the overall emphasis is on pork dishes. What may be even more surprising is the fact that those dishes are prepared by adding only minimal quantities of chilli and other spices. Thus, they are normally very mild and actually quite 'tasteless' compared to the average meat dish offered in everyday contexts at private homes or restaurants.

Individual preferences for game, chicken or freshwater fish notwithstanding, domestic pigs are at the top of the hierarchy of edible animals and pork ranges highest among the different kinds of meat. Pork (whether it is boiled, fried or grilled) is, therefore, indispensable at every festive meal. The economic significance of pigs is not surprising because, first of all, they provide more meat and fat than any other available animal and, thus, demonstrate the wealth of their owners or others who can afford purchasing and slaughtering them. To offer a whole pig, or even several animals, is a sign of a very special event for which the host is prepared to make an extraordinary sacrifice. Today this happens mainly at weddings, baptisms, and funerals.



als or, occasionally, at large birthday parties.


Pigs are also valuable because they are prominent characters in traditional Minahasa mythology and cosmology. According to some myths, a huge ancestral pig carries the world upon its shoulders, while in other versions the pig is ritually sacrificed by the gods of the underworld (Tauchmann 1968:121). Until a few decades ago it was quite common to divine the future by examining the liver of a recently slaughtered pig (Pusung 1994). More than any other animal, the pig represents Minahasa traditions and ancestral as well as territorial connections.

However, the taste for pork is not unique for Minahasa people but can be found in all non-Islamic communities in Indonesia. It may therefore be less suitable as indicator of a specific Minahasa identity that excludes all Others but, on the contrary, it proclaims a wider unity that stretches beyond the regional borders. As dedicated 'pork eaters', Minahasa place themselves into one category with Others who are officially recognized as Christians, Hindus or Buddhists. By extending sameness to these Outsiders, the distinction from Muslims is especially highlighted. This happens not only on the regional but also on the national and sometimes even international level. Minahasa emphasize their adherence to Christianity which, although having its roots in the early days of colonization by European powers, spread quickly over the Minahasa territory only after the arrival of the NZG missionaries and their dedicated work. Meanwhile, the former colonists have been replaced by the Christian 'world community' and identification with the West is an attitude expressed in opposition to Islam.

Thus, pigs are ideal animals when Minahasa identity is at stake. The wide-spread breeding of pigs and the popularity of pork and, consequently, its consumption in large quantities can

be explained on the grounds that pigs have been of great significance in traditional as much as in modern (Christian) religion and society. While other kinds of meat may be offered at an optional level, pork should not be missed at any feast. During its preparation phase, the butchering of pigs, cutting up and cooking of the meat are almost ritualized acts that underlie certain rules according to Minahasa traditions. By giving pigs special prominence and following traditional models of food preparation at such events, organizers as well as participants prove the continuity and their own knowledge of Minahasa traditional culture and customs and, subsequently, their identity as Minahasa people. In everyday life and interaction, Minahasa frequently underline their regular consumption of pork as a dominant marker of difference from the local Muslim population. 'We, the Minahasa people, eat pork whereas they, the Muslims, eat beef' is a commonly heard expression. People, places and events are identified as Christian or Muslim on the basis of the kinds of meat being offered or consumed. Due to religious taboos, Muslims normally refrain from eating pork, dog or game but, instead, consume beef and goat on a regular basis at feasts, restaurants and at home.

In this respect, the eating habits of the Muslim population living in Minahasa do not differ from those of most other Indonesians. At public events and private feasts that take place in larger towns and cities with rather heterogeneous populations (including Muslims), two types of food are commonly offered: 'Minahasa food' (*makanan Minahasa*) and 'national food' (*makanan nasional*). Thus, dishes prepared specifically for the Muslim, 'pork-avoiding', community are categorized as 'national dishes', although they may bear the characteristics of Minahasa cooking and only differ in the choice of meat from the so-called 'Minahasa dishes'. The label would suggest



that Islam is recognized as an almost national religion which, however, conflicts with claims, in other circumstances, for religious plurality and resistance against Muslim dominance.

In everyday context, the separation between Christian and Muslim food and consumers is not always as strict as it may appear. There are Muslims who do eat pork or game, at least occasionally and secretly, and restaurants and *warungs* with 'Muslim cuisine' are frequented by almost as many Christians as Muslims. Nevertheless, many Christian Minahasa I talked to, and more women than men, expressed their dislike for beef and goat and made it clear that, due to their peculiar tastes, those kinds of meat ranked lowest at their scale of preference.

### **Tastes of distinction—tastes of resistance—tastes of power**


It is anthropologically accepted that taste is not only a body sense and an innate capacity but largely something we acquire with our socialization over time (e.g. Caplan 1997; Macbeth 1997; Scholliers 2001). Our preferences and aversions regarding food and drink, like everything else, have been shaped by our experiences in particular social environments. Socially and culturally bound meanings and associations attached to different kinds of food strongly influence our 'personal' attitudes towards these food sources and, thus, influence our taste. They are important determinants in our selection of edible versus non-edible, or tasty versus non-palatable foods.

Anthropologists have documented that food, more than most other phenomena, offers itself as an ideal signifier for a particular 'culture' or 'tradition' (e.g. Counihan and Esterik 1997). Cooking and eating seem to be fairly safe and non-provocative acts of demonstrating one's cultural 'embeddedness' and identity. However, when we scratch away the surface layer of this assumption, we realise that the

selection and consumption of foodstuffs are, as much as other forms of consumption, significant social, and sometimes even political, acts.

Let me illustrate this by turning back to the example of the three categories of 'typical Minahasa food'. As I have mentioned above, the first two categories, chilli and dog meat/game, show a special symbolic affinity, despite their very different qualities from biological as well as nutritional points of view. These particular types of meat are normally prepared with an 'overdose' of chilli and therefore, not surprisingly, also classified as 'hot', and subsequently as 'male' food. The consumption of spicy, 'hot' and, thus, potentially dangerous foods, offers Minahasa men opportunities to demonstrate their courage and strength among their own people but also towards Others. Such qualities are particularly emphasized when Minahasa people draw comparisons with other Indonesians and identify themselves with their brave ancestors who, according to local narratives, neither feared their hostile neighbours nor the threats of other invaders.

With its rather bland taste, *tinutuan* cannot enter the category of 'virile' foods but, perhaps more surprisingly, it too has its place in the sphere of Minahasa heroism. It was the food of resistance during the most important epochs of war in recent history (Japanese occupation and *Permesta*). At both occasions, Minahasa fought against and resisted invasion and occupation by outsiders, whether it were Japanese or Indonesian forces. Although Minahasa were not all that successful in their attempts to defeat the enemies as they would like to make others believe, in their collective memory those times have become important scenarios of Minahasa cleverness, bravery and heroic patriotism. Hence, while the consumption of chilli and dog/game should represent the impulsive and fearless 'male' character



(linked to traditional ancestors), the rather ‘female’ qualities of endurance and resistance—which nevertheless are appreciated by both sexes when it comes to reflections on Minahasa history—are highlighted when praising the value of *tinutuan*.

Although it is tempting and, in my view, also legitimate to see Minahasa foodstuffs as gendered, we should not uncritically assume a necessary extension of such categorization to the actual sexes. It is true that more men than women eat larger quantities of ‘hot’ and spicy foods while the latter often prefer rather bland vegetable dishes (like *tinutuan*), but this is not a hard and fast rule, and in reality food consumption takes place across gender lines. Women, like men, may indulge in ‘male’ foods and men may take in ‘female’ foods without hesitation. The quite flexible consumption practices correspond to Minahasa images and expected roles of both gender that overlap in many other ways too and do not stand in strict opposition to each other.


I would, therefore, argue that it is the continuity of ‘male’ as well as ‘female’ virtues being associated with Minahasa people, and especially with the activists and ‘regional patriots’ of the mid-twentieth century, that is reflected in their food traditions. Those violent times of battle and occupation are vividly ‘remembered’ by the adult generations, even by those born after 1960, and forms of political and cultural resistance still range among the generally accepted, or even preferred, coping strategies in the context of Javanese ‘internal colonialism’. Such an attitude may be most suitable for a ‘threatened’ minority, at least according to its own subjective interpretation and when open conflict is avoided.

Within the Province of North Sulawesi, however, Christians constitute the vast majority who hold much of the wealth, resources and power. Consequently, there seems to be

less need for social restraint from their side on the local level, and Minahasa act and react towards their Muslim minority populations with self-confidence, assertiveness and sometimes even with aggression. While this is not an entirely new phenomenon, the climate of political and social tensions in connection with ongoing violent conflicts, which has developed over the past few years throughout Indonesia and beyond, has certainly raised feelings of insecurity and sensibilities related to expressions of ethnic and religious identity on both sides. Hence, Minahasa people justify individual as well as collective anti-Muslim initiatives as forms of self-protection with the long-term goal to prevent Minahasa being taken over by the Muslim national majority. Decentralisation, which has led to increasing local political authority and power, has opened more opportunities for ‘regionalisms’ and consequently for ethnically or religiously motivated actions.

As we know from numerous examples throughout history, it is often easier and more convenient to blame and fight the weak than the powerful. In the Minahasa context of ethnic/religious divisions, Muslim street vendors of fast foods are among those chosen as scapegoats for local economic and/or social problems. Violent attacks by the police and paramilitary forces aiming at the dispersion of the *pedagang kaki lima* in the city of Bitung in 2002, for instance, were rationalized as necessary measures against the apparently negative effects the little food stalls had on the city traffic.<sup>8</sup> In a country where traffic regulation is almost non-existent, it makes one wonder about the true motives behind such firm actions. It probably is no coincidence that the majority of those ‘undesirable subjects’ were identified as

<sup>8</sup> Like in the provincial capital Manado (and in stark contrast to the rural areas), the Muslim population in the second-largest regional city Bitung reached more than 25 percent in the last census of 2001.



*orang Gorontalo* who had only recently arrived in Minahasa and were watched with suspicion by the local government and population.


This can be explained on various grounds: Firstly, as a predominantly Muslim province in northern Sulawesi, Gorontalo is considered being one of the potential neighbouring ‘pools’ of Muslim activists and/or their local sympathizers who may put peace and stability in the region at stake. Secondly, time is an important factor in processes of identification, acceptance of belonging and the granting of local rights. Thus, long-term Muslim residents in Minahasa enjoy higher levels of integration and trust by the local government and mainstream population than newcomers do. In Minahasa, like elsewhere, ‘danger’ is perceived as coming from ‘outside’ and could be imported by Gorontalo street vendors for instance. Thirdly, as small independent and economically weak business people, the street vendors do neither have the economic or social power to defend their position against the aggressors, and certainly not against the police and other official authorities, nor do they represent a resourceful and economically attractive minority who would substantially contribute to the wealth of the city, its leaders and inhabitants. The expulsion of the food vendors with their stalls was explained as an initiative to ‘clean up’ the city, an idea that could easily be associated with a selected, and perhaps rather symbolic, form of ‘ethnic/religious cleansing’, and one that would not provoke a strong counter-reaction from any particular social or political group.

Additionally to these factors, I would suggest a fourth explanation: the public aggression against the *pedagang kaki lima* could be linked to the specific functions of the mobile little stalls as places where food, and mainly ‘foreign’ and ‘undesirable’ food, is offered and consumed, and to the vendors’ performance

as mediators between these products and the clients and, hence, as potential ‘seducers’ of the (Christian) public. Foodstuffs and feeding are prominent, perhaps universal, elements in processes of seduction as well as in their popular interpretations and theorizing, as artists and writers, but also social scientists, have extensively shown (see e.g. Davidson 1999; Probyn 2000). Seduction could roughly be defined as an act that aims at leading somebody away from his/her previous path (*se-ducere*) and, by promising an attractive reward, to get him/her to do something he/she had not intended to. Since oral gratification is one of the primary and basic human desires, culinary specialities present themselves as ideal objects of reward.

The Muslim food stalls in Bitung offered inexpensive and tasty meals to a Muslim as well as Christian clientele. In public discussion among Christian Minahasa, however, the taste for Muslim food is often subdued or even denied. I would therefore argue that it is rather the *discourse* about taste and culinary preferences or taboos that is socially conditioned than the actual taste or preference itself. As we know from personal experience and psychological studies, our (innermost) feelings and desires do not always, though perhaps often, correspond with our actions and verbal expressions, with the ways we present ourselves in public. However, it rather is the latter, our behaviour, that determines whether we belong to a certain social group or are excluded from it. Identification as Christian Minahasa, for instance, is based not only on descent, place and religion, but also on a commonly and publicly shared body of traditions, practices and values, among which food habits take on a prominent role in everyday life. To eat ‘improper’ food would mean a kind of deviation, like being ‘on the wrong track’, which could eventually diminish a person’s identity as ‘proper’ *orang Minahasa*.





As it has been witnessed in other regions with ethnic/religious conflicts, consumption practices are popular signifiers of people's respective ethnic/religious identities (Brubaker & Laitin 1998:440; Laitin 1995). By being closely associated with those particular identities, objects and activities themselves are increasingly 'ethnicised'. Hence, previously rather (ethnically) neutral consumption habits may become ethnically marked practices.


While cultural prescriptions are to some extent valid for all forms of consumption and other manifestations, eating/drinking constitutes a separate category because it not only symbolically but also physically represents a consumer's identity – we are what we eat (see Brillat-Savarin 1825/26). Edible substances nourish our bodies by dissolving in them, building them and shaping them; they become as much part of our bodies as of our minds. Thus, identification with these substances is a cultural phenomenon based on a physical reality. Eating other people's food does not only mean that we become *like* those other people but we would actually *turn into* other people, it would change our physical constitution and, hence, our selves.

Even if they are composed of mainly 'natural' ingredients, most foodstuffs could be classified as 'cultural products' in the sense that they are produced, distributed, prepared and consumed by human beings and according to social or economic regulations or conveniences, cultural traditions or habits, and individual preferences. After its consumption, the foodstuffs decompose and are excreted or they dissolve into various body parts—they turn into 'natural' substances again. Thus, food—or its components—switches from the sphere of 'nature' to that of 'culture' and then back to 'nature', it transforms human cultural production into natural organisms.

When looking from this angle at consumption practices in Minahasa, Christian dislike of Muslim food takes on a different and more relevant dimension than it may have been expected at first sight. It expresses not only a cultural tradition and social separation but also a particular physical desire and physical distance towards their Muslim neighbours. Christian Minahasa often explain a certain culinary aversion not primarily as a matter of taste or preference but as a physical precondition, something that is beyond their control: they *cannot* eat a particular kind of food, even if they wanted to, because it would make them sick or sometimes even seriously ill. 'Food boundaries', therefore, are not only ethnic, cultural or religious but also biological boundaries. Although they are not impermeable and do allow crossover or 'migration' from one side to the other, acceptability of such exchange is limited, situational and negotiable, as the city authorities demonstrated in their reaction to the Gorontalo street vendors. When the 'Other'—in forms of food—penetrates our bodies, we are most vulnerable and at a high risk of 'pollution' (Douglas 1966). 'Excessive' consumption of Muslim food poses such a threat to Minahasa people. However, it would not only pollute Minahasa bodies, and perhaps their minds, but in doing so it would also make Christians becoming more similar to Muslims. The unique and 'different' quality of Minahasa identity could ultimately be questioned—something that neither Minahasa people themselves nor their local politicians would aspire.

### Conclusion

Food, eating and taste are connected to the body, its organs and functions. Eating is a physiological process; taste, as a physical capacity and quality, adds 'flavour' to this process and provokes emotional reactions like plea-



sure or disgust; and only substances apt for the consumption by human bodies and their disintegration in it deserve the label 'food'. Hence, food habits are obviously not entirely 'unnatural'—at least not to those whose bodies have become conditioned to the culinary prescriptions and preferences in question.


Minahasa bodies, for instance, have become accustomed to the taste of pork, rat and dog - types of meat their Muslim neighbours would not touch. Furthermore, the generous amounts of chillies used in Minahasa cooking require a physical ability to bear hot spices. While Minahasa cuisine may be a challenge to newcomers, the local population indulges in such delicacies on which their bodies have been nourished over the years. Outsiders are judged according to their ability to eat Minahasa food and, although gradual adaptation is desired, complete integration is hardly expected. Taste tends to be conservative, and scholars have shown that food preferences are among the most persistent habits; but they are not as static as they appear at first sight (see Bourdieu 1986) and changes in taste may occur even at later stages in life.

While flexibility and adaptability in taste are generally welcomed with visitors, these qualities are regarded rather with suspicion among Minahasa people themselves when it comes to 'typical' Muslim food and its temptations for Christians—which are seen as arenas where important components of Minahasa identity are likely to be threatened. 'Minahasaness' as a common identity of the majority of the Minahasa population, is based on social categories like ethnicity, religion and culture, as well as on a shared territory, language and history. External forces like colonialism, proselytization and postcolonial Javanese hegemony have substantially contributed in its construction. Although descent is given a prominent role in the transmission of

Minahasa identity, the latter has to be continually renewed and confirmed by social practices. Eating, for instance, is a particularly suitable practice that serves social and biological identification by demonstrating people's ties to their ancestors and the land as well as their belonging to the Christian 'community'. Like all social identities, Minahasaness is defined negatively almost as much as positively, and it is based very much on the distinction from Muslim identities. On the local level, Christian Minahasa dissociate themselves from their Muslim 'neighbours' who, despite their often long-term residence, are not recognized as *orang Minahasa*; on the national scale, dissociation from other Indonesian regions and provinces with Muslim majorities is emphasized.

In recent years, changes in political structures and the handing over of competences and responsibilities to regional and district authorities have offered not only greater local autonomy and independence but also raised instability and feelings of insecurity, especially since these political reforms have been accompanied by violent conflicts in many parts of the archipelago. Minahasa people, like other Christian populations in Indonesia, have held Islamic fundamentalism primarily responsible for the conflicts and their negative effects throughout the whole country. Subsequently, rejection and mistrust have grown in Minahasa attitudes towards Muslim people generally. Although relations between both groups have always been characterized by mutual distance and certain avoidance, tensions have undoubtedly increased and been nourished by (negative) stereotypes and prejudices against each other.

The differences in food habits *per se* are not provocative enough to create serious conflict between Christians and Muslims. However, food is a primary marker of Minahasa identity and, thus, of distinction from Others who do





not share these traditions, like the Muslim population. Ideologies and practices of distinction have become particularly relevant in times of political and social unrest. Food is a central element in everyday life as well as at most special occasions and, therefore, provides ample opportunities to fill Christian and Muslim identities with meanings and highlight 'natural' differences. The continuous re-enactment of rules, taboos and recommendations revolving around food is one way, and obviously a quite effective one, to make boundaries appear normal and inevitable. Eating is a fundamental social act and creates or defines social relations, prox-

imity and distance. Thus, the regular consumption of Muslim food, and particularly in a Muslim 'environment', could lead to question ethnic or cultural boundaries and perceptions of difference. While such an approach between Christians and Muslims may be desirable from an outsider's perspective, Minahasa people themselves are rather sceptical about it. Social distance is a prerequisite for reproducing Minahasa images and interpretations of Muslim aggression in order to justify political and social discrimination and to maintain a 'culture of difference'.

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