Gregory Forth

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Not long after I began fieldwork on the eastern Indonesian island of Flores in 1984, I learned that I could become the subject of a rumour. As an outsider and moreover a white-skinned male, local people might, I was told, suspect that I had come to Flores in search of human heads. As I eventually discovered, the notion reflected an enduring rumour bound up with modern construction projects. For decades, stories had been circulating to the effect that, whenever an iron bridge, dam or a large modern building (including a church) was to be built, a human head, preferably that of a child, had to be procured to place beneath the foundations so as to render the structure strong and durable. During the period of Dutch colonial rule, I was further told, the ultimate instigators were Europeans, but the actual head-stealers were fellow Indonesians, typically members of other ethnic groups. The victims, on the other hand, were always members of the storyteller’s own community.

As shown in a series of publications (e.g. Sjahrir 1949, Drake 1989, Forth 1991, McWilliam 1999) such rumours circulated throughout the 20th century all over Indonesia. The details are generally the same, although sometimes rather than heads it is whole bodies or other parts of bodies, including blood, that are required. During the early 19th century and subsequently, stories concerning head-stealing for construction projects were also propagated in Singapore (Abdullah 1970 [1849]), Malaysia (Skeat 1900, Naipaul 1981) and further afield, including China and India (Haddon 1901, Opie and Opie 1997).

Indeed, the rumour has counterparts in European folk traditions regarding the immuring of human victims in bridges, gates and the foundations of buildings (Sartori 1898, Frazer 1951, Opie and Opie 1997). Similar rumours, and the fears to which they can give rise, occur to the present day in Western societies. They are of course mainly designated as ‘urban legends’ or ‘urban myths’, and under these rubrics have been extensively documented by folklorists, psychologists and sociologists (see e.g. Brunvand 2001).

Although I have so far referred to head-stealing rumours mostly in the past tense, they continue to surface on Flores and other Indonesian islands to the present day. They thus provide an example of ‘diving rumours’, a concept introduced by Byssow (1928) and further developed by Allport and Postman (1965). These are stories that are told – and possibly acted upon – for a time, but which then disappear, only to re-emerge at some later date. When they do ‘resurface’, however, they need not do so in precisely the same form, and they might reappear in combination with other rumours, different from ones possibly accompanying the story’s earlier occurrence.

Among the Nage and Keo peoples of central Flores, groups among which I have been working during the past 25 years, I have often heard the head-stealing rumour pronounced dead: it is a story people used to tell and believe but, no longer do. A variant notion is that the latest technology employed in modern construction projects is so sophisticated and effective that the powers-that-be no longer require human heads to render the structures strong. Nevertheless, the rumours do survive, evidently revealing a durability greater even than the products of modern technology.

When I returned to eastern Indonesia last summer (2008), I found a variant of the head-stealing story had been circulating recently in my old field sites. This one, however, displayed intriguing differences from instances I had recorded before, for the focus was not a local construction project but the mud volcano disaster in Sidoarjo, East Java. In May 2006, Indonesian oil company Lapindo Brantas had obtained permission from the Indonesian government to begin drilling for natural gas in the region of Sidoarjo, not far from Surabaya, Indonesia’s second largest city. The controlling interest in Lapindo is held by the family of Aburizal Bakrie, at the time Indonesia’s Co-ordinating Minister for the Peoples’ Welfare. Unfortunately for all concerned, the drilling cut through layers of carbonate rock and limestone, thus (according to an interpretation receiving wide support among geologists’) precipitating an eruption of volcanic mud that rendered a large part of the surrounding area uninhabitable and causing the evacuation of as many as 15,000 people. The mud continues to pour from the ground and could have inundated an even larger area had it not been temporarily contained by levees. According to another interpretation, one naturally favoured by the company but which has received rather less geological support, the eruption resulted from seismic activity and was thus a natural disaster, the consequences of which are the responsibility of the Indonesian government and not Lapindo. Pictures of the Lapindo mud disaster can be found on numerous internet sites by searching ‘Lapindo mud’.

Over several months in 2007, hundreds of concrete balls were dropped into the crater to staunch the mud flow. But the attempt met with limited success, and it was therefore probably more than a coincidence that, towards the end of 2007, people in various parts of Indonesia began speculating about another possible solution. Arriving in Flores in May 2008, I began hearing about a rumour which had
begun circulating in late 2007 and was still doing the rounds in early 2008. By mid-2008, the rumor seemed to have died down. At least, no one ever related it to me directly; rather, while assuring me that the story was certainly or probably unfounded, they simply described what people had been saying a few months previously. According to the rumor as it was first recounted to me in the Nage region of central Flores, numbers of masked men, usually identified as having hailed from Java, had landed on Flores to acquire a large number of local children’s heads in order to ‘stop the flow of mud at Lapindo’ (meaning the location of the mudflow in East Java). The number of heads reputedly varied, but it was usually in the thousands.

Accompanying this story were more specific reports, variants of which I recorded in several parts of Flores, and later (in July 2008) during a visit to the neighboring island of Sumba. According to one, a child had been abducted somewhere, placed in a sack, and carried off on the back of a motorcycle or driven away in an enclosed vehicle; because the sack had fallen from the vehicle, however, or for some other reason, the youthful victim had usually managed to escape. According to another tale, people somewhere had stumbled across one or more headless bodies. In one instance two headless corpses were reputedly kept in a hospital in the Flores port town of Maumere; in others, single victims had been left headless in dwellings or near settlements in remote rural locations. At about the same time – late 2007 or early 2008 – similar rumors were circulating in West Timor (to the south-east of Flores and Sumba) and in several parts of western Indonesia, including Bali and Borneo. In West Borneo, the Lapindo rumor was circulating in March 2007, and was reported in Sumatra as early as January 2007.

While the Lapindo rumor was still current, it evidently had many people scared. In parts of Sumba and Flores, for a while children generally were unwilling to work in areas, had either kept young children away from school or insisted on accompanying them there and on their home-ward journeys. Also on Sumba, there was an unverified report of an itinerant Javanese clothes-seller who, on suspicion of being in search of children’s heads, had been attacked and beaten in the interior Sumbanese district of Lewa. According to an internet account of what may have been the same alleged incident,1 the man had said something in jest to a potential female customer who had mistakenly interpreted his remark as an offer to provide the woman with clothes in exchange for her child. Another story that found its way into the media described how, in February 2008, Sumbanese villagers in the Kambaniru region, not far from the main port town of Waingapu, had apprehended a man, described only as ‘someone of foreign nationality’. The man had reputedly been offering young children money to buy sweets at a kiosk some distance from their home. The villagers’ suspicions were aroused by reports that the foreigner was carrying a large bag. Sometime prior to this, other people had reported seeing a number of non-Sumbanese strangers carrying bags and suitcases that were ‘spotted with blood’. After accosting the mysterious outsider, the Kambaniru villagers escorted him to a local police station; however, responding to later enquiries, the police were unable to verify the report.1

**Similarities: New wine (or mud) in old bottles**

Whether these bag-toting strangers were supposed to have been Westerners is unclear. However, Europeans – since the 1970s often designated in both Flores and Sumba as turis (that is, ‘tourists’) – have regularly been implicated in earlier rumours of head-stealing related to bridges and other modern construction projects. And from stories I myself recorded, Europeans were still being accused of some unspecified involvement or interest in the Lapindo head cull in 2007 and 2008. The association appears to be especially persistent on Sumba. According to one story, in 2008 Sumbanese rice harvesters, upon seeing a local albino in the distance, had fled to their houses in the fear that he might be a European searching for heads for Lapindo. This, then, reveals one continuity between the older rumours of head-stealing for modern construction sacrifice and what can be understood as its latest manifestation in relation to the mud eruption.

There are other similarities. In both older and newer versions, heads (and particularly human heads) figure as a source of power. In one case, they can lend a man-made structure strength and durability. How this works is usually not specified, but with reference to bridges Floreseness sometimes speculate that the head buried beneath the foundations not only lends strength to the structure but also acts somewhat like a guardian spirit, protecting the bridge and warding off flash floods. The theme of bodies or body parts functioning as spiritual guardians is common to many Asian and European traditions of construction sacrifice (Frazer 1951, Opie and Opie 1997). In the new rumour, the numerous heads required in East Java, while evidently acting against erupting mud, a natural force comparable to raging rivers, implicitly operate not by strengthening and protecting a built structure but simply by countering the phenomenon itself. Still, the difference is not so great as might first appear, for on Flores also, similar ideas have been broadcast in reference to comparable natural disasters. In 2004, when the volcanic Mount Egon became active, a rumour arose in eastern Flores that traditional ritualists required seven young children as sacrifices to prevent an eruption. Later, a young boy did in fact disappear from his home near the harbour in Maumere, and local people suspected that he had been abducted for this purpose. However, another version found, it was children’s heads to me how, in the 1960s, the eruption of the volcano Roka Tenda on Palu’e, a small island off Flores’ north coast, had given rise to a rumour that one or more young girls had to be thrown inside the cone to stop the activity.

The Lapindo story resembles both sorts of rumour insofar as it combines an element of modern technology (as in stories of construction sacrifice) with the idea of human sacrifice to counteract a partly natural disaster. Other similarities between the Lapindo rumour and older manifestations of the head-stealing threat concern their palpable effects on local people. On Flores, it is reported that head-stealing rumours in the past have resulted, if not in actual ‘panics’ (Drape 1989), then in some disruption to local communities. People would keep children indoors, would be reluctant to leave their villages to work in the fields, and would refrain from going abroad after dark. On both Flores and Sumba, reaction to the Lapindo rumour was apparently similar, although perhaps more especially so with regard to schoolchildren.

Another common feature concerns threats to and attacks on outsiders – like the clothes-seller reputedly beaten on Sumba last year, and also numerous people suspected of being ‘ninja’ in Java (Cribb 2000). In the Nage region of central Flores, I have recorded several stories of such incidents, some from the 1950s and 1960s but others supposedly occurring in the 1990s or more recently. These concern suspected child abductors and head-stealers being attacked, injured and even killed.

Some such reports are likely fanciful or exaggerated, and most remain unsubstantiated. Nevertheless, at least one is verified. In July 2000 a disturbed man from north coastal Flores who had wandered far from home was set upon and murdered in the interior district of Rendu by villagers, nine of whom were subsequently convicted and jailed. Owing to some peculiar behaviour, the Rendu folk suspected the
stranger of attempting to abduct a young boy. The year 2000 also saw a rabies epidemic in central Flores, and outsiders were the focus of another rumours, to the effect that Indonesians from other islands had deliberately introduced the disease to Flores and, by various means, were spreading it. According to one report, in the same year two Muslims from Lombok Island were attacked near the western Flores town of Ruteng by local people who suspected them of scattering food laced with some substance that made dogs rabid. The Lombok men were killed before the authorities could intervene.³

Local discourse concerning both the older rumours and the Lapindo story demonstrates how rumours generally can spawn other rumours. Stories told in 2007-08 of alleged discoveries of headless corpses are one instance. Applying to all variants of head-stealing rumours recorded so far on Sumba and Flores, another example of derivative rumour is a frequently rehearsed claim that head-stealing rumours are false and are deliberately spread by thieves, so that people will be afraid to leave their homes, especially at night, thus facilitating theft of livestock and agricultural produce. Especially on Flores, an island whose population at night, thus facilitating theft of livestock and agricultural produce. Especially on Flores, an island whose population

Differences: Old wine in new bottles

It hardly needs mentioning that all variants of the Southeast Asian rumours, both old and new, represent local people as victims of more powerful outsiders. Yet in this connection, the Lapindo story reveals interesting differences from older versions, including a structural difference which illuminates other, minor variations. As a more detailed analysis could show, older rumours of construction sacrifice invariably reveal a minimally triangular relationship comprising: (1) alien instigators, in previous years identified as European colonialists (the Dutch in Indonesia, the British in Singapore, Malaysia and India), (2) victims belonging to the rumour-mongers’ own group, and (3) what can be called ‘local outsiders’ – ethnically distinct strangers employed as the actual abductors and head-stealers and thus serving as the instigators’ agents.

In Singapore, these agents once included Sikhs and Buginese who reputedly took heads from Malay and Chinese victims.⁴ In Indonesia, they are typically members of other Indonesian ethnic groups, possibly residents of the same island but often culturally and linguistically distinct migrants who came (or were brought) from elsewhere during colonial times. Other possible agents are ethnically diverse convicts, said to be released temporarily from local jails to hunt for victims. Interestingly, an association of head-stealing with colonialism in South Asia appears to go back to the early 19th century. Thus, when construction began on the old St Andrew’s Church in Singapore in 1836, rumours arose that the British had engaged convicts to ‘capture heads’, especially of children, ‘to put inside their church’ (Abdullah 1970; cf. Sjahri 1949 on rumours involving convicts in the Moluccan Islands). In a more elaborate model recorded among the Nagae of Flores, a fourth category is added to the basic three. This is a local ‘guide’ who, knowing the local terrain, reputedly assists the outside abductor but sometimes acts as a double agent, ultimately thwarting his nefarious intentions.

With the Lapindo rumour, this minimally tripartite scheme is reduced to a binary relationship. Outside head-stealers from Java travel to other islands (including Flores and Sumba) to obtain non-Javanese heads to stop the mud eruption in East Java. According to this rumour, the heads must come from outside Java, since local (Javanese) heads would not be effective. By contrast, in the older rumours, body parts are typically required for construction projects taking place within the victims’ own territory, or at least on their own island, and only occasionally do older stories describe heads being shipped off to other islands.

As noted above, some versions of the Lapindo rumour recorded on Sumba have vaguely linked the head-stealers with Westerners or ‘tourists’. In this context, however, Westerners figure simply as an instance of a diffuse category of ‘outsiders’; they are not definitively identified either as the instigators of the head-stealing (as in older, colonial-era construction sacrifice rumours) or as anyone’s agents.

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tunguishable. By contrast, in the Lapindo rumour, head-stealing agent and alien instigator are conflated. Both are ‘Javanese’, and to the extent that head-stealing is seen ultimately to be initiated by the ‘state’ (one might say the ‘Javanese state’), the representation is quite consistent with the involvement of a Javanese federal cabinet minister in the Lapindo company, the entity held responsible for the Javanese mud eruption.

Other distinctive features of the Lapindo rumour follow from its basically binary structure. Although elsewhere the head-stealing invaders were designated by older names for head-stealers (e.g. mo gele, waga aru, mapaketa), in central Flores last year they were nearly always referred to as ‘ninja’, ‘Ninja’ is a term quite specifically associated with Javanese. Inspired by the famous clandestine warriors of Japan, it denotes mysterious assassins said to wear masks and dark clothing, and who, since the late 1990s, have been linked with apparently politically-inspired kidnappings and killings of Islamic leaders in rural Java. Beginning with the murders of rural magicians in East Java, the mysterious killings later spread to Central and West Java (Cribb 2000). In eastern Indonesia, ninja have become known mostly from news reports and fictional depictions broadcast on television, a medium that first became available in many parts of Flores just over ten years ago. In Flores, people started hearing about ninja in the early 2000s, thus well before the Lapindo disaster. At that time, the name was applied to mysterious outsiders who reputedly come to Flores simply to murder people and cause civil disruption; yet in contrast to the incidents on Java, evidence for actual killings, or any activity attributable to such mysterious agents, appears never to have been any more than hearsay.

As Floresne further explained, the ninja who had invaded Flores to obtain heads for Lapindo are worse than the old-style head-stealers: the Lapindo ninja kill people and immediately cut off their heads, whereas the older sort of kidnappers were ‘more refined’ and would simply abduct people for later decapitation. Indeed, in the older rumours, the focus is far more on abduction simply abduct people for later decapitation. Indeed, in the older rumours, the focus is far more on abduction and revision in Indonesian and Malaysian societies, pp. 377-402. Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University Program for Southeast Asian Studies.


Haddon, Alfred C. 1901. Head-hunters black, white, and brow. London: Methuen & Co.


Fig. 4. Village youngsters in Rendu, the district where a suspected child abductor was murdered by villagers in 2000.


Haddon, Alfred C. 1901. Head-hunters black, white, and brow. London: Methuen & Co.


Furthermore, the Lapindo rumour has spawned unsubstantiated reports of the discovery of headless bodies while older rumours of construction sacrifice rarely include stories about discovered corpses or specific abduction attempts. I have recorded several Floresene stories of abandoned corpses or body parts but these, ironically, are identified with the murders of suspected head-stealers rather than their victims.

The directness and immediacy of the Lapindo threat is revealed in other features of the recent rumours. On Flores I was told that the head-stealing ‘ninja’ never employ local guides to direct them to likely victims. Also, Floresene rumours connected with the Lapindo mud eruption either locate reputed incidents in major ports or coastal settlements (thus places directly associated with other islands, including of course Java) or specify these as places where the rumours began to circulate. Similarly, a number of stories I heard on Sumba concerned incidents that had reputedly occurred near the port town of Waingapu or in the vicinity of the nearby airport.

One further peculiarity deserves mention. In the older rumours it was usually just one or two heads that were needed to strengthen a bridge or other structure. By contrast, with the Lapindo rumour it is thousands of heads, even ten thousand or more, that are required. Quite possibly this difference reflects the scale of the East Javanese disaster. Yet it might also be connected with those numerous concrete balls (objects shaped not unlike human heads) that were dropped into the hot mud but failed to staunch its flow not long before the head-stealing rumour became widespread on islands outside of Java.

Conclusion

Previous interpretations of Southeast Asian head-stealing rumours have portrayed these as a reaction to repression by colonial and national states, the entities most closely identified with major construction projects. In this context the notional head-stealing has been construed as a transformation of indigenous head-hunting and traditional head-stealing rituals, attributed ironically to powerful outsiders who have denied these practices to indigenous peoples by outlawing local warfare (Drake 1989). A further analysis of the rumours could show how, as part of a more general and continuous representation, the stories serve to articulate relations between local communities and various categories of outsiders in the context of nation-building, and in so doing express an ambivalence towards modernization and development (or ‘construction’ [pembangunan] as it is called in Indonesia) on the part of people who see themselves as both involved beneficiaries and victims. A partly opposing view has represented these head-stealing rumours as a reaction to a repressive, coercive and even terrorist Indonesian state, conceived as perpetuating violence against local peoples (e.g. George 1996). This view, however, fails to adequately address the continuing and remarkably durable suspicion of European involvement in all these affairs, even after 60 years of Indonesian independence. The explanation may lie partly in a continuing identification of modern technology with affluent Westerners (see e.g. Hoskins 2002), but I suspect the matter is more complex.

The Lapindo rumour is somewhat different from stories of construction sacrifice, for it concerns not a local development project but an external disaster caused by the same modern technology. Eastern Indonesians do not see themselves as benefitting from its resolution, as they might from a locally built bridge or dam – or for that matter the stilling of a local volcano. But, according to the rumour, it will still be they who pay the price. Given that the Lapindo disaster pertains to Java, the centre of national power and thus the source of the drive to technologically assisted economic development, these contrasts are perhaps not so great. Nevertheless, they go some way towards explaining differences between the older rumours and their newest variant. ⚫