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THE USES OF MEMOIRS AND ORAL HISTORY WORKS IN RESEARCHING THE 1965–1966 POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

Since the end of Suharto's rule in 1998, Indonesia's official history has been contested, especially by former political prisoners from the 1965 period, who had previously been regarded as the regime's enemies. In challenging the New Order regime's historical accounts, these former prisoners have written, and in some instances published, their memoirs, as well as taken part in oral history projects.

This paper examines the genre of 'prisoner memoirs' and oral history work, which have flourished in the post-Suharto period. It surveys some of the common themes and motivations among such works and draws upon interviews with ex-political prisoners engaged in both memoir-writing and oral history projects. The paper also charts how such a genre and method can assist with documenting more of Indonesia's post-independence period from a diverse range of sources. Writing on Indonesia's post-independence history has posed many difficulties due to the New Order regime's representation of the Sukarno period as constituting a 'political mistake'. The end of the Cold War, however, has generated more interest among scholars in how Southeast Asian leftist movements and organisations dealt with questions of ideology and mobilisation in the nation-building phase of the 1950s and 1960s.

Mindful of the numerous challenges of working with long-suppressed memory, this paper argues that 'prisoner memoirs' and oral history work can become a significant source for analysing the post-independence period,

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specifically the 1965 events in Indonesia. The paper outlines how, in the case of the 1965 mass killings, oral history sources can play a role in enabling researchers to understand the contours of the violence, the nature of participation and witnessing and ways of resisting participation. The case of Indonesia's killings has been little analysed compared to other instances of mass violence.

Keywords: Indonesia,1965, violence, memoir, oral history

INTRODUCTION

Since the fall of Suharto in May 1998, published oral history collections and writings by former political prisoners have added to the knowledge about the imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of people in connection with the coup attempt of 1965. This paper aims to examine the genre of prisoner memoirs and oral testimonies discussing the 1965 period and the challenges of working with such sources in Indonesia. I will survey the production of memoirs and autobiographies by former political prisoners and some of the responses to them. I will argue that the availability of such works opens up some possibilities for gaining an understanding of how the 1965 political repression was experienced from the perspective of those who survived this repression.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first section deals with the background to the 30 September 1965 coup attempt and the subsequent mass killings and imprisonment. This section, then, examines the recent memoirs, autobiographies and oral history collections published in Indonesia, which contain the experiences of former political prisoners. It attempts to situate these publications within the context of Indonesian society following the authoritarian transition. The second section looks at the contribution that these works could provide to the understanding of the mass killings in Indonesia, which between 1965–1966 took some half a million lives and continue to traumatise many today. In this paper, I draw upon written works published by and about former political prisoners on 1965 and upon interviews conducted in Java and Bali in 2007.

On 30 September 1965, led by Lieutenant Colonel Untung, left-wing army officers sympathetic to President Sukarno and the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) attempted a coup against the top echelon of the military leadership in Jakarta. At the time, the PKI was estimated to be the third largest communist party in the world. Following the coup attempt, the Indonesian Army under General Suharto began purges against the PKI and the broader left movement in Indonesia. The PKI was blamed for the

allegedly grisly torture, mutilation and killing of seven military officers at Lubang Buaya, in East Jakarta. The level of involvement of PKI members in the coup is widely debated. Roosa (2006) has argued, based on his study of prison writings by Brigadier General Supardjo, one of the key military leaders implicated in the coup attempt, and interviews with left-wing activists in Indonesia, made possible by the fall of the dictatorship, that only some elements of the PKI's leadership had some involvement in the coup; this is in contrast to the regime's claim that the whole party was involved.

As the military progressively began to take control of the state administration and security, waves of killings and imprisonment of leftists began in October 1965. These were committed by a combination of people's militias, religious-linked groups and the military in many parts of Indonesia including Sumatra, Java, Bali, Lombok, Flores and Kalimantan. Around half a million people accused of being leftists were killed, and almost a million people were imprisoned; the Suharto government released most of these prisoners in the late 1970s. However, some of these people had remained imprisoned up to the fall of Suharto. Suharto's successor, BJ Habibie, released these remaining few in 1999. In the late 1970s, when released, most political prisoners were subjected to various restrictions. These included prohibitions on the right to vote and to run for political office, restrictions on employment, mobility and place of residence, and the need to report to local authorities on a regular or semi-regular basis. Former political prisoners lived under these restrictions with the uncertainty of whether they would be lifted.

The regime consolidated its rise to power through the writing, teaching and indoctrination of a version of history that painted the Sukarno regime and the PKI as the cause of chaos and economic mismanagement. In contrast to Sukarno's 'misdeeds', according to these official histories, the Indonesian Armed Forces, particularly the Army, were the nation's saviours, with a central role in winning independence from the Dutch in 1945 and crushing the PKI (McGregor 2007: 219–220). As a result of the regime's tight control of the production of history in Indonesia after its assumption of power, there are still many doubts about what happened during the coup attempt of 1965.

The post-Suharto period opens up possibilities for the former political prisoners to speak out about their memories of political imprisonment and other forms of violence. There has been a burgeoning in memoirs and biographies by and about former political prisoners. There is some corresponding interest from younger students and intellectuals born after 1965 in the accounts of the past provided by former political prisoners. Several writers and historians from within Indonesia and without, including

Cribb (2001), Hilmar (2001), Zurbuchen (2002), Stoler (2002), Adam (2004), Schulte (2004), and Hadiz (2006), have variously reflected on this exercise of reopening the past and on what the benefits of such an exercise would be. I suggest that the testimonies of former political prisoners can add to historians' knowledge about how the 1965 repression marking the end of Sukarno rule, was experienced by its victims.

While the government has lifted some restrictions on former political prisoners (they can now stand for election, for example), the battle to rehabilitate their names and gain acceptance from the state and the community is still far from over. As Anthony Reid writes, "The destruction of the left was so total and so devastating that those survivors with a personal interest in rehabilitation have themselves scarcely dared to raise the issue" (Reid, 2005: 82). At the same time, biographies and autobiographies of President Suharto and others from the New Order government and military (Knapp, 2007; Batubara, 2007) have recently been published, casting their image and legacy in a positive light. More broadly, the failure of the government to set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, despite ongoing discussion about such a body since 2000, has denied victims the possibility of speaking out in formal hearings. Anti-communist paramilitary groups have also terrorised public gatherings of victims (*Koran Tempo,* 2006) and continue to speak out against any rehabilitation of the left in the national discourse.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY/BIOGRAPHY DISCUSSING THE 1965 REPRESSION IN INDONESIA

Despite the large numbers imprisoned, for many the experience of imprisonment was relatively brief, often less than one year; thus, being in prison might not have influenced a large portion of their lives. The number of those who have published their memoirs is small, fewer than twenty, considering the hundreds of thousands of former political prisoners throughout Indonesia. According to Haryo Sasongko, a writer who was persecuted as a student activist in 1965 was but never imprisoned, memoirs provide 'counter-histories based on people's experiences as historical witnesses' (interview with author: 2007, Jakarta). Capturing the motivation of many ex-political prisoners in recording their life stories, Sumiyarsi

Siwirini, a member of the Indonesian Graduates' Association (Himpunan Sarjana Indonesia) [1] wrote that:

> The strongest urge for me is to resist, in the ways that I can, the attacks by the New Order, which have been levelled against political prisoners and their families, [portraying them] as bad people, criminals, even as national traitors. By writing this, I want to resist [to show] how false and misleading those accusations are.
>
> (Siwirini: xi, translation by author)

Sumiyarsi, who was a medical doctor, served thirteen years in the women's prison of Plantungan in Central Java. Plantungan was the location of a hospital for leprosy patients before it was turned into a women's prison in 1970 to accommodate hundreds of women political prisoners. Sumiyarsi's motivation for writing, the desire to resist the government's stigmatisation, encapsulates the purpose of many of the published memoirs. There is also an element of seeing this production of memoirs as a political battle, a war of memories. A former political prisoner sent to the Buru Island prison camp, Djoko Sri Moeljono, argued that those complicit or involved in the mass killings, as well as members of the New Order administration, were providing 'their' versions of what happened in 1965, 'therefore we should also be telling our children and grandchildren our version of what happened' (Interview with author: 2007, Jakarta). In challenging the government's actions in detaining and discriminating against them, authors call for the restitution of the rights of former political prisoners, viewing the government's denial of their rights as unjust.

At the same time, these works go beyond a simple campaign for the rights of those branded as being part of the political left and who were imprisoned for being part of this political left. The works also purport to speak 'to the nation'. There is a strong theme of deterrence cautioning the reader against the repeat of practices such as imprisonment without trial and the subsequent discriminatory treatment against former political prisoners. The theme of reclaiming nationalism also permeates these works, which include reinstating the role of the left in the independence struggle and the nation-building process under Sukarno (McGregor & Hearman 2007; Sulami, 1999; Sudjinah, 2003). These memoirs serve as a way to restore their voices and identities and to represent a different political outlook, an outlook critical of the exploitative capitalist society built by Suharto in the wake of the coup attempt in 1965.

[1] The Indonesian Graduates' Association, representing the small number of Indonesian university graduates in the 1960s, was banned because of suspected links with the PKI.

Former Sukarno minister Oei Tjoe Tat (1995) was one of the first former political prisoners to release his memoirs, doing so during the Suharto period; this memoir was banned. Pramoedya Ananta Toer, an author and former member of Lekra (the People's Cultural Institute), a cultural organisation close to the PKI, published his memoirs of the Buru Island detention centre after the collapse of Suharto (Toer, 2000). Others who have subsequently published their autobiographies include political activist Raid (2001), writer Setiawan (2003), physician Saroso, government advisor Moestahal (2002), journalist Suparman (2006) and teacher Prayitno (2007). Many renowned left-wing leaders were easily identified and killed in the 1965–1966 purges, so there are no memoirs by top-ranking PKI leaders. Biographies or memoirs about former PKI chairman D.N. Aidit have been written by family members, two of whom were authors in exile (Aidit 2003; Aidit 2005; Alam 2006). There are no published biographies of other members of the PKI national leadership, such as Njoto, Soedisman and Oloan Hutapea.

Relatively few women have written their autobiographies about their experiences of imprisonment. Compared with men, fewer women were imprisoned in the wake of the 1965 coup attempt. Sumiyarsi was one of very few women who have written about their experiences during and after imprisonment. Other women who have written their memoirs in book or manuscript form are Sulami (1999), Sudjinah (2003) and Bustam (2006, 2008). One possible reason for the lack of female memoirs may be the strong effects of New Order propaganda against the politically active women involved in the Indonesian Women's movement, Gerwani (Indonesian Women's Movement). A key part of the government's propaganda was that members of Gerwani sexually mutilated and tortured army officers as part of a sexual orgy at Lubang Buaya (Cribb 1991: 29). The 'Gerwani myth' promoted by the government has impacted women, causing it to be more difficult for these women to speak about and publish their experiences. The leaders of Gerwani, Sudjinah and Sulami, both now deceased, published autobiographies dealing specifically with their prison experiences, but these works were vague regarding Gerwani's political activities before 1965. Former political prisoner and painter Mia Bustam has written a two-volume memoir. The first, titled *Sudjojono dan Aku* [Sudjojono and I] (Bustam 2006), deals with the last days of the Japanese occupation and life in the immediate post-war period as the wife of one of

Indonesia's most prominent painters, Sudjojono.[2] This first volume covers the period up to 1958. As a local leader of Lekra (People's Cultural Institute) in Yogyakarta, Mia Bustam was arrested in November 1965. The second volume of her memoir, *Dari Kamp ke Kamp* [From Camp to Camp] relates her imprisonment in several prisons in Central Java, including the Plantungan women's prison (Bustam 2008). Women have tended to contribute to collective projects such as oral history collections and films rather than writing their memoirs. Oral history work is discussed in more detail in a separate section of this article.

PRISON MEMOIRS IN INDONESIA

The experiences of political prisoners are diverse, though there are discernible patterns in their treatment as prisoners at the hands of the military and prison authorities. C.W. Watson has analysed three works by former PKI prisoners in the context of the autobiographies of activists confronting repression (Watson 2006).[3] Most memoirs describe the phases of imprisonment, from arrest to release, which often occurred with restrictions placed upon them by the government. Facing these restrictions has led to one memoirist coining the phrase "free, but unfree" to characterise their situation (Raid 2001: 445). Despite the time that has passed, in many ways, the identity of 'prisoner' has stuck to these writers, due to the restrictions placed on political prisoners and their families over the years.

The field of autobiography writing is relatively new in Indonesia (Watson 2000: 14) and often takes the form of celebratory works on political or military leaders, as is more generally the case for this genre in Southeast Asia (Ooi 2006). Educational backgrounds, which vary among

[2] The second volume of Mia Bustam's memoirs published in 2008, titled *Dari Kamp ke Kamp* [From Camp to Camp], deals with the period of imprisonment from 1965 and after her release in 1978.

[3] These three works are Hasan Raid, *Pergulatan Muslim Komunis* (Yogyakarta: LKPSM-Syarikat, 2001); Achmadi Moestahal, *Dari Gontor ke Pulau Buru* (Yogyakarta: Syarikat, 2002) and Sudjinah, *Terempas Gelombang Pasang* (Jakarta: Pustaka Utan Kayu, 2003). See C.W. Watson, *Of self and injustice: Autobiography and repression in modern Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2006). The first two works were also analysed in Budiawan, *Mematahkan pewarisan ingatan: wacana anti-komunis dan politik rekonsiliasi pasca-Soeharto* (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi dan Advokasi Masyarakat, 2004). Watson analyses the three works fairly discretely in a work that includes a wide range of memoirs, including also the autobiography of a Muslim parliamentarian, AM Fatwa and biographies of activists and NGO workers under Suharto rule; as a result, his analysis is not restricted to the 1965 prisoner memoir genre.

former political prisoners, influence their level of involvement in creating written documents. There also continues to be suspicion or fear among political prisoners about fully disclosing their past. The ravages of trauma impact differently, with varying degrees of recall ability and the capacity to represent experiences in a narrative. In a 2007 interview, Asiong (a pseudonym), a former political prisoner and journalist in Surabaya, blamed continuing trauma as a reason for his inability to write his memoir, despite offers to fund its publication (Interview 2 August 2007). Therefore, Asiong seeks someone who can write his life story in order to place some distance between him and the experiences he hopes to narrate.

Some political prisoners continue to be fearful of disclosing their identities, thereby subverting the process of life story writing. Some of this fear is often not necessarily related to these political prisoners as individuals, but it does often have to do with fear about the impact it could have on their families. Family opposition to Achmadi Moestahal's publication of his memoirs as a political prisoner resulted in the publisher's recalling of most copies of the book at the request of Moestahal's family (Stanley, interview 2 May 2007). Writer and journalist Ali Sabil (a pseudonym) informed his family of his political imprisonment as recently as 2005, explaining, "To save the people I knew, I chose in the past to keep these things secret," (Interview 28 April 2007). Lingering fear of anti-communist reaction against former political prisoners has created a reluctance to put their stories down as public records, should the political situation again become unfavourable for former political prisoners.

There were some striking differences between victims located in the capital, Jakarta, and those in regional areas, in their attitudes towards memoir-writing. Those based in Jakarta, such as Harsono Sutejo and Djoko Sri Moeljono (Interviews with author, Jakarta, 26 and 30 April 2007) had completed manuscripts of their memoirs and stressed the importance of writing and speaking out about their experiences. They both identified the difficulties of finding a publisher and the lack of funding as major constraints to publication. Those I interviewed who lived in regional areas were less confident about life story writing and thought that their life stories would not interest any readers. One respondent from East Java, Sumanto, a former school superintendent and participant in the teachers' union who was imprisoned for almost 10 years, said, "My life was filled with being involved in [union] organising all the time. Who would be interested in that?" (Interview 11 May 2007). This sense of the lack of an audience could perhaps indicate that earlier generations have difficulties communicating with contemporary Indonesian audiences, for whom industrial organising, for example, was not a common experience. Others reverted to the pretext

of being *orang kecil* (little people) as reasons for reluctance. This is perhaps indicative of the tension in left-wing autobiography writing, where there is a perception that social forces and objective conditions play a greater role than individuals, though tales of heroism are not foreign to autobiographies of left-wing activists.

Earlier published memoirs have focused primarily on the period after October 1965, particularly on prison experiences.[4] The preoccupation with relating the post-coup attempt situation is consistent with my experiences of interviewing former political prisoners, who often focused on speaking about the period after their arrest. Avowed anti-communists argue that the focus on imprisonment and maltreatment is a deliberate omission, a whitewashing of the PKI's 'crimes' against and cruelty towards political rivals prior to October 1965 (*Sriwijaya Post* 2003). Such responses showed that the period prior to the 1965 coup attempt and the PKI's record during the Sukarno era needed to be reexamined. Former political prisoners have at times been reluctant to reflect about their political involvement in the 1960s, as Marxism-Leninism, the PKI and several other left organisations are still banned, and views about 1965 are still often polarised.

Rather than a desire to gloss over the period when the PKI was one of the four largest political parties in Indonesia, former political prisoners assume, sometimes incorrectly that there was interest only in what happened after 1 October 1965. Many former political prisoners were also not involved in PKI. In the immediate post-Suharto period, some 1965 political prisoners had the experience for the first time of speaking about their experiences of imprisonment, in meetings and seminars focusing on the 1965 period. Their subsequent retelling is also affected by the contexts in which they have publicly told their stories. In Indonesian society in the immediate aftermath of the transition, 1965 victims have been labelled by advocacy groups and "victims' organisations" (*organisasi korban*) as victims of imprisonment without trial and other human rights abuses. This mode of identification submerges the full complexity of their identities. Meetings and gatherings featuring former 1965 prisoners have focused on them as human rights abuse victims. This victimhood status has impacted on the way they narrate their stories by focusing primarily on human rights abuses such as arbitrary detention and torture. There are some exceptions however. Some former political prisoners are uncomfortable with the label backup victim. Writer and former political prisoner Hersri Setiawan

[4] To compare, for example,e the works of Sulami (1999), *Perempuan-Kebenaran-Penjara*, Jakarta: Cipta Karya, to the work of Mia Bustam, *Sudjojono dan Aku* (Jakarta: Pustaka Utan Kayu, 2006), the Bustam work provides a more in-depth account of the social and historical context of the times, interweaving these with political developments.

objected to the use of the word victim, arguing that such a term 'makes one passive' (Interview 27 April 2007). Instead, he saw himself as a conscious participant in the left, anti-imperialist movement in the 1960s whose 'life choices ended like this' (Interview 27 April 2007). However in many cases, the long term effects of social stigma and the lack of state accountability have moulded the types of narratives that they put forward about themselves, in which their experiences of political activism have been downplayed (for those who were politically active before 1965).

The next part of this paper looks at how new histories are being constructed based on oral testimonies and the voices of these 'victims'.

VOICES OF SURVIVORS IN PIECING TOGETHER WHAT HAPPENED IN THE 1965–1966 MASS KILLINGS

Giving space to those who have survived political violence is important in the recovery process. Elizabeth Xavier Ferreira, in her study of women political prisoners under Brazilian military rule, argues that the oral history approach is vital to the recovery of political agency of a society ravaged by dictatorship and endemic violence (Xavier Ferreira 1997: 1). Hilmar Farid argues that in writing about violence, it is important to focus on the stories of victims themselves, in order to understand the patterns and application of violence and to repair the social fabric damaged by violence in which the victims were highly marginalised (Farid 2006: 269–270). Coupled with the release of memoirs and biographies, there is increasing use of oral research to capture the experience of 1965–1966 and earlier in Indonesia. The oral history approach is central to providing more diverse accounts of Indonesia in the 1960s and the enormous human impact of the 1965–1966 transition to Suharto rule. The increasing use of oral history by popular history groups and organisations working with victims from 1965 coincides with developments in the oral history field, where as Thomson (1999: 295) writes, "an emerging trend is the renewed effort to link theoretical sophistication about narrative and memory with the political commitment to the history of the oppressed and marginal groups". The writings and oral testimonies of former political prisoners represent an intermeshing of these possibilities in capturing the stories of survivors who speak about their experiences of political violence and as a way to understand the frameworks of memory and how memories are deployed in an attempt at reconstitution of the self.

Working with oral sources is one way of overcoming the many silences of official documents and the heavily-censored Indonesian media

regarding the mass killings and imprisonment. Knowledge about the killings remains fragmented and anecdotal (Cribb 2001: 234). In October 1965, *Surabaja Post*, the main newspaper for East Java reported various policies enacted to suppress left organisations politically, but did not discuss the physical killings of the left in that period. The key primary source documents quoted by scholars about the mass killings in East Java are two documents: an intelligence officer report, which surveyed the entire province (*Report from East Java*, 1986) and reflects many of the silences of the primary documents; and, a report thought to be compiled from exile sources outside of Indonesia (Anonymous in Cribb 1991). Levels of knowledge and recall capacity vary among former political prisoners about the extent of killings and violence.

Oral history provides a more accessible way of relating one's experiences, particularly for those for whom writing in an unfamiliar task, and allows information to be given anonymously depending on how the interview material is written up (Budianta & Sasongko 2003; Roosa, Ratih & Farid 2004; Setiawan 2006; Susanti 2006). Women in particular have chosen to speak about their experiences through oral history projects (Susanti 2006; Setiawan 2006). Organisations working with 1965 victims, such as *Syarikat* and Lingkar Tutur Perempuan (Women's Discussion Circle) as well as the Indonesian Social History Institute (ISSI), have deployed the method of oral history to reconstruct narratives of victims about their past. ISSI has conducted approximately 300 interviews in Java, Bali, Sumatra and Kalimantan and used some of the interview material to write a collection of thematic essays on the 1965–1966 period, *Tahun yang tak pernah Berakhir* [The Year that Never Ends] (Roosa, Ratih & Farid, 2004). Themes taken up in the collection include the role of the Army Paracommando Regiment, the RPKAD, in igniting and carrying out the massacres in Java, the use of forced labour, the PKI's resistance attempts in South Blitar and the experiences of women political prisoners. As a follow up, ISSI intended to publish another collection of thematic essays on the pre-1965 period, or what ISSI historian Hilmar Farid has termed 'a disappeared world' (Interview 28 April 2007). Through such a collection, ISSI researchers also set out to construct micro-histories, such as an economic history of Tanjung Priok harbour from the perspective of dockworkers and a history of Chinese schools prior to their closure and takeover by the Suharto regime in 1965.

An example of an oral history collection is *Kidung untuk Korban* [Songs for the Victims]. Edited by Hersri Setiawan and published by a survivors' advocacy group, Pakorba in Solo, Central Java, it contains the life stories of ten people, including three women, from the Solo area, an area

often seen as a stronghold of the PKI in Central Java (Setiawan, 2006). As editor of the collection, Hersri Setiawan thought that research on the question of the events of the 1950s and 1960s was important in understanding what occurred in 1965 and the aftermath (Interview, 27 April 2007). The participants in the project told stories about their lives, including in some cases about their political involvement prior to their arrest. One of those included in the collection, 'Bibit' (a pseudonym) was a member of the Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI) who assisted in some of the purges against the left. By including Bibit's story, in which he explained his justifications for his involvement and his 'haunting' by the spirits of murdered leftists afterwards, it was suggested that he was also a victim of the times. Through his choice to include this particular interviewee, the editor demonstrated the complexity of the times by looking beyond the binaries of 'victim' and 'perpetrator'.

Some former political prisoners and writers, such as Hersri Setiawan, are themselves practitioners of oral history as a way of reconstructing their lifetimes and presenting these to contemporary Indonesian audiences. Recordings of Hersri's series of interviews with Indonesian leftists in exile in Europe, titled "In Search of Silenced Voices," are now archived at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. He saw oral testimonies as making available people's experiences more widely (Interview with the author 27 April 2007). Harsono Sutejo, formerly a history lecturer and political prisoner from Malang, East Java has used interviews as a way to re-examine the Battle of Surabaya of November 1945 in his desire to restore the role of the Left into episodes of the Indonesian struggle against colonialism (Interview 23 July 2007). This battle was a pivotal event in the Indonesian revolutionary war and subsequently became the focus for memorialising and imprinting in national history accounts. Harsono argues that the Suharto government's version about this event eradicated the contribution of the left and that the New Order versions of history have emphasised the contribution only of figures politically palatable to the regime, such as Sutomo (Interview 23 July 2007). Similarly, another former political prisoner of Chinese background, Asiong argues that the role of Chinese-Indonesians in the Indonesian revolutionary war against the Dutch, particularly the work of the Chinese-led nationalist organisation Baperki, whose leaders were imprisoned in 1965, has not been fully analysed or recorded (Interview 2 August 2007). Researchers relying on oral accounts are attempting to realise both the empirical and the freeing aspects of oral history, in the sense of collecting 'data' about that period of history, while at the same time providing possibilities for informants to talk

about a past that had largely disappeared from mainstream historical discourse in Indonesia.

Relying on memory in trying to piece together what happened, particularly on memories from more than forty years earlier, can be problematic. Such memories are influenced by contemporary discussions about the violence and by continued trauma. The existing literature about the effects of trauma on narrative capacity has shown that narrative structures can be disrupted in the case of trauma survivors retelling their stories (Lacy et al. 1999: 1; Laub 1995: 64). Such effects of trauma can pose some challenges for researchers working with life histories that are marked by violent events. Survivors of 1965 have told their stories using language and images that have permeated the limited public discussion about the 1965 killings. Such images include those of roads and rivers filled with bodies and body parts. The Gerwani leader Sulami demonstrates how such 'prison news', stories transmitted among prisoners, came to be included in her memoir. Sulami includes in her memoir several stories she heard from other prisoners regarding the widespread killings, leading to the Brantas River in East Java being choked up with bodies. Another political prisoner, Suparman recounts in his memoir, while in prison in West Java, that "in East Java, the Brantas River became a silent witness" (Suparman 2006: 62). Sulami also recounts stories of killings, torture and humiliation, such as the case of a school principal and the head of the Indonesian Peasants' Union (BTI) in Boyolali, Central Java. The headmaster is traditionally a figure of respect—and according to Sulami, bystanders were instructed by the military to take part in torturing him to death, a task from which many recoiled (Sulami 1999: 18–19). In spite of not having experienced the actual events recounted in these stories, such stories constitute a sort of prison news channel, which after the prisoners' release continues to have legitimacy and to form a part of a body of knowledge maintained by some former political prisoners about that period.

Memories of ex-political prisoners provide information about prisons and detention places, such as police stations, schools and government buildings commandeered to hold prisoners. However, the extent of knowledge about the actual mass killings varies depending on the time of a person's arrest, their location and their individual experiences. Many prisoners relied on news received from outside, such as about the rivers clogged up with bodies which then circulated in prison. Such "prison news" is often included in political prisoners' memoirs, although the depicted events were not directly experienced. From approximately thirty interviews I conducted, two interviewees, Sumanto (Interview 11 May 2007) and Haroto (Interview 28 July 2007) who were arrested in 1967 and 1969

respectively, had witnessed in Surabaya the bodies in the Mas River.[5] The prevalence of particular, recurrent images may prove frustrating for historians seeking empirical data. Interview-based materials with former political prisoners can provide a partial picture of the violence, but they need to be triangulated with other available information, including interviews with perpetrators and bystanders and available documents and reports. The resilience of particular images highlights the lack of new knowledge about the killings, as well as the ways in which people who have suffered traumatic events may recall and represent their memories of these events in the broader context of their lives.

The continued reliance on particular images and the lack of detailed knowledge about the killings are testimony to the lack of a public discussion and new findings about the killings. Accounts by perpetrators and eyewitnesses are still limited. Opposition by some Islamic groups and local government to exhumations of mass graves possibly dating to the 1965–1966 period (such as those in Central- and East Java) form some of the barriers to this research. University students on fieldwork in 2002 came across Luweng Tikus, a vertical cave in the Blitar Regency in East Java, which according to initial surveys contained the remains of approximately fifty people. A non-government organisation set up by Indonesian-Chinese activist Ester Jusuf to investigate the 1965 mass killings, Kasut Perdamaian, purchased the land following the discovery, but local authorities have discouraged efforts to construct a memorial there (Junaidi 2006; *Kompas* 2002). The work of researching and mapping the mass killings in Indonesia proceeds slowly, with little outside help. In Bali, where approximately 80,000 people were killed over the 1965–1966 period (Robinson, 1995: 273), there are various accounts of how former pro-independence leader and prominent Balinese businessman Gde Puger was killed, along with twenty-two other Balinese men. A news report in 2004 stated that Puger's ten children had 'only recently' received news that their father had died, though he had disappeared in 1965 (Hasan 2004). A group of survivors and documentary film makers has put forward the case based on eyewitness accounts of local villagers; according to these accounts, Puger was slowly tortured to death in Kapal, on the western outskirts of Denpasar around 18th December 1965 (LPKP 65—Bali and Jepun Klopak Enam 2004). To try to understand that particular incident of execution and the killings more broadly, some former political prisoners in Bali collected and documented eyewitness testimonies that were then included in this documentary about the 1965–1966 period (Wayan Natar, interview 18 May 2007). The example

[5] The northern part of the Brantas River, flowing through Surabaya, is called the Mas River.

of Puger demonstrates that even in some of the most highly-talked about cases, there are still uncertainties about the circumstances of the killings.

In contrast to the growing availability of victims' testimonies, accounts by perpetrators of the killings (Rochijat 1995) and bystanders are still very limited, particularly in view of the lack of legal certainty about what would happen to them if they spoke out. Many perpetrators, particularly those in East Java and to a lesser extent in Central Java, were members of Banser, an Islamic paramilitary group linked to Ansor, the youth wing of Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) (Fealy 2007: 335–356). HD Haryo Sasongko, who edited the oral history collection *Menembus Tirai Asap* (Sasongko & Budianta, 2004), claims that he has interviewed eight perpetrators (interview 26 April 2007). None of these interviews has been published. The Suharto government might have legitimised anti-communist operations, assisted by the use of distancing terminology such as *menumpas* (to obliterate) PKI, with little reference to the human impact of such 'operations'. Individual perpetrators, however, have been more reluctant to come out publicly and discuss their role in the killings. Since the fall of Suharto, however, more uncertainty has crept in regarding about how to speak about one's involvement in the violence, should any human rights tribunals be set up. Among the small number of perpetrators' accounts of the time after the fall of Suharto, a private television station broadcast an interview with a man called Rauf in 2006 on a talk show on Metro TV; the man wore a mask to hide his identity. Rauf was a participant in the killings and, by his own admission had killed eighty-six people, including his uncle. The interview with Rauf was followed by interviews with Sumilah, a former political prisoner and Endang, whose relatives were imprisoned (*Metro TV* 17 August 2006). With the death of Suharto, interviews with perpetrators who were primarily Banser members were published (Deutsch, 2008). Preliminary research by McGregor (2008), based on interviews with Islamic religious leaders and teachers in East Java, could, in the future, also provide greater insight into how these figures view the killings decades later. To understand more fully on how the killings were motivated and sustained, including the after-effects on those who committed such violence, researchers also need to gain access to perpetrators.

In formulating new narratives about the mass killings, the experiences of the bystanders and the eyewitnesses also need to be reflected. There were some ambiguous responses towards the killings among the Islamic religious boarding schools, the *pesantren* and their leaderships, for example. The head of the Langitan Pesantren in Tuban, East Java, Kiai Abdullah Faqih imposed a type of night curfew on his students during the killings (Rumekso

Setyadi, personal communication 7 May 2007) and warned that his students were to study and not be involved in the operations, though he encouraged the pesantren's alumni to take part. Perhaps he had considered that the students were too young to take part. Some *kiai* or religious leaders in Central Java and Jakarta sheltered PKI members or discouraged their followers from joining the NU executioners (Fealy 2007: 339). In Bali, where the population is predominantly Hindu, the killings were committed by several different groups: Ansor Youth as well as gangs of thugs (*tameng*) associated with the Indonesian Nationalist Party (Robinson 1995: 300). Anthropologist Warren (2007: 84) was informed during fieldwork in Bali that a section of the village in Peliatan in the central highlands in Bali avoided involvement in the killings by forming a *kecak* dance group that required all men to take part in nightly dance practice. Such tactics of avoidance are an attempt at resisting involvement during a period of uncertainty. Stories of going underground, survival and relying on the help of others are also elements that need to be written up, to answer the call issued by Cribb (1991: 43) on obtaining 'many more stories' to know how these experiences 'impact on modern Indonesia'.

RESPONSES TO MEMOIRS AND ORAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS

Responses to these memoirs and oral history collections have varied; they may include protests by anti-communist or Islamic groups or attempts by former political prisoners to claim the status as victims and to put on record, through memoirs and oral histories, their history of suffering. As a possible comparison, during the transition from authoritarian rule in Brazil, the publication of biographies and memoirs condemning military rule aroused public debate about these works themselves as well as what actually happened in that period (Xavier 1997: 5). Debates arose; many Brazilians were unfamiliar with the new versions of history presented in these works, which often spoke of extensive abuses committed against Brazilians by their own military. Sections of the public were at a loss as to what to make of these new works. It took some time for there to be widespread interest among readers in how the contents of these works could augment—or challenge—official versions of history. In the transition from Suharto rule, Indonesia has become strongly wedded to the New Order regime's version of history; as a result, the reception for such works has varied across audiences.

Former political prisoners see their activities as their contribution to a fuller account of Indonesia's past, but remembering is a political act and takes place in the context of declining interest and likelihood of the government's accounting for past human rights abuses. Publishing memoirs, speaking at public gatherings and taking part in human rights lobbying are not easy tasks in today's Indonesia. The period between 1999 and 2004 could be said to have constituted the height of the publication of these works. In 2004, in direct presidential elections, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was elected as the first president with a military background in the post-Suharto period. Cynicism deepened among human rights organisations about the prospect of trials or any other measures of accountability (Saraswati 2004). The effective propaganda of the New Order against former political prisoners has left behind a legacy of fear and a sense of alienation affecting themselves, but also their audiences. Indonesian society was ill prepared to make sense of the flood of memories being expressed during the transition to democracy.

One considerable problem is finding the financial resources to publish or a publishing house courageous enough to publish a prisoner memoir. Some memoirists such as Sumiyarsi have passed away without having their work published. In the post-reformasi period, books about previously taboo topics such as those canvassing theories about the 1965 coup attempt and political prisoner memoirs have become more freely available, but printing and paper costs are high, and purchasing books is still a luxury for many poor Indonesians (Mann 1999). Book distribution is largely confined to Java. While it is possible with adequate funds to self-publish, print runs and distribution networks would be even more insignificant in cases of self-publication. Publishing of prisoner memoirs seems to be confined to several publishers, such as Syarikat, a non-government organisation involved in advocacy work for 1965 survivors.[6] Ombak and Galang are progressive publishers in Yogyakarta. A group of young people led by M. Nursam created Ombak (Wave) publishing house specifically to publish books examining the history surrounding 1965 (Fadila n.d.).[7] LKis is a liberal

[6] Syarikat's publication of memoirs include: Hasan Raid, *Pergulatan Muslim Komunis* (Yogyakarta: LKPSM-Syarikat, 2001); Achmadi Moestahal, *Dari Gontor ke Pulau Buru* (Galang Press has published two works by Hersri Setiawan, 2006), *Diburu di Pulau Buru* and *Aku Eks Tapol* (2003).

[7] Ombak in Yogyakarta has published trade union leader Adam Soepardjan's memoir *Mendobrak Penjara Rezim Orde Baru* (2004), as well as works by Indonesian political exiles including J.J. Kusni (2005), *Di Tengah Pergolakan: Turba Lekra di Klaten*, J.J. Kusni (2005), *Membela Martabat Diri dan Indonesia: Koperasi Restoran Indonesia di Paris* and Basuki Resobowo (2005), *Bercermin di muka kaca: Seniman, seni, dan masyarakat.*

Islamist publishing house also based in Yogyakarta that has published on themes of Islam, violence and conflict resolution. For example it published Greg Fealy's doctoral manuscript on the history of the Nahdlatul Ulama between 1952–1967, which incorporates the organisation's stance on the PKI and the mass killings. Memoirs have also been published as co-publications between several different organisations and commercial printing houses.[8] With Indonesia's history of censorship and book bans, publishers outside the niche occupied by those such as Ombak, LKis and Syarikat (that also sometimes relies on external funding to publish specific books) would be reluctant to expose themselves to risky ventures such as publishing these memoirs.

CONCLUSION

Rewriting the past is a significant task in Indonesia, where history was been controlled and manufactured by those in power. The publication of more prisoner memoirs and oral testimonies dealing with the 1960s period in Indonesia can provide a counterpoint to the histories that have thus far been promoted by the New Order. These memoirs are not exact replicas of a 'disappeared world' but are works to provoke debate and discussion about many aspects of Indonesia's past, while being products of the time in which they are produced for their intended audiences. Tapping into these sources enables researchers to examine victim-based narratives of violent events and examine how, after a democratic transition, representations of the past continue to be moulded by the legacy of authoritarian rule.

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[8] One example is Mia Bustam, *Dari Kamp ke Kamp: Cerita Seorang Perempuan*, (Jakarta, Spasi, VHR Book and Institut Studi Arus Informasi [ISAI], 2008). ISAI is a non-government organisation that has focused its activities on freedom of the press and journalism.

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