

Telling Stories about Torture in Indonesia: Managing Risk in a Culture of Impunity¹

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In this paper, I problematize the collection of survivors' testimonies of torture at the hands of State agents in Indonesia. I examine the process of collecting these testimonies and address some of the many issues raised during fieldwork. The main issue is one of ethical responsibility and the risks associated with speaking about torture (and other forms of state-sponsored terror) in current day Indonesia. I begin by exploring particular encounters with past and present forms of danger during fieldwork undertaken over ten years across different parts of Indonesia. These dangers intruded upon the retelling of past experiences as well as threatened the capacity of survivors to speak about these experiences in the present. Lastly, I discuss how confronting the mass atrocities of the Indonesian past in the present are also affected by ongoing impunity for these and other crimes. In particular, I highlight how torture of detainees by members of the security forces is an ongoing and widespread crime in Indonesia. This culture of impunity surrounding the systematic abuse of detainees is a product of the torture perpetrated by State agents against an estimated hundreds of thousands of civilians across Indonesia throughout the New Order regime. Despite the promise of reform and democratization, successive administrations since 1998 have shown little willingness or ability to seek redress for these and other gross violations of human rights. Those who speak out about these violations are often marginalized and suppressed, at times through the use of further violence.

It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of civilians were tortured by members of the security forces in Indonesia throughout the New Order regime (1965-1998). This authoritarian, militarist regime seized power following an attempted coup in Jakarta on 1 October 1965. In the aftermath of that coup, elements of the Indonesian military took the opportunity to eradicate their main political rivals, the Indonesian Communist Party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*, or PKI) and all those associated with it. Between October 1965 and March 1966, it is estimated that half a million PKI members and associates were murdered, while a further million were rounded up and held in political

¹ I wish to thank my co-editor, Erin Jessee, and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback on this paper. Their insights not only challenged some of the underlying assumptions of this paper but of my research more broadly, undeniably improving both.

detention. Of those detained, hundreds of thousands are estimated to have been interrogated and tortured between 1965 and 1970.²

While the killings and mass detentions that followed the 1965 coup represent the single largest case of mass atrocities, over the thirty-three years of the regime, there were other comparable cases of large-scale state violence. Ten years after coming to power, the New Order regime invaded East Timor and occupied the country for twenty-four years. Throughout the occupation, there were frequent cases of crimes against humanity, including mass killing, rape and torture, as well as famine and other humanitarian disasters. Members of the East Timorese resistance were targeted by military campaigns and thousands of resistance members, their family members, communities and other civilians are estimated to have been tortured by Indonesian security forces throughout the occupation.³ Torture was also frequently perpetrated against civilians and those considered “subversive” or “rebellious” in other parts of Indonesia, in particular, the militarized zones of Aceh and Papua.⁴ As a legacy of decades of state violence, torture and ill-treatment are endemic within the country’s security apparatus in post-New Order Indonesia.⁵

This paper investigates issues of danger and risk brought to bear in a large research project that documents the physical, sexual and mental forms of torture perpetrated against civilians throughout the New Order regime in Indonesia. The project relies on survivor and eye-witness testimonies collected through oral history interviews conducted across several regions of Indonesia and Timor Leste.⁶ In this paper, however, I focus on the violence of 1965-66

² For a comprehensive collection on the 1965 massacres, see Robert Cribb (ed.), *The Indonesian Killings of 1965-1966: Studies from Java and Bali* (Clayton, Victoria: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1990); and Douglas Kammen and Katharine McGregor (eds), *The Contours of Mass Violence in Indonesia, 1965-68* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012).

³ See the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste (CAVR), *Chega! The Report of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste (CAVR)* (Dili: CAVR, 2005).

⁴ On these and other conflicts in Indonesia, see Charles A. Coppel (ed.), *Violent Conflicts in Indonesia: Analysis, Representation, Resolution* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Benedict R. O’G. Anderson (ed.), *Violence and the State in Suharto’s Indonesia* (Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2001).

⁵ See Suzannah Linton, “Accounting for Atrocities in Indonesia,” *Singapore Year Book of International Law*, 10 (2006): 199-231; and Annie Pohlman, “An Ongoing Legacy of Atrocity: Torture and the Indonesian State,” in *Genocide and Mass Atrocities in Asia: Legacies and Prevention*, eds. Deborah Mayersen and Annie Pohlman (London: Routledge, 2013), 35-52.

⁶ The large research project currently underway involves interviews conducted by me and other researchers in Indonesia and Timor Leste. The current project also builds upon the extensive interviews (more than 150) conducted by me in Sumatra and Java between 2002 and 2011, primarily with women survivors of the 1965-1966 massacres. This original research was conducted as part of my Honours and then PhD theses, in which I investigated women’s experiences of sexual violence during the Indonesian killings of 1965-66, see Annie Pohlman, *Women, Sexual Violence and the Indonesian Killings of 1965-1966* (Routledge, forthcoming). My work is based on ethnographic and oral history methods, whereby I carry out in-depth,

and problematize the collection of testimonies about experiences of torture at the hands of State agents in Indonesia. I examine the process of collecting these testimonies and address some of the many issues raised during the fieldwork. In particular, I explore how the dangers and risks involved in telling stories about torture in Indonesia are spread across space and time in the testimonies of survivors. These included dangers of revisiting events long past but intimately remembered, the hazards of speaking about the dead, as well as the more urgent, political and social risks posed by giving testimony in Indonesia today.

To highlight how themes of risk and danger became a central part of telling stories about violence under the New Order, I begin by outlining some of the military regime's measures to suppress dissenting versions of Indonesia's history, including the effects of these measures on the regime's many victims. I then discuss some of the contexts in which I interviewed survivors about their experiences, drawing specific attention to the dangers remembered and recounted in testimonies. These dangers, however, are not only those remembered but also those that persist in recreated forms in the present. To reveal some of these present dangers, I recount one incident at length which occurred during my fieldwork in Central Java that highlights the ongoing risks associated with talking about a suppressed past in Indonesia.

The New Order and Three Decades of Silence

Ibu Lani: The military wanted to be in control. They wanted it so that the people wouldn't resist or fight back. Of course they were in control for a very long time. Everyone was made stupid. They were all made stupid for so long, they were in power for so long because the people were all stupid. They were terrified.

Ibu Nana: Because if you're afraid, then you aren't brave enough to speak out.

Ibu Lani: No one was brave enough to speak up. No one was ever brave enough again [...] because the killings were terrible. The public were terrified. By showing off the violence like that, by showing people what could happen, it was frightening. Terrifying. If you frighten people, you make them stupid. If they're stupid, they won't criticize you or resist. That was the aim of it all.

open-ended interviews with survivors, usually recorded on a digital voice recorder (with permission) and later transcribed. In keeping with more ethnographic fieldwork methods, I also keep extensive field notes which I usually make directly after each interview. On these methods, see, for example, Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

Ibu Nana: Our lips were sealed by those events. By that savagery.⁷

Ibu Lani and Ibu Nana are survivors of the killings and arrests that swept across Indonesia in 1965-1966. Both were members of Communist organizations and both lost members of their families in the massacres. They were also both arrested and detained as political prisoners. In detention, they were interrogated, tortured and sexually assaulted by members of the military and police. After nearly ten years in political detention, they were finally released and returned home to their villages, both in the highland areas of West Sumatra.

As for so many former political prisoners (known as *tapol*, an abbreviation of “*tahanan politik*” or “political prisoner”), Ibu Lani and Ibu Nana returned home to face social stigmatization, suspicion from their neighbors, and harassment from government and security personnel. They also faced restrictions on freedoms of movement, speech, political participation and other rights. These restrictions were further expanded during the 1980s with the enforcement of such policies as the “Clean Self, Clean Environment” (*bersih diri, bersih lingkungan*) policy, which curtailed not only the rights of former political prisoners, but also those of their families. As part of these measures to restrict the rights of former *tapol*, the Institute for National Defence recommended that Indonesian citizens be “clean” and “clean in their surroundings,” the latter a reference to a person’s relationships with former political prisoners. As a result of the government’s repression of all those associated with the former Left, “certificates of non-involvement in the 30 September Movement/Indonesian Communist Party” were required of any person seeking employment in government services, the military and some businesses, or seeking admission to school or university, as well as of anyone wishing to move to a new district.⁸ The individuals who gave their testimonies as part of this project often emphasized the ever-expanding sphere of influence of this collective trauma; a trauma which they experienced as individuals, as inmates within prison camps which held hundreds if not thousands, and as members within families who, by association, also suffered the Suharto government’s vigilant repression of latent communism.

For the duration of the New Order’s thirty-three year reign, speaking about the persecution suffered by those accused of involvement in the Communist Party following the 1965 coup – as well as other cases of State repression – was a dangerous undertaking. Not only did the regime effectively wipe out Leftist political organization in Indonesia, it also created and policed its own version of history. As historian Anthony Reid explained, “[t]he destruction of the left was so total and so devastating that those survivors with

⁷ Group interview with Ibu Lani, Ibu Nana and Ibu Sri, Sumatra, September 2005. Please note that all names and other identifying data have been obscured. All names given are pseudonyms. “Ibu” literally means “mother” but it is also a polite term of address for an older woman across Indonesia.

⁸ Justus M. van der Kroef, “Indonesia’s Political Prisoners,” *Pacific Affairs* 49 (1976): 643.

a personal interest in [speaking out about the violence] themselves scarcely dared to raise the issue.”⁹ The military’s version of the events of the 1965 coup – which depicted the Communist Party as traitors to the nation which had to be wiped out in order to save Indonesia – was created and recreated through school history curriculums, indoctrination of those in the public services, movies and national monuments.¹⁰ Prior to 1998, publications relating to 1965 that portrayed events differently from the regime were banned and severe punishments meted out to those responsible for their creation or circulation.¹¹ As Mary S. Zurbuchen argued, “Within the tightly controlled domestic discourse about 1965, and under a security apparatus that has been ruthless towards dissenting viewpoints, most Indonesians have lived in conditions of willed amnesia or fearful silence concerning [the coup] and PKI.”¹²

It is only since 1998 that memoirs, collections of memoirs and accounts, and scholarly works about and by former political prisoners have been published in Indonesia.¹³ Particularly in the early post-New Order period (known as the *Reformasi* or “Reform” period, 1998 -), former *tapols* and their supporters published personal accounts of their memories of the killings, their time as political prisoners and the struggles they endured to try to rebuild their lives after release. It must be said, however, that since the election of the current President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and the resultant standstill in implementing any form of transitional justice mechanisms that would open investigations in the 1965 massacres and other crimes against humanity

⁹ Anthony Reid, “Writing the History of Independent Indonesia,” in *Nation-Building: Five Southeast Asian Histories*, ed. Wang Gungwu (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005): 69-90, 82.

¹⁰ For some of the official texts see, for example, Aswendo Atmowiloto, *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI [The Betrayal of the G30S/PKI]* (Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 1986) which was the novel version of Arafin Noer’s film of the same name; Djanwar, *Mengungkap Pengkhianatan/Pemberontakan G30S/PKI: Dalam Rangka Mengamankan Pancasila dan UUD 1945* (Bandung: Yrama, 1986); Staf Pertahanan Keamanan, Lembaga Sejarah, *40 Hari Kegagalan G30S* (Jakarta: PUSSEDJAB, 1966), 33-46; and KOPKAMTIB, *G.30.S/PKI* (Jakarta: KOPKAMTIB, 1978), 134-36. For a discussion on the Museum of the Betrayal of the 30th September Movement in South Jakarta, see Jacques Leclerc, “Girls, Girls, Girls, and Crocodiles,” in *Outward Appearances: Dressing State and Society in Indonesia*, ed. Henk Schulte Nordholt (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1997), 291-305.

¹¹ Mary S. Zurbuchen, “History, Memory, and the ‘1965 Incident’ in Indonesia,” *Asian Survey* 42, no. 4 (2002): 571. See also Ariel Heryanto, “Where Communism Never Dies: Violence, Trauma and Narration in the Last Cold War Capitalist Authoritarian State,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (1999): 147-77.

¹² Zurbuchen, “History, Memory,” 566.

¹³ See, for example, HD. Haryo Sasongko, *Korupsi Sejarah dan Kisah Derita Akar Rumput* (Jakarta: Pustaka Utan Kayu, 2005); Aguk Irawan Mn, *Sungai yang Memerah: Kumpulan Cerpun* (Solo: Lanarka, 2005); Saleh Abdullah et al. (eds), *Usaha untuk Tetap Mengenang: Kisah-kisah Anak-anak Korban Peristiwa ‘65* (Jakarta: Yappika, 2003); and Ngarto Februna, *Tapol* (Yogyakarta: Media Pressindo, 2002).

perpetrated under the New Order¹⁴, the rate of these publications has declined significantly.

When I interviewed Ibu Lani and Ibu Nana in 2005 about their experiences following the 1965 coup, including the many violent interrogation sessions they endured at the hands of soldiers and policemen, they repeatedly emphasized the risks associated with speaking about these events. As shown in the quoted discussion above, the terror communities experienced during the 1965-1966 mass killings and mass detentions made people “stupid” (“*bodoh*”). Over the years in interviews with other former *tapols*, it is clear that the violence of the massacres encouraged silence amongst individuals and communities across Indonesia; being “stupid” was, for many, the only safe response in the face of the many forms of reprisal that could come from a regime that had both perpetrated the killings as well as used reminders of that violence to ensure compliance in its citizens.

Dangers Past and Present: Settings and Contexts

Of integral importance to the telling of survivors’ narratives of mass violence, torture and political imprisonment under the New Order are the settings in which these tellings occur. By “settings” I refer not only to the larger, socio-political climate in which the women gave their testimonies but also the *mise en scène*, or sites of telling, which are “both occasional, that is, specific to an occasion, and locational, that is, emergent in a specific... context of narration.”¹⁵ The how, when, where, who, etc., of these narratives are as much a part of the testimonies as the words spoken (and not spoken). Without recounting the specifics of every situation of narration that occurred during the interviews for this project, it is important to outline some of the considerations about the “closer” settings in which the testimonies were given. It was in these often intimate spaces that the risks of speaking intruded most heavily into interviews, governing what could be told and what should remain unsaid. In particular, I draw attention to the social landscapes of the narrations, the places which gave rise to certain tellings, the embodied performances of the testimonies as well as the silences inherent throughout.

A number of occasions during the fieldwork brought to the fore the importance of place and space for particular tellings. In most regions that I visited for this research, I had a local contact who helped me to recruit and interview survivors and eyewitnesses of violence in that area. On a few occasions during the fieldwork, survivors of the killings would take me to visit

¹⁴ On the consecutive failure of every *Reformasi* administration since 1998 to redress past crimes against humanity in Indonesia, see, for example, The International Centre for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) and the Commission for Disappeared Persons and Victims of Violence (Kontras), *Derailed: Transitional Justice in Indonesia Since the Fall of Soeharto – A Joint Report by ICTJ and Kontras* (Jakarta: ICTJ and Kontras, March 2011).

¹⁵ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 56.

sites of mass graves. The first was a deep crevasse in a mountainous region of West Sumatra where bodies of victims who had been murdered during the killings had been thrown (or thrown to their death). We were travelling by car to a village in the mountains when the two women survivors, Ibu Sri and Ibu Lani, who had agreed to come with my contact and me asked us to pull over. The edge of the road dropped off suddenly down a steep, rocky gorge into the forest below. I did not understand why we had stopped until Ibu Sri said that this was where many people had died. Getting out of the car, the two women explained how victims of the killings in the area had been brought to this place and other, similar spots in the vicinity to be killed. In quiet and matter-of-fact terms, the two women explained to us that soldiers and militia gangs had used this cliff edge to dispose of their victims because of its location and “suitability” (“*cocok*”). The stories that they related to me that day must have been told and retold numerous times amongst members of the local community and amongst the former political prisoners, eventually becoming the kind of “open secret” (“*rahasia umum*”) that all the locals know but do not talk about. The location was remote, so no-one would hear the victims; as they explained, the victims would scream and plead for their lives but it would make no difference. The cliffs in the area were also *cocok* because, as the victims were lined up at the edge to have their throats cut or to be shot, if they did not die from their wounds, the fall would kill them. After this brief and somewhat hurried explanation, the two women quickly got back into the car and we moved on.

The second mass grave site that I was shown by a survivor called Pak Karto was a large opening in a field in Central Java. The large opening was probably a collapsed doline (or sinkhole) in what appeared to be Tertiary limestone¹⁶, thirty or forty meters across and deep enough that I was unable (after cautiously shuffling close to the edge – the mouth of the cave was unstable) to see to the bottom, with, as I was told, an underground river at the bottom. As with the crevasse, people were either thrown to their death from the precipice and/or the opening used to dispose of bodies. Pak Karto also took me to see the third mass grave site which was a river, the banks of which consisted of sandy soil; a type of soil, as he told me, in which the soldiers had found it easy to dig graves. Other bodies were thrown into the river.¹⁷ On other occasions during my fieldwork, I would be brought to open fields or parts of the forest where there was no discernible sign of a mass grave, only to be told how scores or hundreds of victims lay beneath the trees and grass.

Without delving too deeply into social anthropological understandings of place and space, for both are highly debatable terms, briefly, “place, at a

¹⁶ This description was provided by leading caves expert, Professor David S. Gillieson, School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, James Cook University, after photographs of the site were provided. Personal correspondence, 20 December 2006.

¹⁷ At the time of year that we visited, the water level in the river was very low. During the wet season, however, approximately November to March, the water level rises significantly and the current is swift, thus being useful as a body-disposal site.

basic level, is space invested with meaning in the context of power.”¹⁸ Though constantly becoming and dynamic, places are also pervaded with rules and laws.¹⁹ Each time that we visited a mass grave site (and each time that I was told about other grave sites), once again, the term “*rahasia umum*” would be uttered. The sites that we visited were always quiet, not in the sense that they were far from human traffic (some were only a few hundred meters from a particular village or busy road), but in the sense that they felt abandoned or *unheimlich*. They were, to use a word from one of my contacts who took me to some of these mass grave sites, “*angker*” - a Javanese term that connotes a sacred place, but also means haunted, unapproachable, enchanted and terrible. Furthermore, the term implies an ambiguous state of being both known/remembered and purposely avoided/forgotten. As such, describing these “open secret” sites of mass killings/graves as *angker* seemed to connote community knowledge of what had happened there as well as reflect a local semiotics suggesting ambivalence towards, if not condemnation of, what had taken place in those landscapes.²⁰ As Victoria Sanford describes of her own research uncovering mass graves in Guatemala, “the clandestine cemeteries were hidden in that they were silenced, but survivors, witnesses, and most community members know the locations of these graves.”²¹ At the large sinkhole, Pak Karto said that everyone in the area knew where it was and what had happened there but that it was mostly avoided. As we stood there, he told me about the people who had been brought there and murdered. Night after night for a few months between late 1965 and early 1966, a number of trucks (two, three or four a night) had brought people from a detention center close-by, and had thrown them over the edge of the cavern.

¹⁸ Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 12. See Cresswell also for annotated bibliography of important works on “place” and “space” (125-43). Also, see Paul Adams, Steven Hoelscher and Karen Till, eds., *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

¹⁹ See Cresswell, *Place*, 35 – 36.

²⁰ I wish to thank one of my anonymous reviewers for bringing up this point about the usage of “*angker*”. I later came across the term several times while reading an undergraduate thesis by I Ngurah Suryawan, “Bertutur di Balik Senyap: Studi Antropologi Kekerasan Pembantaian Massal Tragedi 1965 di Desa Tegalbadeng, Kecamatan Negara, Kabupaten Jembrana, Bali [Speaking Behind the Silence: An Anthropological Study into the Violence of the Mass Killings/Tragedy of 1965 in the Village of Tegalbadeng, Negara District, Jembrana Region, Bali],” Undergraduate thesis, Faculty of Arts, Udayana University, Bali, 2006. Suryawan uses “*angker*” to refer to both mass grave sites and, for example, when interviewing an old man about what happened in 1965, certain topics. While interviewing him, when Suryawan reaches for his pen and paper to take notes, the old man becomes hesitant; “To him, this story is only for talking about, it’s not to be written down. You can clearly see in the expression on his face that these memories about 1965 are still secret. *Angker*. He doesn’t want to say any more about it and advises me to visit the village of Tegalbadeng, before he will speak again” (96, my translation).

²¹ Victoria Sanford, *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 17. See here also for a description of how forensic anthropologists go about exhuming mass graves (32 – 37).



Sinkhole in Tertiary Limestone, Central Java, October 2005.
Personal photographs by author.

Pak Karto told this story and others about other mass grave sites in the area of Central Java very quietly while we stood near the edge of the cavern, with him acting out different parts of the story as I watched, acting out my part of spectator. He was neither a direct witness nor participant in these events, yet he recounted these stories in a way that was similar to how they would

have been told to him. He was someone with his hands tied behind his back, forced towards the edge. Then he was a soldier with a gun, forcing those from the trucks into line, or forcing them over the edge. We stood near the edge of the sinkhole and talked quietly about what had happened in that place, with long moments of silence between our words. We stood there, however, removed from the danger that was the sole reason for our visit; more than forty-five years separated us from the victims and perpetrators. Pak Karto and I stood there safely while he enacted stories that he had himself heard told by others, from those who had heard about how victims were thrown to their death down that hole. It was the way in which he told these stories, how he performed them and how I stood there listening, that highlighted how the place and setting of the stories become crucial.

It was the dangers of the past that intruded into Pak Karto's retelling that day of past mass killings. On that day, and on many other days like it at other mass graves such as at the cliff face shown to me by Ibu Sri and Ibu Lani, the threat that these places held to survivors remained with us in the present. On that day with Pak Karto, when standing on the edge of a cavern where hundreds, if not thousands of people had been murdered, we both spoke very quietly, despite the fact that there was no-one else around and it was the middle of the day. Then, because it felt as if we had trespassed too long in that place, Pak Karto and I left quietly.

The Dangers of Speaking about Past Atrocities in the Present

The dangers of the past which crept into survivors' testimonies about their experiences of violence under the New Order are different from the current risks that come with speaking about the past in Indonesia. In interviews with former political prisoners and survivors of the massacres in 1965, the narratives told about experiences of violence are heavily shaped by the need to guard what is said. In these sometimes very intimate encounters between myself and survivors, there is still the need to avoid naming individuals (perpetrators or victims) and to conceal information that could lead back to loved ones. This apprehension and caution is not without grounds. Although spaces are continually opening up for the discussion of past mass atrocities (particularly at the more "elite" level amongst middle and upper-class interested people in Jakarta), I will now briefly recount an incident which occurred during the fieldwork which illustrates the risks associated with talking about the past in Indonesia.

My main contact from Jakarta, Ibu Lia, and I arranged to attend a meeting of former political prisoners in a village in the mountains outside a small town in Central Java. This was to be the first meeting of its kind in the area and was organized by Pak Daeng who came from the village and whose house was the venue. Ibu Lia and I travelled to Pak Daeng's house, located high in this mountainous region, from Jakarta the day before. On the day of the meeting, approximately fifty people arrived early in the morning, men and

women, mostly older, former political prisoners, some of whom brought their children and even grandchildren. The atmosphere of the day was one of discussion, recounting past experiences with people who had been through similar events. Some of the people who came happily greeted old friends and fellow inmates, reminiscing about their times together and sharing the latest news. Others had travelled from outside the region, such as Ibu Lia and myself, and went about meeting new people and exchanging stories. As the only foreigner there, I was happy to move between groups of people, conducting short interviews at intervals. The day was going very well until early in the afternoon when three men arrived in civilian clothing and claimed to be policemen.²²

I had been interviewing some of the people in another room at the side of the house and learned that the three men had arrived when a visibly agitated Pak Daeng came into the room to tell us. He told me to hide my interview equipment quickly, that the policemen were questioning some of the men and that they wanted to speak with me. When I returned to the main part of the house to hide my equipment (a small voice recorder and note pad), the atmosphere amongst the people who had come to the meeting had changed dramatically. Walking to meet the policemen, I saw that the atmosphere of reunion and discussion amongst new and old friends had disappeared. In its place were nervous, mostly silent men and women with shifting expressions of dread, regret and resignation. A few men were in front of the house talking with the policemen. The rest of the men were in the front room, while the women and grandchildren had all moved to the back room, sitting silently or quietly discussing events in small groups. I went outside and answered the policemen's questions for approximately half an hour about my identity, my purpose for being in Indonesia, and provided them with copies of my passport and visa. I politely but firmly refused their requests to give them my original documents.

After answering numerous other questions from the policemen, I rejoined the women and sat down with Ibu Lia in one of the groups in the back room. In between long periods of silence, I heard some of the women speak quietly about their own arrests forty years previously, others asking anxiously what would happen. After about an hour, two of the women sitting next me suddenly starting talking about when soldiers and policemen came to their doors forty years ago to take away their husbands. They spoke in Indonesian so that I would understand, rather than Javanese, explaining to me that "this is what happens". Not long after, we then found out that the day's organizer, Pak Daeng, would be taken away to the nearby town for questioning by the police.²³

²² On this point, I am uncertain as to whether they claimed to be policemen (*polisi*) or "special police" (*polisi khusus*) as I was in the adjoining part of the building when they arrived.

²³ I must add here that Pak Daeng prevented the policemen from also taking me for questioning. He did so by insisting that, if I were to be taken as well, they would need to contact the Australian Embassy for representation. In actual fact, I doubt that the Australian

As soon as the police left with Pak Daeng, almost everyone in the house left immediately. The ten people who stayed, including Ibu Lia, myself and Pak Daeng's relatives, waited anxiously until late into the night when he returned. He told us that they had taken him to the police station in the town at the foot of the mountain, where they had asked him about the purpose of the meeting, who had been there, why I had attended, how long I would be in the area and where was I going. He then showed me a copy of a form that he had filled out on my behalf and recounted to us what he had told the police during questioning.²⁴

There is much more that could be said about what happened that day, however, there are a few main points which bear mentioning here. The first is that speaking about the past in Indonesia, particularly the pasts of former political prisoners, carries with it a number of risks. When sitting with the women in the back room of the house, we were all afraid about what might happen. The potential for "things to go bad", as one of the women next to me said, sat heavily in the room. Most tellingly, when Pak Daeng returned from the police station, he made clear to everyone waiting that, "Yes, they interrogated me, but don't worry, they didn't beat me this time."²⁵ Most of all, however, he was anxious that we leave as soon as possible, explaining that it was likely that more police would arrive the following day. It was already very late at night, so we decided to sleep for a few hours, then depart at dawn. While I went to the back room and slept for those few hours, Ibu Lia sat up through the night, talking with Pak Daeng and his relatives, planning what to do if more police came again. We left shortly after dawn, Pak Daeng waving us off and telling us not to worry, and travelled down the mountain, hitching a ride in the back of a truck to the next town. Thankfully, while a policeman paid a "visit" to Pak Daeng's relatives the following week, there were no further reprisals for holding the meeting.

Confronting Mass Atrocities in the Indonesian Past and Present

This incident in a village in the mountainous area of Central Java taught me in tangible ways about the risks that those who speak about the past face in the present, and how they differ from those posed during the New Order. While the threat of direct violence for speaking out has lessened since the end of the regime, it has not gone entirely. The risk taken by Pak Daeng and his relatives

Embassy officials would have been able to intervene in any way, but the threat that they might do so appeared to make the policemen reconsider. I did not know this until after he returned.

²⁴ He had, in fact, misled the police about many of the details about my visit, saying that I was a friend of someone he knew in Jakarta who had simply arrived on his doorstep during the same week as the meeting. I said that this was rather implausible, but Pak Daeng said it was better to go with this story, rather than say that I was a researcher interviewing former political prisoners.

²⁵ I tried to get Pak Daeng to explain this comment further, however, he was reluctant to do so. I believe that he was referring to his interrogations when he was a political prisoner.

to hold a meeting of former political prisoners – an entirely legal undertaking since the end of restrictions on their movement and congregation in the early *Reformasi* period – resulted in serious consequences for him and his family, as well as for the disparate community of ex-*tapols* in the area. When I contacted Pak Daeng again a few weeks later, he assured me that everything was fine and that his family had not been harassed further. However, as far as I am aware, the former prisoners in that area have not felt safe enough to hold another meeting.

This incident at Pak Daeng's house was not the only time during my fieldwork when I witnessed harassment and intimidation of former political prisoners in Indonesia, though it had some of the most serious consequences. At the few meetings of ex-*tapol* which I have attended over the last ten years, the usually welcoming and celebratory atmosphere of these events has almost always been weighed down with a certain level of apprehension amongst the participants, perhaps better described as a guarded watchfulness. There is always great joy in these events – as well as shared sadness as the participants speak about common experiences of suffering – but there is also uneasiness, as if they are waiting for something to happen. As my main contact from Jakarta, Ibu Lia, explained to me, thirty years of watching out for members of the security services, as well as avoiding the suspicious eyes of neighbors, makes a person a “little paranoid.” In the next breath, however, she captured the paradox of speaking about the dangerous past in the present by saying, “but it's not just paranoia though, is it? Things like this still happen.”²⁶

For most of the people whom I have interviewed over the past decade in Indonesia, and for the individuals whom I am currently interviewing in East Timor, the potential threats and dangers attendant within the research process are also those they manage on a day-to-day basis. Of the nearly two hundred men and women with whom I have conducted interviews over the years, it was often the case that, during a particular interview, my informant would be the one to explain the risks associated with speaking about mass atrocities committed during the New Order regime. On more than a few occasions, at the beginning of an interview when I began talking about an informant's right to respond, to withdraw, and the potential risks and uses of the research (as is standard for any research ethics procedures), discussion about these risks would follow. In these interviews, stories were told about actual violence and intimidation, as well as threats of violence. These included stories about distrustful neighbors and local authorities being intrusive in their demands to know what they were doing or where they were going, and of the dread of

²⁶ In this interview, Ibu Lia spoke in Indonesian but used the English term, “paranoid”, I think for my benefit so that I would understand. Field book notes from an unrecorded conversation with Ibu Lia, Jakarta, December 2005. This particular conversation occurred after we had interviewed a formerly high-up member of the Communist women's organization, *Gerwani*. During that interview, the woman in question had frequently looked out her window to see if any of her neighbours were listening.

having to go through any sort of official process that would bring them into contact with police or public servants.

For those who chose to attend public events and forums to discuss the events of 1965, there were stories about more direct threats and violence. Some of the women who I interviewed in Jakarta talked explicitly about incidents at public events where they were intimidated and harassed. An example that one of the women, Ibu Mimien, gave was when she and numerous other former *tapols* attended a session in the Central Jakarta District Court in 2005. The case itself was a class action civil suit brought by the Jakarta Legal Aid Foundation on behalf of a group of former *tapol* seeking compensation and rehabilitation for the victims of the 1965-1966 killings.²⁷ The case was thrown out of the court almost immediately, but Ibu Mimien recounted how she and the other former prisoners had been harassed and intimidated by the crowds of anti-Communist protestors who surrounded the court, many of whom, according to Ibu Mimien, were members of “hardliner” or militant Islamist groups.²⁸ Despite recalling how she and the other ex-political prisoners were physically surrounded and were screamed at by the crowd, including by having death threats yelled at them, Ibu Mimien laughed and said, “If they want to kill me, well then, just kill me! I’m an old lady. I’ll just keep on fighting until I die.” Over the last ten years, this was not the only time that a survivor laughed while telling me about the risks they continue to face when speaking about the crimes perpetrated against them or the struggles they have encountered when demanding the restoration of their rights. The laughter is, I believe, not simply bravado, but also a way of coping. For Ibu Mimien and for so many others, they are fully aware of the risks they take and they make their own, informed decisions to speak out about their experiences.

I have thought about the incident at Pak Daeng’s house, and about other events during my fieldwork, many times in the last few years, partly to remind myself that despite the end of the regime, the survivors who agree to take part in interviews do so with a far greater understanding of the risks that they take in doing so. I also remind myself of that day – particularly the hours sitting in the back room with apprehensive and mostly silent women and children – to remember that their risks are not my risks. Any risks I take pale very quickly in comparison. I waiver in the responses that I make to my own questions: was my presence a mitigating or an exacerbating factor in what happened that day? And worse, was I probably the reason (or, at least, one of the reasons) someone in the local community had reported the meeting to the police? Would Pak Daeng have been hauled away for interrogation had I not been there? My presence made the meeting more conspicuous, and the police

²⁷ Interview with Ibu Mimien, Ibu Guritno and Ibu Priyanti, Jakarta, June 2009. For details about this case, the Jakarta Legal Aid Foundation Class Action No. 238/Sk/LBH/III/2005, see ICTJ and KontraS, *Derailed*, 55.

²⁸ Ibu Mimien said that these “hardliners” (as she called them) were members of *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI) or the “Islamic Defenders’ Front”, a notorious and extremist Islamist vigilante group that formed in the late 1990s.

were highly suspicious about my attendance. Certainly, my being there had an effect on what happened that day when the former political prisoners from the local area met.²⁹ I also remember that day when asking survivors of atrocities committed under the New Order to give testimony about their experiences, at times wondering if the potential benefit of the research can ever outweigh the potential costs to these men and women who chose to speak.

Speaking about Past Violence in a Culture of Impunity

The purpose of interviewing eyewitnesses and survivors of violence is to trace forms of torture perpetrated against civilians throughout the New Order regime in Indonesia. Since the beginning this research, ethical responsibility and the risks associated with speaking about torture (and other forms of state-sponsored terror) in post-New Order Indonesia have been a central concern. As outlined above, the risks associated with speaking about past violence continue to affect the present. There is, however, another major factor that must be addressed when considering these risks, which relates to the ongoing “culture of impunity” for torture and other crimes against humanity in Indonesia.³⁰

Torture of detainees by members of the security forces is an ongoing and widespread crime in Indonesia. Today, cases of torture and ill-treatment of those held in detention are as regular as they are atrocious.³¹ This culture of impunity for the systematic abuse of detainees, at least in part, is a product of the torture perpetrated by State agents against hundreds of thousands of civilians throughout the New Order regime. Despite the promise of reform and democratization, successive administrations since the fall of the New Order in 1998 have shown little willingness or ability to seek redress for these and other gross violations of human rights.³² As discussed above, those who speak

²⁹ Clifford Geertz, in his famous account of fleeing a police raid on a cockfight (together with the rest of the spectators) in the Balinese village where he and his wife were staying captured some of these complex and conflicting risks by researchers and research participants. I thank one of my anonymous reviewers for raising this point. See Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” *Daedalus* 101, no. 1 (1972): 1-37.

³⁰ Compare with Carla Bongiorno, “A Culture of Impunity: Applying International Human Rights Law to the United Nations in East Timor,” *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 33, no. 3 (2001-2002): 623-92.

³¹ Cases of torture and ill-treatment are believed to be seriously under-reported across Indonesia. In 2007, the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, Manfred Nowak, carried out a visit to Indonesia. He concluded that “given the lack of legal and institutional safeguards and the prevailing structural impunity, persons deprived of their liberty are extremely vulnerable to torture and ill-treatment.” Cited in “Indonesia: UN Expert Hails Progress in Combating Torture, Urges Further Measures,” *UN News Service*, 23 November 2007, www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=24769&Cr=Indonesia&Cr1.

³² For a recent report on the failure of numerous transitional justice mechanisms in the last fourteen years, see ICTJ and Kontras, *Derailed*.

out about these violations are often marginalized and suppressed, at times through the use of further violence.

The question of ethical responsibility for conducting interviews with survivors and the risks they face in giving testimony must therefore be considered in light of the lingering legacy of violence towards these groups of people by the New Order regime; a regime which not only perpetrated the massacres of 1965-66 and invaded East Timor but then used these and other cases of mass atrocities as political tools to legitimize its long-lasting, authoritarian rule. Throughout the regime, fear of being labeled a “Communist” rarely had anything to do with a person’s association with Leftist ideology but rather was used to discredit any form of political dissent. To be branded an enemy of the people in this way was both a form of repression as well as served as a reminder of the horrific violence that could be employed by the state against those who opposed it.³³ Despite the fall of Suharto in 1998, a popular (though increasingly contested) fear of being associated with leftist ideology continues in Indonesia. Thus survivors of 1965-1966 and any individuals who appear to have any connection with communism, past or present, are liable to suffer for it, through either political repression or social stigmatization. For ongoing cases of torture across Indonesia today, incidents are drastically under-reported, alleged perpetrators rarely investigated and prosecutions even more rarely sought.³⁴

The persistent use of torture and other serious crimes by the State’s security apparatus and the unwillingness shown by both the Indonesian and East Timorese governments to deal with either past or ongoing systematic abuses, make speaking out about torture a risky undertaking.³⁵ Thus one of the core issues of this research must always be the ethics of asking survivors to give testimony about past traumatic experiences, as the very act of speaking out can endanger them anew.

³³ I thank one of my anonymous reviewers for highlighting this point.

³⁴ Those few cases which are brought to trial tend to be heard in military rather than civilian criminal courts. See the report by one of Indonesia’s major human rights organisations, KontraS (Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence), *Torture: A Heinous Act which is Not Seriously Addressed – Report on Torture Practice in Indonesia for the International Day of Support for Victims of Torture* (Jakarta: KontraS, 26 June 2011), <http://www.kontras.org/data/torture%20english.pdf>.

³⁵ See note 5 above. The issue of a culture of impunity in post-Suharto Indonesia is inextricably caught up with numerous problems relating to Reform era (1998 – present) political pragmatism. I do not mean to suggest that Indonesia’s culture of impunity is solely a product of State repression by the New Order regime, simply that it is a contributing factor. On this see, for example, Henk Schulte Nordholt, “A Genealogy of Violence,” in *Roots of Violence in Indonesia: Contemporary Violence in Historical Perspective*, ed. Freek Colombijn and J. Thomas Lindblad, 81-103 (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002). I thank one of my anonymous reviewers for highlighting this point. Further, my other anonymous reviewer pointed out that impunity for the 1965-66 violence has been maintained largely without recourse to actual physical violence, but to relies on the “specter” of 1965 to retain its power. See Joshua Oppenheimer and Michael Uwemedimo, “Show of Force: A Cinema-Séance of Power and Violence in Sumatra’s Plantation Belt,” *Critical Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2009): 84-110.

Conclusion

Telling stories about the violence perpetrated during the thirty-year New Order regime in Indonesia remains a secretive business. Speaking about past atrocities – such as the 1965 coup as well as the killings and mass political detentions which followed – are still politically sensitive. During the early years of my fieldwork it became apparent that, despite the end of the New Order in 1998, the apprehension which comes with speaking about these controversial events in Indonesian history persists today. This apprehension relates both to the New Order's continuing legacy of suppression and violence of dissenting versions of the past, as well as to ongoing risks of reprisal for speaking out about the past in current day Indonesia.

Nearly half a century has passed since the massacres of 1965-1966 and the beginning of the military's New Order regime. More than fifteen years after the fall of President Suharto, however, the violence of that era and the ongoing impunity for the crimes against humanity perpetrated by the regime have left a malignant and enduring legacy in Indonesia. For those who choose to speak about past wrongs in the face of the possibility of further violence, the dangers of doing so must be continually negotiated and managed. The military regime may have ended, but the violence of the regime has not.