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Embedded remembering : memory culture of the 1965 violence in rural East Java

Leksana, G.T.

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Author: Leksana, G.T.

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CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION: EMBEDDED MEMORY, HISTORIOGRAPHY, AND NATIONAL RECONCILIATION

For many decades after *Reformasi* (a turning point in Indonesia's democratic era in 1998), scholars and human rights activists believed that the different ways of remembering were created by the repressive anti-communist memory projects of the state, in this case, the New Order. These projects, which used various media (museums, monuments, books, films, commemoration days, and so on), constructed the official memory that centred around the September 30th Movement and the death of the seven army officers. In contrast, the violent military operations in 1965-66 and 1968 in East Java, including the deaths of more than 500,000 people, were mostly suppressed from the public discourse. In this case, scholars and human rights activists perceive Indonesia's collective memory of 1965-66 as a manifestation of power in memory politics, where the state decides how the public should remember 1965. However, through this local study in the Donomulyo district, I argue that this is not the complete case. Society's different ways of remembering occurred because memories are also embedded in their local context, in the rural situation where violence erupted and where people continued to live together in the aftermath of the event. Power in memory-making, then, resembles not state power in central politics, but its concrete existence in daily life, manifested in authority figures such as *Babinsa*, army officers, village heads, and other patrons on which villagers' lives depend. This embeddedness also demonstrates that memory is a social act. In the context of mass violence, memory becomes a strategy to survive, to continue living as a community in the aftermath of violence, and to reconcile an individual experience of violence in the past with the present. Memory is also a historical process, it develops through time by interpreting information that is collected gradually over time, including transformations that occurred at the national level (such as the end of the authoritarian regime that led to advocacies of the 1965-66 violence). The community's interpretation of the past is therefore not static, because it changes when the context transforms.

The backbone of this study elaborates further Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, in which he argues that memory is not an individual act, but a communal process influenced by the collective framework in society. How and what we remember is part of society's existing thoughts and values, which in this case, provide meaning to memories of violence. However, as society is not static, collective memory is also malleable. Therefore, studying collective memory is also a study of its shifting social framework. In chapter 2, I examined the social framework of the agrarian society in Donomulyo and how it was shaped historically. Following Donomulyo's history from the colonial period to the post-New Order, this research highlights the inequality and patronage relationships that remain consistent under the changing state. One of the factors that created this *longue durée* of clientelist features in rural society is the fact that rural elites were also gaining benefits through their alliance with the state. In the colonial era, village authorities played a role as brokers of tax collection, land rent, and labour for the colonial government or plantation administrators. In return, these village elites received money or employment in colonial companies or government offices. These practices exacerbated the inequality in the village: those who are in the network with the colonial patrons gain economic and social advantages, while those outside the networks are left with nothing. In the 1950s to early 1960s, the leftist movement started to criticise the growing rural

inequality, the dominance of rural elites in controlling rural resources, and continuous marginalisation of peasants. However, their progressive movement ended along with the anti-communist military operation in 1965-66. When the New Order established its power in rural areas, new alliances of patrons were formed between the local elites and the military. While tracing the village's history, we can see that the state does not reside far away in central-national politics, but is actually manifested through these rural patrons. This reflects Joel Migdal's theory of the state in society, where he argues that instead of residing at the top of a hierarchical structure, the state works through a complex network in society.⁴²⁹ In chapter 3, I examine the anti-communist killings that occurred in East Java. I argue that the military itself was never an independent state body, but a political one which continuously (re)establishes its alliance with civilians. My reading of the Brawijaya archives pointed to the fact that the killings in East Java, although they began in late October 1965, became massive and intense because the military activated its coalition with civilians. Documents on the Pancasila operation in East Java explicitly described the use of civilian groups in the annihilation operation of communists. However, these civilians also carried their own agendas during the violence, ranging from organisational or ideological reasons to individual motives. In other words, civilians were also obtaining advantages from their cooperation with the army. The findings that I discuss in this chapter strengthen previous studies on the 1965-66 violence in Aceh (Jess Melvin) and Banyuwangi (Ahmad Luthfi) that stress the role of the army in orchestrating the violence against civilians. Melvin's study in Aceh even goes as far as concluding that the violence is an act of genocide. Adding to these findings, the study in Donomulyo highlighted the mutualistic (yet unequal) cooperation between the army and civilians, where the latter gained benefits from this coalition in the New Order period.

In chapter 4, I highlight how remembering the violence is actually embedded in localities. Local patrons connect the local and national, influencing how villagers understand and remember the violence that they experienced in their area. For some people, usually those who have close ties with the state through the patronage network and who benefited from the violence, their memories reflect a similar construction of the state's narrative of the violence – for example, expressing the need to eliminate the PKI, because they were troublemakers in the village. While for others, who experienced great losses after the violence, they became critical of the official narrative. Some even perceived the advocacy of PKI and BTI against landlords and local elites as a means to break the patronage relationship in the village, but this movement ended along with the anti-communist military operations. Furthermore, for the community, their memories of violence are not about the violent acts per se, but also about what the violence brings to the village. Vanessa Hearman, in her study of the violence in South Blitar, also portrays the connection of the violence with transformations that occurred in the aftermath.⁴³⁰ In the case of Donomulyo, memories of violence are also connected to the rural transformation that occurred in its aftermath, particularly during the early New Order period. Therefore, the question of 'who gets what after the violence', also constitutes memories of the 1965-66 violence. Moreover, to be able to continue their lives in the aftermath of violence, silence became a tool for survival, a navigating device (more than merely an expression of trauma) that enables perpetrators, collaborators, victims, bystanders and their families to continue their lives in a community.

The case study in a rural community also highlights that memories of violence did not diminish even under state repression. Narratives of violence travel within communities through stories of places, or what Pierre Nora called sites of memory. In chapter 5, I analyse a number of sites in Donomulyo,

⁴²⁹ Migdal 2007.

⁴³⁰ Hearman 2018.

including those that were created by authorities and others that are still maintained and used by the community. However, rather than representing the past, these sites function more as a negotiating instrument in the present, as they are always in a dialogical process with their surrounding society. In some cases, sites of memory are used as a means for social mobilisation, connecting villagers to a new patron. When these sites lose their meaning in the present, the patronage network that surrounded them was also weakened. This study also shows that sites that were built by the state are losing their function in the present, while sites that are maintained by the community, such as mass graves, remain meaningful not only for the family of victims, but also for a larger public who seek spiritual guidance.

Family is another context where narratives of violence also exist. In chapter 6, I use Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory – a distinct way of remembering by the second or third generation, which not only involves recollection of the narrative, but also (re)interpretation, reconstruction, and re-creation of the past.⁴³¹ Case studies of four families show that memories of violence are preserved in a complex way, through interconnectedness of the past and present, and between the private and the public. Silence is also another dominant aspect in family narratives. However, silence in this context is not a form of repressive trauma, but a resilient mechanism to deal with the past. These silences enable communities to navigate and continue living together in the present society in which people had different roles in the violence. Therefore, it is important to examine these silences, and to study how and why they emerge.

Furthermore, although this study is conducted in a particular district in East Java, I believe the results point to some general aspects in studies of collective memory in post-violence societies. First, as the case studies also show, power in memory politics is manifested in everyday life. Zooming into people's everyday lives illuminates the complexities of remembering, the different representations of the past, and more importantly, their connections with the present. In Donomulyo, the power lies in patronage politics, but it might be different in another context. Second, there is no single collective memory. Even for a devastating event such as the 1965-66 violence, there are different ways in which societies remember the event. Moreover, these different narratives are not negating each other, but tend to co-exist and becomes interrelated. Third, silence should not be disregarded. It is not the same as forgetting or an absence of knowledge, but on the contrary, silence is also a different way of remembering, an active strategy to reconcile the past and present. Therefore, studying memories should also pave the way to studies on silences and their dynamics.

Insights on Methodology and Historiography in Indonesia

To a larger extent, while moving towards the end of my research, there are two things that linger in my thoughts. The first is how research on memory can contribute to a larger discussion on Indonesian historiography, and not only constitute research that adds to 'revealing the truth'. The second is how these research findings can bring insights to the discussion of reconciliation in Indonesia.

Regarding the first, I realised that this research is being conducted decades after Reformasi, in times where we are still working to demilitarise and decentralise Indonesia's historiography.⁴³² Research on 1965 has made significant contributions to the discussions on methods of researching Indonesia's history. The use of oral sources, the detachment from the state's historiography, the criticism of military-centric history, and so on, are some of the issues that research on the 1965 violence has

⁴³¹ Hirsch 2012.

⁴³² Both of these agendas were expressed by history students in Universitas Indonesia, Jakarta and Universitas Andalas, Padang, in September 2000. Nordholt, Purwanto, and Saptari 2008, 20.

highlighted. However, as Degung Santikarma discussed in his article, while 1965 is a good case to reflect about power in history, and to advocate for the straightening of history or *pelurusan sejarah*, we are still using the state conception of 'history' in the same way that they write our national historiography.⁴³³ The obsession on making private narratives of violence as a public narrative geared scholars and activists to construct a monolithic counter narrative which tend to overlook the complexities and different ways of remembering.

I am not suggesting that the method in this local study is a remedy to such a case. But while working in the field, I encountered different conceptions, or we can say local conceptions of history. For villagers, 1965 is not about the kidnapped generals in the 30th September Movement, but about a wife's experience of releasing her husband, a farmer who lost his land, and collaborators who aim for an upward mobility of their social status. Through their narratives, a different kind of history is written and more importantly, an interaction between the structural and the individual is developed. History, in this case, is no longer in its grandeur narratives of heroes and nation. History manifests itself in everyday life in the village, and it is the villagers who define what their nation is. Therefore, local history is not only a counter to the national or the state, as Santikarma reminds us, but an exploration of a new meaning of nationhood and citizenship through various historical events.

Reflecting on the case study of Donomulyo, there are two aspects that can be elaborated further in studies of state violence in order to contribute critically to a nation's historiography. First, is to go beyond a national or centralistic examination of the state. As most of this violence occurred at the local level, it is more significant to look at how and in what ways the state is actually manifested at these levels. This will also enable us to see the dynamics that surrounded and contributed to the violence. Second, although the aim of studying cases of violence usually is to answer the question how the violence occurred, it is also important to go beyond the violence per se, and examine situations before and after the violence. This will enable researchers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the losses and gains of state violence. Moreover, by looking at processes that occurred before and after the violence, this can shed light on how violence fundamentally transforms nationhood. These two aspects should be elaborated further to develop an alternative strategy to the human rights approach that has its limitations in studying cases of state violence in the past. For example, the use of victims' narratives in research on 1965 may romanticise the narratives and fall into a historiography of sympathy and empathy, while moving further from the attempt to contribute to critical historiography.⁴³⁴ This is not to suggest that victims' narratives should not be used anymore, but these types of sources should be analysed more broadly than merely focusing on the injustices that they experienced.

Insights on Reconciliation and Transitional Justice – Limitations of the Human Rights Approach

Although providing suggestions for reconciliation is far beyond the scope of this research, it is impossible not to think about how this research could add to the existing movement of reconciliation. Years before I started this research, I was involved in different advocacies for the victims of the 1965 violence. I was quite exposed to concepts and works on human rights, transitional justice, and reconciliation. Human rights framework has contributed greatly to the progress of advocacy for the victims of past human rights violations through numerous political, legal and cultural strategies. However, when listening to the villagers' ideas and conceptions of justice and reconciliation in Donomulyo, I realised that the human rights framework, to some extent, tends to

⁴³³ Santikarma 2008, 202-3.

⁴³⁴ Purwanto & Adam 2005, 24.

gloss over important things that occurred at the local level. A perfect example is the practice of silence. Under the human rights approach, silence is seen as a result of state repression and an expression of trauma and stigmatisation of being PKI. However, for villagers, silence is a way to reconcile their past experiences and their present livelihood. Understanding their silence provides an insight that nobody, neither victims, perpetrators nor bystanders of violence, is autonomous to speak of their past. There are always 'strings attached', be it to their own family, neighbours, friends, or even their local patrons, which influence the representations of the past. This complexity shows that there is no linear connection from victimhood or experience of injustice to a victim's ability to speak about their own mistreatments.

Another point that shows the limitation of the human rights approach in reconciliation is the conception of the state as an autonomous body in executing state violence. This conception leads to advocacy practices that solely target the state. In other words, it is only the state that is seen to be responsible for the mass violence. I agree that the state should be held responsible, particularly because the military had structurally mobilised and facilitated the violence which became massive and bloody. But I also cannot deny that civilians were highly involved in this violence, often voluntarily, carrying their own ideas and agendas. Therefore, it is true that the military politically orchestrated the extermination of communists, but it is also us, Indonesia's middle class, who killed, excluded, stigmatised, and erased the left from our own history. The responsibility, then, lies not only on the state, but also on us, as citizens.

The human rights approach also brings us to the discussion of categorising the 1965 violence as a case of genocide. Scholars and activists have been working intensively to gather evidence that this event should be considered as such a case, even though there is still an ongoing debate on the definition of genocide. The analysis of the Brawijaya documents that I used in chapter 3 adds to this evidence of the intent and structural nature of the violence. I do agree that within international and national contexts, the genocide status can give a certain pressure on the Indonesian state, and also provide some leverage to the victims advocating for their rights. However, I doubt that this status significantly contributes to the discussion on reconciliation. In the case of 1965, arguing that this state violence is an act of genocide will only have an impact at the judicial level. But at the community level, this legal conception is interpreted differently. It becomes losses of family members and properties, insecurity, repression, trauma, and many other things that locals portrayed as *gégér* (a Javanese term that refers to turmoil, chaos, a nearly-apocalyptic situation). Therefore, in order to have more fruitful insights on reconciliation, it is important to go beyond the attempts of proving that certain state violence were acts of genocide or crimes against humanities, and move closer to examining how societies actually deal with such violence.

I do not suggest that the human rights approach should be neglected in formulating the reconciliation of 1965 violence. What I would like to suggest is to shift the discussion of reconciliation from topics of perpetratorship and acts of violence (which is usually the case in the human rights approach) to issues of massive transformation following violence and how societies deal with these transformations. Think not only about generals who authorised military operations against communists, but also about villagers who lost their land to village authorities or about performers of *Ketoprak* who could never perform again. Reconciliation, then, should consider how to re-create spaces, relationships, connectivity and knowledge that were destroyed after the violence, not only for victims and perpetrators of violence, but also for the generations after. Reconciliation, after all, is not an issue between perpetrators and victims alone, but a matter for the whole Indonesian nation.

Grassroots communities and organisations have moved towards this idea of national reconciliation. For example, victims' organisations, such as Pakorba (*Paguyuban Korban Orde Baru*/ Community of

Victims of New Order) and YPKP 1965 (*Yayasan Penelitian Korban Pembunuhan/* Research Institute of Victims of 1965 Killings), are still attempting to reveal the truth about the 1965 by recording mass graves, particularly in Java. Other religious communities, such as Syarikat of NU has initiated reconciliation between former perpetrators of NU and victims in their local regions. However, what seems to be the current development is the growing movement of younger generations – those who did not directly experience the violence nor belong to families who experienced the violence – to discuss the violence in 1965. The online platform Ingat 65 (<https://medium.com/ingat-65>), which is managed by young journalists, publishes experiences of Indonesians (mainly young generations) who encountered the 1965 violence in their lives, for example, through their families' narratives, supranatural stories, or disagreement with the contents of history school textbooks. Not to mention other creative expressions to commemorate the violence, such as theatre performances, films, or exhibitions, that are arranged by groups of young artists.

All of these practices show that 1965 has moved further from a matter between perpetrators' and victims' groups, and is becoming a matter of Indonesia's nationhood. In the future, I believe these socio-cultural (as distinct from the legal) approaches will expand and develop, taking different forms, involving different people, and more importantly, raising more questions about how we, as a nation, should deal with the violence.