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Contesting Victimhood in the Indonesian Anti-Communist Violence and Its Implications for Justice for the Victims of the 1968 South Blitar Trisula Operation in East Java

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ABSTRACT

Since the end of the Suharto New Order regime and Indonesia's transition to democracy in 1998, the country has struggled to address past serious human rights violations, in particular the 1965–66 anti-communist violence. Half a million members and sympathizers of the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) and its mass organizations were killed and hundreds of thousands were detained, most without trial. Although these individuals seem to have the clearest claims to victimhood, they still cannot easily gain such recognition, facing opposition from the military and representatives of civilian organizations implicated in the violence. The contested nature of the status of victim, and in particular how to accommodate claims from those who were less central to the experience of political persecution but who nonetheless suffered as part of the government and military's anti-communist strategy, is the subject of this article. Drawing on scholarly literature on victims, victimhood and collective memory, I analyse a case study of a group of villagers in south Blitar, East Java and how their being implicated in providing support for leftist fugitives in that area in 1966–68 has influenced how they are perceived by society. Representations of this group of villagers by the military and government have resulted in the rise of a collective victimhood across generations, but a victimhood that nonetheless remains striated by victim hierarchies and difficulties in identifying as victim. As a result of these factors, this complex victim group has, by and large, been excluded by mainstream transitional justice processes, except for limited efforts by two small non-government organizations in the local area, discussed in this article. The resurgence of anti-communism since the election of President Joko Widodo, however, creates new difficulties for the victims and these organizations.

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Introduction

In addressing the legacy of the 1965–66 mass violence in Indonesia, a key question is how to meet the needs of the diverse groups of victims who suffered during the repression, the

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effects of which were not confined to those two years alone. Victims are at the centre of transitional justice mechanisms.¹ They provide the rationale for the impulse to tackle the past. The process of identifying them and determining their needs is therefore of utmost importance, but the “wider politics of victimhood” influences that process and its outcomes.² The politics of victimhood, the struggles for recognition in order to determine who gets to identify and be socially accepted as victims, influences how their needs are met in the aftermath of violence. In all post-conflict societies, a socially accepted understanding of the identity, experiences and desires of victims guides what practical steps should be taken to deliver justice. The struggle for recognition and victim mobilization in support of recognition occur because to be accepted as a victim carries moral and tangible benefits. These benefits may include public acknowledgement of suffering, rehabilitation, material and psychological support and reparations.

The anti-communist violence in Indonesia is an example of complex, large-scale violence whose aftermath is difficult for the government to address. The violence affected different groups of people in different ways as it unfolded across the archipelago and was not confined only to the years 1965–66, as I will discuss. Members and sympathizers of the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) and leftist mass organizations were killed, detained and persecuted following the killing of seven high-ranking army officers in Jakarta on 1 October 1965 by a group calling itself the Thirtieth September Movement (hereafter referred to as the Movement). Led by Lieutenant Colonel Untung of President Sukarno’s Cakrabirawa Palace Guards, the Movement involved a small group of military officers and soldiers and a specific section of the PKI, namely the Special Bureau, a section that was responsible for liaising with members of the armed forces.³ The Special Bureau reported directly to PKI chairman D. N. Aidit. The Movement decommissioned Sukarno’s cabinet and declared its replacement with a “Revolutionary Council” consisting of forty-five members, drawn from the armed forces, political parties and civil society organizations. In response, the army under Major General Suharto spearheaded an attack against the Movement and the PKI, as it argued that the Movement’s activities constituted a *coup d’état* against President Sukarno’s government. The army leadership had long regarded the PKI as a dangerous political rival and now it saw the opportunity to neutralize the party by portraying it as being behind the Thirtieth September Movement. The army and its allies, including those in civilian organizations, organized and carried out the killing and detention of the left throughout Indonesia. According to historian John Roosa, Suharto then used the pretext of suppressing the Movement to delegitimize Sukarno and catapult himself into the presidency.⁴

While the bulk of the killings had stopped by mid 1966, anti-communist operations continued until 1968, as Suharto sought to consolidate his rule. Security forces raided suspected PKI support bases and members of the pro-Sukarno Indonesian Nationalist Party (Partai Nasional Indonesia, PNI) and sections of the military; those deemed to be leftist or pro-Sukarno were also persecuted.⁵ In the context of these ongoing operations, the army carried out the 1968 Trisula operation, a large-scale counterinsurgency operation against a PKI base in south Blitar, East Java. The area denoted as “south Blitar” consisted of a group of poor, subsistence farming villages south of the district capital of Blitar and it bordered the districts of Malang to the east and Tulungagung to the west. To the south lay the Indian Ocean. The aim of this article is to examine the effects of the Trisula operation on the villagers of south Blitar, a group that has been marginal in the

process of the identification and mobilization of victims of the anti-communist violence. Victim mobilization is defined as the mobilization of resources “that restore the dignity, reputation and life chances of victims.”⁶ The healing effects of “suffering together” in groups involving diverse types of victims in a particular location, exchanging information and sharing experiences with others can counteract past isolation and create a supportive social fabric for victims.⁷

Contestations over Victimhood: The Indonesian Left, Perpetrators and Victims at the Margins

Defining victims in human rights and transitional justice literature depends on the context, disciplinary approaches and victims’ own preferences, but entails a basic agreement that “acts or omissions” have taken place that have harmed others.⁸ As an example of one definition, the United Nations Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power, General Assembly Resolution 40/34, 29 November 1985 states that “victim” means, in the case of abuse of power:

persons who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that do not yet constitute violations of national criminal laws but of internationally recognized norms relating to human rights.⁹

However, the ways in which victims are defined in international human rights discourses are too narrow, and according to one scholar, Diana Tietjens Meyers, are predominantly based on Locke’s view that “victims are just people whose rights have been violated.”¹⁰ In her view, such definitions do not provide sufficient room for agentic complexity, and nor do the heroic victim and the pathetic victim paradigms that have emerged in the late twentieth century. Heroic victims are idealistic and courageous.¹¹ Pathetic victims, in contrast, are innocent, helpless and have faced unspeakable suffering. The agency of neither type of victim is morally compromised. The complexity of human responses to instances of mass violence, however, means that victim categorization is not as simple as these two categories suggest.

Indonesian non-government organizations (NGOs) have focused their attention on advocating for victims who had been detained without trial, were tortured, suffered economic, political and social stigmatization or whose family members were killed or disappeared.¹² Most of these were members or sympathizers of the PKI and leftist mass organizations aligned to it, including the Indonesian Women’s Movement (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, Gerwani) and the trade union confederation SOBSI (All Indonesia Workers’ Organising Centre). Despite evidence of some PKI complicity in the Thirtieth September Movement through its Special Bureau, most leftists would have had no knowledge of the events unfolding in Jakarta on 1 October 1965. They have the clearest claims to victimhood and to any reparative measures that the Indonesian state may choose to take in response to this case following the fall of the Suharto New Order regime in 1998.

Since 1998, national victims’ organizations have been formed and together with Indonesian NGOs such as Kontras, AJAR (Asia Justice and Rights) and Elsam (Lembaga Studi dan Advokasi Masyarakat, Institute for Policy Research and Advocacy) advocate for a

series of transitional justice measures for victims.¹³ These campaigns have entwined the 1965 case with other serious human rights abuses committed under the Suharto regime. Alternative truth-telling projects, such as meetings, seminars and the production of books and films, aim to provide victims with the opportunity to speak about their experiences. At the same time, activists pressure the government to provide comprehensive rehabilitation for the victims, from an official truth and reconciliation commission to an apology from the president. Their efforts to secure these gains for victims at the state level have, however, been largely unsuccessful.

One of the reasons for the lack of success is that the victimhood of the left in Indonesia is not socially understood or widely accepted. The left's claim to victimhood status is itself still contested, particularly by some of those associated with organizations that perpetrated the violence. The identity of victims is primarily derived from an assessment of the violent events that have occurred and understanding who was affected by the violence and who committed the violence. But such a process relies on the social acceptance of particular interpretations of the violence. A consensus on what occurred before, during and after 1 October 1965 remains absent in Indonesia. Following the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, the Indonesian government failed to hold any processes of historical clarification. The regime had maintained that the PKI were the aggressors and its suppression was necessary. It instituted a ban on Marxism-Leninism and on the PKI and its associated organizations. Under Suharto, "anti-communism became a state religion, with sacred sites, rituals and dates," including the establishment of museums and the commemoration of the killings of the army officers on 1 October as Sacred Pancasila Day, Pancasila being the state ideology.¹⁴ Its version of history has remained strong, despite growing research and scholarship showing that these assertions were false and that the army seized upon the Special Bureau's implication in the Movement to suppress the PKI and unseat President Sukarno.¹⁵

In the absence of a socially accepted consensus the 1965 events, victimhood remains in flux in Indonesia. The lack of an agreement over past historical events has resulted in fierce contestations over the nature of victimhood in Indonesia in relation to the suppression of the left. Claims to victimhood have arisen from within what Katharine McGregor refers to as "implicated communities," namely Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), an organization more commonly associated with the perpetration of violence against the left.¹⁶ There are two motivations for NU members' claims to victimhood and these are quite opposed to one another, involving different claimants. The first motivation is to exonerate perpetrators altogether and to maintain NU's importance as an organization to the founding of the New Order regime. The second is to downplay the conscious involvement of NU members and civilians in the violence, in order to foster grassroots reconciliation. Both these polarized positions within NU claim victimhood for NU members for quite different reasons.

NU's involvement in the 1965–66 violence stems from sections of the army convincing communities disaffected with the PKI to work under its leadership to help suppress the left.¹⁷ The army exploited years of low-level friction and rivalry that had existed between NU and the PKI to mobilize the former into committing violence against the latter, thus forming what Andrei Gomez-Suarez terms "perpetrator blocs."¹⁸ In East Java, NU and its youth wing, Ansor, comprised the civilian component of the anti-communist forces.¹⁹ Some NU leaders believed that as victims of past PKI harassment and violence,

NU helped to suppress the PKI partly to protect itself. NU leader and head of the prestigious Tebuireng Islamic religious boarding school, Salahuddin Wahid, maintained that the PKI represented a real threat to Muslims, citing historical examples such as the killing of several Islamic leaders by leftist troops in the aftermath of the 1948 Madiun Affair, a brief, failed seizure of the town of Madiun in East Java by these troops.²⁰ Later, in 1964–65, the left's land reform campaign, framed around furthering the government land redistribution agenda following the passage of the 1960 Agrarian Reform Law, resulted in further friction between the left and Muslims in East and Central Java.²¹ The campaign led to physical clashes between members of the leftist Indonesian Peasants' Front (Barisan Tani Indonesia, BTI) on one hand and supporters of landowners on the other, including Islamic activists who were opposed to the left and its land reform agenda, as they believed it disrupted existing patterns of landownership in the countryside. From the above perspective, NU's involvement in the violence is depicted as a response to PKI provocation. They believed that as victims of PKI harassment and violence, NU helped to suppress the left as an act of self-preservation, to stop a PKI-led coup attempt. In the post-Suharto era, NU leaders re-emphasized this claim to victimhood, long perpetuated by the organization under the New Order regime. They did so to counter accusations, including from within the organization itself, as discussed below, that its members had committed grave human rights abuses, and to exonerate the perpetrators.

The end of the regime led some NU members to begin to examine the role of their organization in the violence. Syarikat (Masyarakat Santri untuk Advokasi Rakyat, Muslim Community for Social Advocacy), founded by religious scholar and activist Imam Aziz, is a network of Islamic humanitarian youth organizations in Java that conducts activities to foster reconciliation.²² Syarikat's founding was partly inspired by the stance of former Indonesian president and NU leader Abdurrahman Wahid ("Gus Dur") who personally apologized in 2000 for his organization's role in the violence. Syarikat network members have brought together former political prisoners, NU and other interested parties in public discussions, film screenings and joint social and religious activities. These activities aimed to erode the longstanding mutual distrust in the community and provide new information about the 1965–66 events, such as through articles in its regular magazine *Ruas*.²³ Syarikat members suggest that NU members were victims to army manipulation to commit the violence. Although Syarikat activists concede that the victimhood of the left is distinctive from that of NU, in that NU members did not suffer the kinds of abuses the left did, the group's promotion of NU as victim also promotes a rather distorted history, in the cause of attempting to foster grassroots reconciliation.

Despite the clear evidence of extrajudicial killings, disappearances from prison, torture, rape and forced labour enacted against the left, some of their previous opponents continue to deny their victimhood. I have chosen to use the word "victim" in this article throughout, rather than "survivors," because of the contested nature of the word "victim" (*korban*) in Indonesia when it comes to this particular historical episode. While some victims, such as writer and former detainee Hersri Setiawan, have emphasized their dislike of the word, believing it to have passive connotations of its subject, nonetheless, to gain social acknowledgement as a victim is still the locus of the struggle in Indonesia when it comes to the 1965 events, and my recognition of the contested nature of the word "victim" has led me to use the word here.²⁴ In the context of this struggle, in less well-

known cases of anti-communist violence such as in south Blitar, the victims are even further removed from the centre of the debates on the identity of victims and their claims to redress.

South Blitar Villagers: Victims at the Margins

The south Blitar base was founded in approximately late 1966 as PKI leaders and activists retreated to the countryside to escape the persecution in Javanese cities. Its relative isolation was appealing to the fugitives. They relied on the help of villagers in south Blitar with whom they lived for several months, up to a year. In my interviews, some former fugitives related how they tried to reorganize by seeking out sources of support from the surrounding towns.²⁵ They also began bringing in small caches of arms, as they planned to resist the New Order regime from this base.²⁶ However, following reports of attacks against public servants and religious leaders in the surrounding areas that were blamed on these fugitives, the army under Major General Muhammad Jasin, commander of East Java's Brawijaya Division, mounted the Trisula operation in late May 1968. In my previous work, I discussed the government representation of the base as being highly armed and dangerous and how this exaggeration had long-lasting effects in denying the victimhood of the PKI leaders and activists who had sought refuge there.²⁷ At the operation's conclusion, the army found the base only had negligible amounts of arms.²⁸ The related question of accounting for the victimhood of the villagers in south Blitar is what this article is concerned with.

I show below how this group of villagers has had difficulties identifying and being recognized as victims of the anti-communist violence compared with former political prisoners and those whose family members were killed or disappeared. I then explore the reasons for their marginalization from the category of victims of the anti-communist violence. These reasons include a less than clearly identifiable relationship to the violence—they were affected later than the immediate years of 1965–66—as well as the implication of some villagers in attempts to resist the regime. They have, as a result, been engaged in transitional justice processes in very limited ways. This article discusses the experiences of villagers during the 1968 Trisula operation, then analyses how military and government treatment of the villagers fostered a sense of collective victimhood. Before doing so, however, I discuss the theoretical literature on victims and victimhood that I draw upon.

In this article, I explore the concept of victims' agency by drawing on the work of Meyers referred to earlier, as well as Kirsten McConnachie and Kieran McEvoy who show that in human rights and transitional justice discourses, victims are expected to be innocent and not engaging in political action, particularly in instances where violence might have been involved.²⁹ This poses some difficulties in the case of the south Blitar villagers, because there was some evidence of a strategy of armed resistance in the area against the new regime under Suharto. This strategy was applied by the political fugitives hiding in the area and supported by some villagers who were members or sympathizers of the PKI. Political support for the PKI was very high in South Blitar prior to October 1965, according to Brawijaya army commander Jasin.³⁰ In turn, I then consider how the fall of the New Order regime in May 1998 impacted the concepts of victim and victimhood in south Blitar, drawing on Steffen Jensen and Henrik Rønsbo's view of victimhood as consisting of "assemblages," or different ways of presenting and speaking about the self by victims over

time. In order to understand how these assemblages shift and alter at different points in time, they argue that it is necessary to study the “particular histories of victimhood, that is victims in their nonessentialized and ever-changing form.”³¹ According to Jensen and Rønsbo, in occupying their victimhood, victims are “caught in ongoing transactions, transactions and exchanges.”³² In this article, I analyse then how the fall of the regime affected victims’ self-identification in south Blitar and their capacity to negotiate new social and political terrains.

Echoing these views that victimhood is shaped and defined by time, history and space, historian Vincent Druliolle argues that victimhood is historically and socially constructed and the status of victims in society does not always directly correspond with the harm they suffered.³³ Defining victimhood as the identity, meaning and status of victims in society, he argues that victimhood is not a given, but rather the product of struggle. The relative status of different categories of victims depends on social and political conditions at different points in time and the power of each group of victims to press its claims. He cites the example of how victims of the authoritarian regime of General Franco receive less attention in Spain today when compared with those of the Basque pro-independence movement’s terror attacks. This difference can be attributed to the pact of silence that Spain’s political parties agreed to after Franco’s death and the Spanish state’s preoccupation with defeating the Basque pro-independence campaign in more recent times.³⁴ Franco’s victims were submerged out of view as a result of the pact of silence, while the terror victims of the Basque independence movement have risen as the “ideal victim.” The case of Spain is not unique. Victimhood in other post-conflict societies, including Indonesia, is also constituted in complex battles over meaning and resources that change over time. As the previous discussion on the place of Indonesian leftist victims suggests, the relative weakness of that category of victims in winning their claims to reparations and rehabilitation has also resulted in similarly limited gains for the victims of the Trisula operation.

The villagers at first seemed marginal to the status of victimhood in the anti-communist violence, but their experiences of the 1968 violence, and of the authorities’ monitoring and surveillance afterwards, created a sense of collective victimhood that extended beyond the generation that directly experienced the violence. I therefore draw accordingly on theoretical literature dealing with collective memory and postmemory to analyse how some south Blitar villagers and their descendants recalled and regarded the 1968 military operation and afterwards. Maurice Halbwachs shows that remembering takes place within a social context, in this case in rural areas in south Blitar, the scene of the operation.³⁵ Postmemory, according to Marianne Hirsch in relation to the Holocaust, “describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births, but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.”³⁶ There is, I have argued, evidence of the presence of postmemory in the way subsequent generations discuss the operation and its effects on their parents’ generation. Memories have been transmitted to the generations that did not directly experience the operation in south Blitar, to the extent that a collective sense of suffering and victimhood has arisen, including among those who did not directly experience the violence.

Villagers' Experiences of Trisula: Military Propaganda and Victim Classifications

The Trisula operation, which lasted just over three months from late May to early September 1968, resulted in 2,000 killed and thousands more detained and displaced.³⁷ The army reported that some 5,000 soldiers from six battalions and 3,000 militiamen were involved in the operation.³⁸ Villagers were evacuated from their villages, subjected to screenings and interrogations, and were not permitted to return for short periods of time or were relocated elsewhere.³⁹ The army instructed men to go on patrols with soldiers to capture fugitives and to pull up food crops to starve them.⁴⁰ In their effort to capture fugitives, the army's use of fire and heavy artillery destroyed villages and fields and traumatized residents. The army listed fifty-seven captured leaders and activists from the PKI and its mass organizations, as a result of the operation.⁴¹ Several base leaders were killed during the operation.

In the following section, I will discuss the army's treatment of villagers over the course of the operation and afterwards, and how such treatment contributed to the ongoing victimization of the villagers. At the beginning of the operation, the army portrayed them as innocent victims whose communities were occupied by leftist tyrants against their will. Despite the army's promotion of the view that it was there to save the population from communism, however, the villagers of south Blitar were mistrusted and punished for not doing enough to turn communists in. An army account of the operation noted that intelligence operations in the area ran into problems, because the population was "well-trained" to be secretive about matters to do with security.⁴² The propaganda the army disseminated in the area was a mixture of cajoling statements and threats for the population to stop helping the communists, informing them that the only viable option was to help the army.⁴³ Army leaders accused the villagers of harbouring and helping communist fugitives and refusing to cooperate. Indeed, some villagers actively helped the fugitives, acting as couriers, and hiding them.⁴⁴ They exercised their agency, knowing full well that these "newcomers" were on the run from the authorities—they were aware of this fact because some of them had been involved in leftist organizations before October 1965. In persecuting all the villagers, it did not seem convincing for the army to argue that it was saving them from communists.

After the operation, even with thousands detained and forced to report regularly to the authorities, the army took some decisive steps that affected all villagers to prevent south Blitar from becoming an anti-government base again. Military-approved village administrators and the East Java governor himself, Mohammad Noer, oversaw the process of cleansing south Blitar from opposition to the regime. In the reconstruction process, villages were redesigned, new roads were built and houses brought closer to the main roads to enable greater surveillance over the population. A major road linking south Blitar villages was renamed Trisula. Accused of being communist supporters, many villagers were detained and forced to work on public works projects.⁴⁵ Women were not as likely to be detained, but were also regarded as communist sympathizers. Some worked for the military as household servants and were forced to become soldiers' sexual companions.⁴⁶ The army sought ways to have children who were orphaned as a result of the operation removed from the area to live with new foster families—in their view, to minimize the risk of ill feeling or desires for revenge from descendants of those killed during

the operation.⁴⁷ Therefore, while the army won decisively in south Blitar in 1968, it continued the persecution beyond the operation itself, this time digging deep into the social fabric of the area.

The south Blitar villagers suffered from their inability to articulate their complex position as those who helped or tolerated the presence of leftist fugitives and then were themselves subjected to military incursions into the area. Long-term persecution by the government and military helped to foster a sense of collective victimhood, even though the villagers were not all affected by the violence in the same ways. The government and military treated villagers as equally suspect, with little regard for the degrees to which particular individuals had been implicated in helping fugitives. The villagers' case therefore complicates and expands our understandings of victim, in the context of the persecution of the left, beyond the leftist former political prisoner, who tends to be the main focus of advocacy campaigns by Indonesian NGOs.

In reality, most victims, including the south Blitar villagers, are morally compromised if they have exercised any agency in response to the political events in their area. Evidence of the presence of arms and militia training at the Blitar base and the government's use of this evidence to portray the area as the location of an insurrectionary guerrilla base complicate the claim to victimhood for the villagers.⁴⁸ Meyers argues that in international human rights discourses, victims are expected to be innocent and passive.⁴⁹ Similarly, McEvoy and McConnachie argue that, "when victims are not faultless, when they are in some sense 'deviant,'" they become "much more problematic, both as an object of public empathy, and in terms of their entitlement to formal compensation on the part of the state."⁵⁰

It is also easy in certain quarters to overlook how the lower social classes, such as peasants, exercise their agency. Historian Miguel La Serna shows, in the context of two groups of indigenous Peruvians and their relationship with the Shining Path armed guerrilla movement, that each group of peasants actively made choices about how they engaged with the guerrillas, but that many scholars and government officials overlook this fact.⁵¹ The south Blitar villages suffer from similar misunderstandings by outsiders about the nature of their community and their complex responses to leftist fugitives on one hand, and the military on the other. Meyers prefers to apply the concept of "burdened agency" to the experiences of victims, rather than innocence or heroism. She writes: "Burdened agency acknowledges that victims cannot escape from powers that inflict or threaten to inflict needless suffering on them, although it doesn't strip them of the agentic complexity and resilience that are characteristic of humanity."⁵² In south Blitar, some victims were involved in the activities of constructing and defending a base in their midst. They then chose to exercise their agency by resisting or not cooperating with the army once the arm of the authorities extended to their part of the world.

The Trisula Operation in Official State-Supported Memory

In the three decades following the end of the Trisula operation, the government stigmatized these marginalized villages as susceptible to supporting communism. Practices of propaganda and memorialization entrenched the perception of south Blitar as an area that must be closely watched. The New Order's 1986 propaganda film, *Operation Trisula: The Eradication of the PKI Remnants in South Blitar* [Operasi Trisula: Penumpasan Sisa-

Sisa PKI di Blitar Selatan], a military-sponsored production, kept alive the association of south Blitar with communism and the PKI, and perpetuated images of the villagers as vulnerable to communist infiltration.⁵³

In practices of commemoration, rituals and memorialization, the military constructed a monument, the Trisula monument in the sub-district capital Bakung, that celebrates victory over the communists.⁵⁴ Inaugurated in 1972, its design suggests that villagers fought the communists hand in hand with the military. The monument consists of five statues, three of members of the military and two of local peasants, a man and a woman. The five are shown standing together, presumably united in their battle against communism, perpetuating the army representation of the operation as being a joint effort with the local population. Legacies of the violence continue to be present in the physical landscape, such as the monument. They can also be found in the various rituals held there, for instance the ceremony commemorating Sacred Pancasila Day every year under the New Order. Political rituals also included the holding of Pancasila state ideology indoctrination courses at a higher frequency than elsewhere in Indonesia. They are held twice monthly in Bakung, earning it the title of “Pancasila village.”⁵⁵ The population voted overwhelmingly for Golkar, Suharto’s ruling party, in the six general elections held by the New Order, as if fearful of not being seen to support them.

In addition to political rituals and commemorations, the population was also subjected to restrictions such as needing permits (*surat jalan*) to leave the area, and having village activities being closely monitored. One young man complained to the press years later that even playing the guitar was not allowed during the Suharto era.⁵⁶ Furthermore, local authorities were careful to maintain ongoing surveillance, even against those who were not yet born in 1968. In another example, a church worker, Cecilia Yulianti Hendayani, noted that in 1996 she found the villagers of Banyu Urip withdrawn and silent, and they seemed afraid of newcomers to the village.⁵⁷ After several attempts to discover the reason for their attitude, she finally discovered that many of those displaced from other parts of south Blitar had made Banyu Urip their home in the late 1960s and the local government had marked seventy per cent of the 300 households living in Banyu Urip as pro-PKI.⁵⁸ Victimhood was, as a result, closely linked to south Blitar as a place and a related collective identity. Understanding the legacies of the violence must therefore take into account notions of place, space and collective memory.

Collective Grievances and Recovery

After the fall of the New Order regime, almost thirty years after the end of the Trisula operation, the extent of military and government surveillance decreased in south Blitar. The fall of the regime opened up new possibilities for the people of south Blitar to enter into different transactional relationships regarding their victimhood. “Now we are truly free,” a villager, Rudianto, told one journalist.⁵⁹ In the first elections held in the post-Suharto era, in 1999, voters shifted their allegiance away from Golkar towards other political parties.⁶⁰ The Trisula monument became neglected out of local disinterest and visitor numbers fell.⁶¹ Evidently, the villagers began to see new possibilities in the way in which their area, and they themselves, were regarded. But undoing the legacies of the past requires much effort on the part of the villagers and society more broadly.

In line with the concept of “assemblages” that Jensen and Rønsbo refer to, it was hard for south Blitar villagers to deal with collective victimhood in a situation where the “relations of exteriority,” relations with organizations and individuals who had not experienced the violence, did not always allow them to speak openly about their past under the New Order.⁶² The villagers had largely borne their victimization in silence in recognition of their past problematic history and the fact that they were the subjects of the New Order’s propaganda and its surveillance powers. The collective suffering gave rise to a sense of collective victimhood that in the main was not widely known beyond the area. As a result of the workings of collective memory, past grievances have been difficult to forget and overcome. Halbwachs theorized that memory is socially “localized” within the context of the groups we belong to, such as families and religious communities.⁶³ As he has contended, individual memory arises in connection with remembering that comes to us from our social milieu. Where the social milieu had suffered instances of violence, such suffering affects the kinds of collective and individual memories held in a particular area and community.

As a result of the social nature of memory and remembering, victims also possessed shared memories of suffering that were transmitted to the next generations who did not experience the operation directly. This phenomenon is related to Hirsch’s concept of postmemory regarding the violence. Postmemory’s presence in south Blitar was shown by my recent encounter with Pur (pseudonym), a labour activist born in south Blitar. Rather than photographs being the medium of postmemory for the second generation of Holocaust survivors, as in Hirsch’s case, in south Blitar, postmemory has been transmitted orally and through sites of memories. In 2015, Waru, another labour activist, introduced me to Pur through social media. Upon learning that I had researched and written about south Blitar, Waru encouraged him to tell me about his family’s experiences during the Trisula operation. Pur was born in the Kademangan area of south Blitar after the operation. During his childhood years, his uncles had recounted their memories of the violence to him. Without additional prompting from Waru, Pur told me, a relative stranger, that Banser forces, the paramilitary wing of Ansor, burnt down a hamlet in his area and that women had been abused in his village, including one of his aunts who had disappeared, taken away by the military.⁶⁴ On trips back home, he had taken Waru to local memory sites such as Luweng Tikus, or the Rat Hole, a vertical cave used as a burial site for detainees who had been killed during the operation, as well as to the beaches of the south coast, the scene of much of the operation. Pur had not experienced the operation first-hand, but was nevertheless able to take Waru to the sites significant in local memories of the operation. In Pur’s case, postmemory acts as a powerful trigger to recall a difficult past for his parents’ generation and to maintain a sense of grievance about their suffering.

Since the end of the regime, there has been a small degree of victim mobilization in south Blitar. Mobilization occurs through identifying more openly as victims of the 1968 operation and its aftermath, and being willing to take part in activities such as public speaking and being interviewed about past experiences. While there is still no victim association dedicated solely to the 1968 events, a small number of individuals from south Blitar joined national-level victims’ groups such as the Foundation for the Investigation of Victims of the 1965–66 Killings (Yayasan Penelitian Korban Pembunuhan, YPKP, 1965–66). But this mobilization still occurs in a very limited way, with only a

handful of former detainees having joined such groups; by my estimation, fewer than twenty individuals. This small number stands in contrast to the large number of victims of the 1968 military operation. The long-term stigmatization and victimization of the south Blitar area also call into question the kinds of initiatives that can lead to a collective destigmatization of this area and generations of its inhabitants.

For those who were born and raised in south Blitar but who did not directly experience the violence during their lifetimes, memories of Trisula live on through the sites that Pur had been told about and as postmemory. Postmemory can be a hindrance for the second generation, preventing them from moving on and seeing the future as one free of the stigma of Trisula. But memories can also provide residents with the tools to view their experiences differently. In a case of large-scale violence experienced collectively in a place such as south Blitar, place, and place-based scholarship and collective activities are possible remedies for victims to overcome the burden of stigmatization.

Such place-based and collective activities arose when a group of young activists in the nearby administrative centre and town of Blitar began to take an interest in the area to the south, being conscious of its controversial status in local lore. These activists were involved in one of the few local organizations that have played a crucial role in victim mobilization in Blitar, Lakpesdam NU, the Institute for the Development of Human Resources of the Nahdlatul Ulama. Lakpesdam NU in Blitar is part of the Syarikat network mentioned earlier, and its members often come from families who have supported NU for generations. Some Lakpesdam activists are related to men who were directly involved in suppressing communists in south Blitar.⁶⁵ They therefore risked alienation from their families and their religious communities by working with leftist victims and villagers who had been considered communist sympathizers. According to Budiawan, the links between the organization and south Blitar villagers and former detainees came about when the mother-in-law of a Lakpesdam activist, Baharuddin, met the son of former detainees from Bakung, south Blitar, whom she wanted to assist.⁶⁶ The young man worked in the market as a porter, as he had been unable to complete his schooling because of the family's poverty after both his parents had been detained. Lakpesdam activists began visiting the south Blitar area as a result of this personal connection.

Lakpesdam NU was the first organization in the network to conduct activities in support of reconciliation, when, in 2002, it organized a celebration of the Hijriah New Year at the Trisula monument. To get the community working together, Lakpesdam NU supported clean water pipeline projects in parts of south Blitar.⁶⁷ They worked with local men such as Dwi Purwanto, whose uncles were detained in 1968, to organize prayer groups involving former political prisoners and NU members, despite initial community suspicions.⁶⁸ Two Lakpesdam activists, a married couple, have been involved in the reconciliation activities described above, as well as in gathering oral histories with south Blitar villagers. They interviewed several local women and former political prisoners in the Blitar area about their experiences during the Trisula operation.

Victim Mobilization and Fears of a Communist Resurgence

Victim mobilization activities can reinforce victim hierarchies, though not necessarily due to the deliberate actions of these activists. Rather, the years of New Order stigmatization and threats against those perceived as being leftists have led to the victims experiencing

difficulties in being open about their past history, and this has helped to reinforce such hierarchies. The different kinds of abuses that victims suffered and social attitudes towards those abuses also helped to shape such hierarchies.

In the case of the anti-communist violence, some violent experiences and their victims are more frequently discussed than others. In south Blitar, former detainees (villagers as well as former leftist leaders) have been more prominent in joining victims' groups and giving interviews, even if at times they have spoken using pseudonyms, so the experience of detention has been more well known.⁶⁹ This is because detention can perhaps be more easily discussed with outsiders than other violent experiences, particularly of a sexual nature.

In 2008, I interviewed two former detainees, Yanto and Sudarman (pseudonyms) in the Wonotirto area of south Blitar. They had both been involved marginally in leftist organizations in the mid 1960s when both were in their late teens.⁷⁰ They helped the base by working as couriers, ferrying messages and guiding the fugitives through the local area. During a break in the interview, on my way to the bathroom, I encountered Yanto's sister, Suginem who had just returned from the cornfields. She asked about the purpose of my visit and I explained that I was interviewing her brother and brother-in-law about the Trisula operation. In response, Suginem said, "Why don't you interview me? I am a victim too." However, our plans to speak did not eventuate, as she suffered ill health, but according to a transcript of her interview with Lakpesdam NU activists, the army had killed Suginem's husband by plunging him into the deep vertical cave called the Rat Hole. She was then forced to be the "wife" of a soldier who was posted as the head of her village for seven years.⁷¹ She helped Yanto and Sudarman to survive their detention by sending them food to supplement their meagre rations. Suginem's victimhood was much more complicated, and potentially shameful, than that of the two men who had been detained for several months after the operation. Women such as Suginem, therefore, did not readily disclose their identity as victims, for example by joining victims' groups or being interviewed by researchers from outside the area, even though Suginem told researchers that her past experiences did not stigmatize her in the eyes of the villagers in her own immediate environment.

Much of the oral history interviews that the Lakpesdam NU activists have collected, such as that with Suginem, remains unpublished, although these could form the beginnings of a history project about south Blitar, to return to the theme of place-based and collective activities that can address the past stigmatization of south Blitar villagers. To avoid the sensitivities related to writing about this past, such a project could position itself as part of local history making and life story gathering. Regional histories have captured long-term changes as a result of the 1965 events, as evident from several scholarly works on other parts of Indonesia, such as those by Terance Bigalke on Tana Toraja and Robert Hefner on the Tengger people of East Java.⁷² Histories of the village and of long-term change could also uncover various dimensions about the violence and its long-term effects, as well as re-knit the fabric of the community and restore a sense of community pride, particularly among youth born after the operation. As well as alternative history projects, educationalist Cecilia Hendayani has demonstrated the possibility of using other methods to restore the confidence of south Blitar villagers.⁷³ She established an inter-faith school, a playgroup and small discussion groups on "tolerance and mutual appreciation" in Banyu Urip village to enable the villagers to speak more freely together and to learn strategies for expressing differences among themselves.

As well as Lakpesdam NU, another NGO in the Blitar area working with small groups of victims is the Post (Provision of Social Transformation) Institute, founded by a group of Lakpesdam activists working on issues of local democracy and transparency in 2005.⁷⁴ They focus on the provision of assistance for agriculture and to access government social welfare programmes, in recognition that the violence had resulted in structural economic hardship for south Blitar villagers. It has held several meetings with those it identified as “1965 victims,” bringing them together with agricultural experts, representatives from the National Human Rights Commission and the NU-aligned Tebuireng religious boarding school.⁷⁵ The involvement of Salahuddin Wahid’s Tebuireng school in this activity is significant, because of its staunchly anti-communist stance, not only under Wahid but also under his predecessors. The “1965 victims” involved in this activity were some of the same people with whom Lakpesdam NU works, namely victims of the 1968 Trisula operation. Therefore, in this case, by blurring boundaries between “1965” and the events thereafter, the status of “1965 victims” has expanded to refer to those affected by the 1968 Trisula operation.

Former political detainees and villagers from south Blitar also took some tentative steps towards collective memory work when three of them participated in the Yogyakarta Biennale on 28 November 2015, in collaboration with painter and performance artist Moelyono.⁷⁶ Together with several former detainees from the Yogyakarta area and members of the group KIPPER (Kiprah Perempuan, Women’s Initiative), they performed traditional Javanese tunes and other songs under Moelyono’s direction to showcase older cultural forms such as *tetembangan* (a form of Javanese singing). The performance was part of a series of activities held in conjunction with the “1965 Moving Museum,” an exhibition featuring personal objects and testimonies of leftist victims. They performed publicly at a prestigious national art event, but organizers identified them only as performers from Blitar, rather than south Blitar. Their caution was perhaps due to the fact that the term “south Blitar” could have resulted in anti-communist intimidation and threats against the event.

Local activists, in concert with some victims in south Blitar, have slowly tried to repair the rifts from the past through organizing and participating in local activities, but whether they have been successful in fostering reconciliation is less clear. Some victims of the 1968 Trisula operation have begun to step out and identify and mobilize as victims of a violent military operation and of collective stigmatization and abuse of their rights by the government. But their numbers remain small and they risk attack from those who want to silence them. The district administrator of Blitar ended attempts to exhume human remains from the Rat Hole by the Indonesian NGO Kasut Perdamaian, led by Ester Jusuf, in 2002, arguing that it could create social instability.⁷⁷ There continues to be a great deal of sensitivity in the Blitar area, and indeed in all of Indonesia, regarding activities that highlight the anti-communist violence, with opponents of the left portraying the mobilization of victims in its diverse forms, despite its modest nature, as the re-mobilization of the PKI. The return of the PKI would, in their view, lead to violence against religious forces and complete moral degradation.

Victims’ capacity to be open about their past is limited by intimidation from groups opposed to reopening discussions about the anti-communist violence. In July 2015, Banser, the paramilitary wing of Ansor, held a rally in Blitar pledging to slaughter adherents of “new style communism” in the town.⁷⁸ With rumours that President Joko Widodo was planning to apologize to the “1965 victims,” a similar rally was held in Blitar on 30

September 2015, where demonstrators declared that a new group of leftist organizations in the town, including the Post Institute, constituted “a new style of communism.”⁷⁹ One activist blamed the Post Institute’s activities for bringing special attention to former leftists and “provoking” the anti-communist rallies in the town, thus showing that pressures from anti-communists have, to a certain extent, contributed to friction between pro-reconciliation groups.⁸⁰

Conclusion

The victim status confers a certain amount of authority in post-conflict settings. In Indonesia, despite evidence of the left having suffered mass violence in 1965–66 at the hands of the security forces and their allies, the status of victim continues to be denied them. In the absence of a clear consensus about the events surrounding the violence, claims to victimhood have arisen among perpetrator communities, as ways to exonerate perpetrators or to enact grassroots reconciliation with their victims. The violence was massive and complex, however, and was not confined only to 1965–66; anti-communist persecution continued beyond those years, as the case of the 1968 Trisula operation shows.

Within the hierarchies of victimhood, some types of suffering are easier to discuss and address than others. The expectation in human rights practice and literature for victims to be innocent and not morally compromised has reinforced victim hierarchies and complicated the possibility of providing redress for as wide a category of victims as possible. South Blitar villagers who suffered extrajudicial killings, detention, sexual violence and forced labour, as well as the transformations of their everyday life, have difficulties in articulating their victimhood, given their agentic complexity in how they dealt with leftist political fugitives and the military.

While the end of the Suharto regime reduced the level of surveillance and persecution, it has proven difficult to overturn the sensitivities surrounding the south Blitar area and for the victims to substantially overcome their fears. To that end, we have not seen a high degree of involvement by them in victim mobilization and memory activities. Based on an assessment of the activities of the few local non-government organizations that advocate for the victims in the south Blitar region, I suggest that overturning the area’s stigmatization and dissolving the sense of collective grievance could occur through creating collective, village histories and fostering community activities that avoid the characterization of these villages as only “PKI bases.” However, judging by recent opposition in the area to discussions on history and anti-communism, such attempts may likely founder. Despite greater openness in the post-Suharto period, and efforts by activists and some victims to place these experiences of violence on the public record, an increase in activities by anti-communist groups has pressured them to act cautiously or to retreat altogether.

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