ON THE USES AND ABUSES OF THE PAST IN INDONESIA

Beyond the Mass Killings of 1965

Ann Laura Stoler

Over the past two years, there has been an explosion of interest in opening frank discussion of a past that has been literally unspeakable in Indonesia's public sphere for some 35 years, the mass killings in 1965–66. New queries from activists and academics, Indonesians, and foreign researchers have been marked by an effort to understand Indonesian political violence as something that has a history—neither as an anomaly nor as a situation gone awry that erupted suddenly from nowhere. The work of such scholars as Geoffrey Robinson is a forceful reminder that the 1965 Coup was not about the *beginnings* of a military-dominated state in Indonesia but rather, as Adrian Vickers notes, "the *culmination* of a politics in which the military or state-based coercion have been central at least since the colonial era."[1]

This is an important intervention with which the articles in this special issue of *Asian Survey* concur. In nuanced ways, they too show the events of 1965–66 as part of a national, regional, and transnational history of a longer colonial, and postcolonial, durée. They too link violence to the structure of the state and demand a new historiography that confronts rather than circumvents people's diverse and disparate experiences of those years. Several of the essays rightly put on trial a paradigm of anthropology that has celebrated Java's "shared poverty," aestheticized Bali's past, and celebrated Borneo's

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1. Adrian Vickers, "Reopening Old Wounds: Bali and the Indonesian Killings—A Review Article," *Journal of Asian Studies* 57:3 (August 1998), p. 780; and Geoffrey Robinson, *The Dark Side of Paradise: Political Violence in Bali* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

"primitive" headhunting culture by rendering "culture" removed from politics and by defining "the political" in political economy in limited and parochial ways.[2]

In speaking to important and challenging problems, these articles represent openings that could not have been on the Indonesian political agenda several years ago. They offer a rich set of questions about how people remember trauma and what narratives are considered plausible to construct around this subject. They prompt us to ask more about the circuits of knowledge production in contemporary Indonesia: who can speak about the past, to whom, and in what way. They prompt more queries about whose evidence counts, whose narratives have currency, and whose "facts" are credible. Not least, they demand careful consideration of the new political contexts that delegitimize public amnesia and may encourage people to reframe and recount their memories, rather than forget.

But the articles also raise another troubling question: why does this intense focus on the killings appear on the academic and political agenda today? From the vantage point of someone who has long worked on colonial culture in Indonesia and its legacies, for me these provocative essays also demand questions about the possible histories enabled and foreclosed by a focus on '65. With this in mind, in this brief commentary I look at some of the distinct and very different consequences of the questions about '65 prompted by these papers, and address why some questions may be more pressing and possible to speak to than others.

If any subject confirms the notion that effective history must always be a "history of the present," nowhere is this more clear than in how Indonesians choose to remember the internment, torture, and mass killings of alleged members of what was, just prior to 1965, a legal part of Indonesia's political landscape, the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI, Partai Komunis Indonesia) and its affiliate unions and organizations. It should be no surprise that the past is being raided as a powerful tool in the present. Nancy Peluso reminds us that the past can serve both as a "weapon of the weak" *and* as a weapon of elite control. How Indonesians are raiding, will raid, and are rewriting that history—as these papers show—is still up for grabs.

Walter Benjamin's disquieting injunction comes to mind: "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was." It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."[3]

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2. Nancy Peluso, "Weapons of the Wild: Strategic Uses of Violence and Wildness in the Rain Forests of Indonesian Borneo," paper presented at the Conference on Mass Political Violence in Southeast Asia, February 16–17, 2001, University of California, Berkeley; also in *In Search of the Rainforest*, ed. Candace Slater (forthcoming).

3. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations,* ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1976), p. 255.

The current preoccupation with 1965 is an opening, an invitation, and a moment of danger. But what constitutes *this* moment of danger and what constituted *that* moment of danger in the early 1960s resonate in very different and unsettling ways. As Elizabeth Collins and earlier Indonesia observers have noted, the current regional violence can be understood both as part of a longer history of state and local violence and also in part as a legacy of the 1960s, if not '65.[4] Mary Zurbuchen emphasizes more an "inscribed collective memory" that might serve to avert a new moment of danger, which might help turn revenge into reconciliation.[5] What underlies each of these analyses is a warning that takes the form of a search for commensurabilities, be they similarities or differences, with the animosities and fears of the past. All of the analyses ask the question Robert Cribb poses most explicitly when he notes that, "[t]he greatest unresolved question of the killings is not 'whodunit' but 'can *it* happen again'?"[6] Or, as alternately framed by Elizabeth Collins, Nancy Peluso, and Joseph Nevins, is "it" already happening again before our unknowing eyes? Both Cribb and Collins suggest that we may be witness to an emergent form of mass violence, but we do not recognize it as such because we do not know how to see and what to ask.

But what is crucial here in the question "can it happen again?" is not only the "again" but what constitutes the "it." For the "it" is a moving target defined by different constituencies in wholly different ways. For the military and its supporters, the "it" that may happen again is the rise of communism and a progressive, left-wing populism supportive of it. For others, the "it" is not communism per se in its Cold War manifestation but rather, popular, aboveboard, and public forms of political mobilization that were criminalized in the New Order regimes after '65. For some, the "it" is authoritarian military rule, not what has come to be known as the September 30, 1965, "Untung Coup" by alleged communists, but the repressive military counter-coup of October 1, 1965, that followed and the proclivity for a form of political control that produced and fed off the possibility and incitement of political violence to maintain its rule. In short the "it," for many, is the return of any semblance of a military-backed, Suharto-style regime. For others still, the "it" that can happen again is less clearly specified but thought to be just as dangerous, namely, the rise and legitimation of technologies of rule that make it both feasible and sensible for the government to target a segment of a

4. See Peluso, "Weapons of the Wild"; Elizabeth Collins, "Indonesia: A Violent Culture?" *Asian Survey*, this issue; and Joseph Nevins, "The Making of 'Ground Zero' in East Timor in 1999," *Asian Survey*, this issue.

5. Mary Zurbuchen, "History, Memory, and the '1965 Incident' in Indonesia," *Asian Survey*, this issue.

6. Emphasis added, see Robert Cribb, "Unresolved Problems in the Indonesian Killings of 1965–1966," *Asian Survey*, this issue.

population as "the enemy within," from which the national body needs to be protected and regularly cleansed.[7] Here the "it" is a state that produces, fosters, and condones violence, and that also, as Nevins notes, receives international support for strategies and then renames the problem "mass violence," attributes it to Indonesian character, and calls state violence by other names.

Robert Cribb's essay sets out some of these questions but leaves open their priority. He reviews the how and why of the killings, and four principal approaches to accounting for them. He asks how many were killed and why it is important to investigate these killings now. But, as many of these articles suggest, the intrigues within the army that produced the coup and counter-coup also limit the historical and political landscape of the story. The more fundamental problem is to ask about the conditions of possibility that allowed Suharto to come to power and remain in power for as long as he did. The question then would not be so much "why?" and "because of what?"[8] but rather, as Michael van Langenberg asks, *how* a political culture could have been formed on the basis of mass violence used to build a state system more powerful than before, one that "so markedly change[d] the civil society within a generation."[9] Van Langenberg's attention to "a changed civil society" is important and on the mark. At issue is whether and to what extent a preoccupation with the killings may discourage or even disallow a historical understanding of the sociological and political coordinates of that changed civil society.

Cribb argues that for many Indonesians the truth of the killings seems to be a low-priority issue and that there is "a strong case for allowing the memories of 1965–66 to die unrecorded." But wondering whether the Indonesian people "should be liberated from the specter of the past" is not a viable option. The question is not whether Indonesians should (whose "should" is this, anyway?) be liberated from a past that an older generation may prefer to forget, but rather, how knowing the past can reshape the political possibilities today. As Cribb notes, there are strong generational differences between those who lived those years and a younger generation that has known no other reality

7. On the political rationality that condones mass murder as a "defense of society against itself," see Michel Foucault's Collège de France lectures, *Il Faut Défendre la Société* [Society must be defended] (Paris: Gallimard, 1997); and my discussion of these lectures in Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 55–94.

8. As Robert Cribb notes in enumerating the discarded theories that emerged after '65 among foreign scholars, these included the thesis that Indonesia was a more violent culture than Westerners had wanted to imagine and Indonesians had acknowledged. See Cribb, "Unresolved Problems."

9. Michael van Langenberg, "Gestapu and State Power in Indonesia," in *The Indonesian Killings 1965–1966*, ed. Robert Cribb (Clayton, Victoria, Australia: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1990), p. 62, quoted in Vickers, "Reopening Old Wounds," p. 783.

than the repressive, silencing tactics of the New Order. But for this younger generation, schooled with purged history books and with access only to bookstores immaculately emptied of ways of making sense of the world into which they were born, liberation from the past cannot be attained by forgetting but by knowing how their lives have been shaped by it. Older people may want to forget for good reasons, as I discuss below, but young people looking toward the future seem convinced that they themselves need to know.

Some analysts turn to the broader social landscape of 1965 to ask about the possibility for violence and the increasing amounts of it in Indonesia today. Thus, Elizabeth Collins, like Cribb, asks if "it can happen again," when she compares south Sumatra's mob violence in 1998 with that violence produced by the tensions of the 1960s and the slaughters of 1965 and after. By her account, both periods are marked by a failing legitimacy in the political regime, a student-led democracy movement that legitimated the expression of raw anger, an unjust distribution of wealth, and the rise of paramilitary youth groups that attack persons rather than property. Not least is the absence of a means for redressing violations of rights. As Collins notes, state violence was endemic to the New Order regime and actively produced by it. In Michael Taussig's terminology, it was a "culture of terror," in which violence was not a preserved possibility but one that was coercively persuasive—an active and recurrent force. But parallels between the public culture of contemporary Indonesia and that of Indonesia in the immediate postcolonial period may be forced. A civil society and public sphere that produced a thick groundswell of popular participation in the 1950s look very different from today's equivalent (now with a fatter middle class and a thinner segment of organic intellectuals). The analogy may be less viable when the distinctive social history and the active public sphere of the 1950s is drawn more fully into that comparative story.

Mary Zurbuchen turns in another direction, to examine the representations of 1965 as elements in Indonesia's collective past that are so prevalent in contemporary discourse. She rightly characterizes what Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls the "silencing of the past" as an emblem of the New Order, which appropriated "1965" as part of a language of terror and as a tool of governance—as distinct from 1965 as a topic of history. She argues for the value of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission on a South African model but attributes the successive failures of attempts to make such a commission work more to the failure of *reformasi* and national reconciliations than to the collapse of the investigations. With tempered confidence that a Truth Commission is still viable, Zurbuchen underscores the positive goals that could be served: to establish a public record, to suggest reforms, and to provide a forum for society to listen to the voices of victims themselves. Whether it is "the truth" of the engineering of the 1965–66 killings or, as Jemma Purdey

notes, the "multiple truths" of the Jakarta-based violence in May 1998, in both cases it is the memories of the victims that "were seen to pose a threat to the preferred representation of this violence demanded by those in positions of power."[10] "Giving voice to the victims" of state violence, then, entails more than consciousness of the state's systematic suppression. It requires a political space that Indonesia's state structures of dominance have refused, and continue to disallow.

But if it were possible, what would be on trial? If it is the events of 1965–66, then there is little in common with the situation in South Africa. What would have to be on trial would be the sustained terror of Suharto's New Order regime and, as Nevins urges, those states that colluded with it. Apartheid was a systemic structure of racialized rule, and South Africa's truth commission was not confined to any one event. If it is the New Order for and from which some form of redemption and forgiveness must be sought, then the task may be more difficult than Zurbuchen suggests. The option not to focus on individual perpetrators and assign culpability but rather to "build a comprehensive picture of the extent of the killings, their deep and abiding impact on Indonesian society, and the horrific violence as institutionalized and made possible," is rightly the work of a commission, but not it alone. As Zurbuchen notes, it must be based on personal histories that are possible to speak and to share. People have to be able to tell stories that are grounded and experienced, instead of those scripted with visions of rivers clogged with mutilated bodies and running thick with blood (such as those reported by Benjamin White that are still told by teenagers in villages northwest of Yogyakarta, where there has never been evidence of any killings).

Truth-seeking commissions are state projects with genealogies that go back to colonial governance and that have taken on many different forms. As social psychologist Robert Zajonc and philosopher Michel Foucault both argue, massacres are made real, pressing, urgent, and acceptable as "moral imperatives" that are endowed with necessity and that recruit their practitioners in the name of a common good. Like massacres, state commissions are a part of political rationalities: massacres are justified by moral stories of "internal enemies" against which society and the body politic need to be defended; state commissions are moral stories that states tell themselves.[11]

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10. Jemma Purdey, "Problematizing the Place of Victims in *Reformasi* Indonesia: A Contested Turth about the May 1998 Violence," *Asian Survey*, this issue.

11. Robert Zajonc, "Zoomorphism of Human Collective Violence," in L. Newman and R. Erber, eds., *What Social Psychology Can Tell Us about the Holocaust: Understanding the Perpetrators of Genocide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, in press); Michel Foucault, "Faire Vivre et Laisser Mourir: La Naissance du Racisme" [Live and let die: The birth of racism], *Les Temps Modernes* [Modern Times] (February 1991), pp. 37–61. On commissions as moral stories, see

In parallel, research by anthropologist Nancy Peluso similarly interprets the ethnic war in West Kalimantan in December 1996 as reminiscent of the violence that wracked the rain forests in the 1960s, showing that "it," i.e., sustained ethnic violence, can happen and is happening again. She argues that the rain forest as a "landscape of conquest" has provided an enduring image and icon that has both mobilized and obscured counterinsurgency tactics. But the Borneo headhunter has not been merely an image worked over by Suharto and the Western press. These are images that the Dayaks have turned back on their creators and appropriated and embellished to explain the form and content of their acts. The politics of naming someone or some place as "violent" or "wild" does not rest as the privilege of those in power alone, a familiar colonial mirror image of a Western subject and civilizing self. Peluso shows how Dayaks have both used those images and, in turn, have been caught by them.[12] As the philosopher Ian Hacking describes it, such categories produce a "looping effect," namely, processes in which subjects work to fit their designations. Such images can be traced back through historical memory to earlier ones, but "originary" stories are not what this analysis should be about. Such categories are part of the modern technologies of colonial and postcolonial states, part of statecraft that depends on taxonomies of simplification for control.

Other Stories to Tell

Each of these articles is grounded and revealing of how Indonesians are making use of the past, and in part, they answer why it is '65 on which so much contemporary focus is placed. The essays address why people are making it a usable past in such different ways, and why many others, who lived it, want to turn their backs and get away. But this riveting focus on the events surrounding, and the climate leading up to, 1965 may obscure another set of narratives and another set of stories. It is reasonably assumed that people in Indonesia turn away from '65 because it was horrific and they want to forget. But it may also be that there are other times to remember that hold more possibilities for the future. For some Indonesians, the events of 1965 and the Suharto years themselves may represent only an episode in a longer history from which they might not choose to turn away.

For the current focus on '65 and the histories that write the 1950s as the foreground to it, demand a very specific narrative with its own teleology. They make all that happened before '65 little more than a prelude, a culmination of an inevitability of what might be envisioned in other ways. The point

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Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton (Capetown: David Philip, forthcoming).

12. Peluso, "Weapons of the Wild," in *In Search of the Rainforest*.

is this. Obsession with getting '65 "straight" may silence another past that we have only begun to reimagine and bring into focus—one in which '65 was not inevitable or a predestined story. This is not to romanticize popular participation and the viability of a public sphere before the Coup. But it is to take seriously Michael van Langenberg's astute observation that there was once another civil society in Indonesia that rapidly changed. It is to take up Adrian Vickers's observations, based on interviews with those who were politically active in the 1950s, that show those people to be more "modern," as he puts it, and more politically progressive, than can ever be reported in Indonesian public discourse. It confirms interviews that Benjamin White carried out over the past few years in his restudy of Kali Loro, the central Javanese village where we both worked in the early 1970s.[13] There, people talked with excitement about the 1950s as "the years of living dangerously," because the years held promise and evidence of venues for popular participation on the ground. Vickers's and White's observations are supported by my own. Former members of progressive social and political organizations such as LEKRA (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, Institute for the People's Culture); SOBSI (Sarekat Organisasi Buruh Seluruh Indonesia, League of Labor Organizations in Indonesia); and SARBUPRI (Sarekat Buruh Perkebunan Republik Indonesia, League of Plantation Laborers of the Indonesian Republic) (whom I interviewed when they were exiled in Beijing) retain vivid memories of a vibrant intellectual and political environment of which they saw themselves a part.

The point is not to reinvent this period as one of full representation and grassroots activism that were equally shared. On the contrary, my research in the 1980s suggests the opposite. Because of the uneven participation and limited leadership of common workers and small landholders in the people's militias and labor militias (*laskar rakyat* and *laskar buruh*, respectively) in the revolutionary period between 1945 and 1949, when those units reconvened in an organized labor movement in the early 1950s, there was often limited involvement of landless and estate workers in decision-making tactics for squatter acquisitions and labor strikes.[14] Nevertheless, the early 1950s was a time when there was a public, vocal, and local discourse about land and labor rights, a time when it was not a crime to congregate on a village corner—something that village heads, for decades after 1965, were instructed to prohibit. It was a time of critical thinking about what was happening on other parts of the scarred, decolonizing world, when kiosks across Sumatra and Java had pamphlets and books by Marx, Lenin, and Shakespeare, just as

13. Benjamin White (personal communication); Vickers, *Reopening Old Wounds*, p. 784.

14. Ann Laura Stoler, "Working the Revolution: Plantation Laborers and the People's Militia in North Sumatra," *Journal of Asian Studies* 47:2 (May 1988), pp. 227–47.

some bookstalls in Yogyakarta in 1998 were brimming over with quick translations of French social theorists such as Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault.

What is striking in talking to former *Tapol* (i.e., political prisoners, *tahanan politik*) internees is the social landscape that they remember. Making room for new histories that situate the events of 1965 as one of many possibilities, rather than as a predestined outcome, may be one way of reviving a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in another form. Such multiple histories would give credence to the fact that both political violence *and* progressive politics were part of a reality that was widely shared. It would provide a context for understanding that even before the advent of the Internet and its fast-fire communications that circumvent official censorship, people participated in circuits of knowledge production and critical exchange that sometimes landed them in the Philippines and Paris, as much as in Moscow and Beijing. Violence is part of that history, but there are other stories of popular participation in social and economic reform that do not reduce to party politics and extreme polarization on every front. These submerged accounts may open into other ways of remembering that locate a broader horizon of possibilities and remind people that there are other histories to write and stories to tell.

It may be that Indonesia's "postcolonial" period from 1948 to 1965 forged cultural and political literacies and transnational sensibilities about equity and distribution of resources that are worth rethinking now. Popular and local histories of the 1950s should not be overshadowed, as they have been for so long, by constant rehearsals of 1965. Both times are part of the sedimented habitus of people who have lived a range of postcolonial moments, who retain different senses of what has made Indonesia's history, and who trust in different ways of recounting and reviving their remembrances of it.