Seeing the Indonesia’s past from my village:

A narrative report

By Budiawan

_Mdm. Danielle Mitterand’s visit_

I had never dreamed before that the river near the village where I grew up was visited by the former first lady of France, Mdm. Danielle Mitterand. It was February 2, 1999, eight months after Suharto stepped down following the mass student demonstrations and racialized pogroms in a number of big cities in Indonesia, Mdm. Mitterand and a number of French and Indonesian human rights advocates visited the river. Another group of visitors coming with them were tens of former political prisoners who had been accused of being involved in the September 30, 1965 events, i.e., the kidnapping and killing of six top army officers and a lieutenant. (Since the Indonesian Communist Party [or the PKI] was accused of having masterminded the killing, anybody having been associated with the Party was either killed or imprisoned without trials for years).

The river is called Kali Simping. Its upper course is located in the foot of Mt. Merapi, Central Java. It extends from the north down to the south, joining the larger one called Kali Dèngkèng in the southern part Klaten regency.

The site where Mdm. Mitterand and her companions visited was the Simping bridge of the Yogyakarta – Surakarta highway. It is around 20 kms east of Yogyakarta. Those visitors were walking around below the bridge. At first some were only observing the landscape of the river, the rest were busily taking pictures. But later on they flocked together, listening to the talk of somebody as if he had been the tour guide. Meanwhile
the cameras of the journalists were focused on Mdm. Mitterand, who looked listening attentively, and then on the narrator.

It was such a rare event that local villagers, especially the youngsters, were curious why a group of tourist-looking foreigners – in accompany with a number of Indonesians – visiting the river. At first they suspected that those foreigners were likely interested in the changes of the physical landscape of the river, as it used to be a sandy river but the sand had already gone. The sand was exploited massively ten years before for building the World Bank-funded-Kedungombo Dam in Boyolali, around 50 kms away from the bridge. Not only the sand in the river, but also piles of sand on both sides had already been exploited. They realized that the exploitation of the sand – the sand itself was originated from Mt. Merapi’s great eruption in early 1930s – had destroyed the environment. Piles of sand on both sides of the river had prevented floods every time the rainy season came. But, once again, the piles of sand had already gone, so that the muddy riverbed is just two meters lower than the paddy fields and villages on both sides.

Having been conscious of the importance of environment conservation, those villagers had some guilty feeling, as they had taken a part in the exploitation of the sand. However, such a feeling disappeared as they found that the interest of those visitors was to learn what happened in the river in 1965-1966. Now, the local populace, especially the elders, turned to be informants of the past events, instead of being the spectators of those visitors. They turned to be the hosts of those visitors; and the river turned to be a space where the local villagers’ memories of the past events in situ were articulated publicly, not only before their local counterparts, but also before a number of foreigners having a deep concern in human rights issue, implying that the villagers’ testimonies could likely
be echoed internationally. In short, the visit of Mdm. Mitterand and her companions was a moment triggering the local populace ‘to begin to remember the past’.

Recalling the bloody past

A local populace called Suyitno, he was then 68 years old, was one of the informants speaking to those visitors. He himself was a former political prisoner. He was imprisoned from November 1965 to December 1969.¹ He said that he was ‘lucky’ since he was ‘only’ imprisoned for four years due to being categorized into ‘political detainee of Group C’ by the team of interrogators. By such a category he was suspected to have some indication as a sympathizer of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) or its subsidiary organizations. He admitted that he had been active in the People’s Youth (Pemuda Rakyat) – one of the PKI’s subsidiary organizations – of the local chapter. However, he convinced his audience, by the time the PKI was a legal organization. So, as he knew nothing about what really happened in Jakarta on the eve of October 1, 1965, he perceived his imprisonment as an injustice.

What is interesting to note in relation to the visitors’ question on ‘what happened in the Simping River in 1965-1966’ was Suyitno’s testimonies on the early months of his imprisonment in Klaten, the town located in the middle between Yogyakarta dan Surakarta, just 10 kms from the bridge. He told that every night a number of political detainees were asked to leave the cell rooms, but they never returned. Rumors were

¹ In Central Java, one of the strongholds of the PKI, the mass arrests and killings of the (so-called) communists began just three weeks after the killing of the six top Army officers happened in Jakarta. During the time ‘nothing happened’, but the situation was already tense, as the Army propaganda of exterminating the PKI was already launched. Those who felt to have some association with the PKI or its subsidiary organizations were either living in hiding or submitting themselves to the local military headquarters, expecting that they would be ‘questioned’ only, without realizing that it was the beginning of their imprisonment without trials.
spread out among the political detainees that those who had been asked to leave but never returned had been killed somewhere outside the town. As far as he heard of, he added, Kali Simping was one of the killing fields of those political detainees.

By such rumors as if every political detainee was supposed to be in waiting the turn ‘to be asked to leave but would never return’. Such a situation was terrorizing, Suyitno said. The more one was concerned with such a situation, the more likely one got mad. ‘Not a few detainees got mad, before finally died due to being starved’, he added.

Then, Suyitno continued, one night after three months being detained, most of the political detainees were asked to leave the cell rooms, to flock together in the yard of the detention house. They were wondering what would happen to them. They wondered if they would be killed ‘somewhere outside the town’. But, they were not sure as it was a big number, hundreds or perhaps more than a thousand political detainees. Normally there were only five to ten political detainees ‘who were asked to leave but never returned’.

Finally, Suyitno told, they knew what would happen to them after the commander of the detention house gave some briefing: they would be removed to somewhere in another part of Central Java. It was Nusakambangan Island, an offshore small island of the harbor town of Cilacap. Since then, he said, the stories of he and his fellow political detainees were concerning with the struggle for survival. He no longer heard about a political detainee being asked to leave the cell room but never returned.

In relation to Suyitno’s testimony about the political detainees ‘who were asked to leave but never returned’, another informant called Sudiman, who was then 50 years old and he had never been a political detainee, told about what he heard and saw by the end
of 1965. By then he was just 16 years old, and as none of his families was active in any subsidiary organizations of the PKI, nobody in his family was imprisoned. However, it does not mean that he was not affected by the situation at the time.

‘During the day’, Sudiman told, ‘the situation looked calm. Things looked normal. Farmers went to the rice field. Traders went to the market. School children went to schools, although they found that the number of their teachers was decreasing, as some had been imprisoned, or even killed. But, at night, things were different. Nobody went out. Nobody put on the kerosene lamp outside the houses. It was completely dark. And we heard the roar of military trucks passing through the village road to this river. Then … Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! ….. We were scared. But, nobody dared to go out. We remained in our houses. Several minutes later we heard the roar of the military trucks passing through the village road, leaving this river’.

‘Later in the morning’, Sudiman added, ‘as we went out, we asked one another whether anybody knew what had happened the night before. Nobody knew exactly, of course. Yet, as we heard the roar of the military trucks passing through the village road to this river, we went here, to see what might have happened here the night before. We found human blood and several corpses buried down just half a meter deep. Even one corpse was just laid down here below the bridge. We did not dare to take the corpses and bury them in the village graveyard. We were afraid of being accused as the sympathizers of the PKI, as we realized that those were the corpses of the PKI. We only buried down the laid corpse here, and buried the rest deeper’.
‘Months after Gestok\(^2\), Sudiman continued, ‘not every night but quite often we heard the same thing at night: the roar of military trucks passing through the village road to the river, then …. Bang! …Bang! ... Bang!... And then the military trucks were leaving the river. We were no longer curious of what had happened. We were only curious whether we had been familiar with any of the dead corpses. None. None of them was familiar to us. They were political detainees from other areas. None of our village neighbors who had been arrested was shot dead here. What we did was the same: to bury down the unburied corpses, and to bury deeper the corpses who were just buried shallowly. Then, our talk was always about the number of corpses we had found that morning. Things were running like this until December 1965’.

While listening to the testimony, the visitors, including Mdm. Mitterand and her fellow French citizens, who could understand the testimony through the translation by an Indonesian political exile who had been French by citizen, Mr. Umar Said (or André Aumar as his French adopted name), looked between ‘believing and not believing’. They believed that the story was factually true, but they did not believe that Indonesia had witnessed such a bloody past. They now realized that it had been a forgotten past, unlike the bloody past of Cambodians during the reign of Pol Pot’s regime, upon which tens or even hundreds of books and articles had been written and published. (The reason is as everybody knows: in the case of Indonesia, the victims were the communists, or anybody who might have had some association with the Communist organizations; while in the case of Cambodia, the perpetrators were the Communists; and it goes without saying that the exposure of the Cambodian atrocity was a part of the Western propaganda of anti-

\(^2\) It was a popular acronym for ‘Gerakan Satu Oktober’ (the First October Movement, referring to the kidnapping and killing of six top Army officers and a lieutenant on the eve of October 1, 1965).
communism; while the silence of the Western societies on the Indonesian killings was likely their complicity to the killings).

Testimonies told by Suyitno and Sudiman *in situ* were obviously an eye opener to the audience at that moment. Months and years afterwards, even until this report is written, Indonesia has witnessed a boom of publications on the 1965-1966 historical tragedy, both written by former political prisoners, scholars, journalists, or any individuals who ‘all of sudden’ have some concern in this issue. However, it is noteworthy that almost a decade before Suharto stepped down, a book on this bloody historical epoch had already been published. Below is a feature on what this book means in Indonesia after 1998.

*On “The Indonesian Killings 1965-1966: Studies from Java and Bali”*

*The Indonesian Killings 1965-1966: Studies from Java and Bali* (1990) edited by Robert Cribb was perhaps one of the history books mostly discussed publicly in Indonesia in several years after the fall of Suharto in 1998. Indonesian scholars having access to read the book cited parts of it; and their citations were in turn quoted by public commentators and various readers. The publication of its Indonesian translation in 2003, followed by its launching in a number of cities and towns in Java, has made the book more accessible for the Indonesian readers. Although it has never achieved a best seller book, the book has been an eye opener for many Indonesians on the so-called Indonesia’s ‘Holocaust’.

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3 The initiative of publishing its Indonesian translation came from “Syarikat”, a non-governmental organization of young members of the *Nahdlatul Ulama* [Religious Scholars] – the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia. In the 1965-1966 massacre, NU, especially its youth wing, actively took a part in hunting and killing the allegedly communists. Such an initiative could then be interpreted as a way of enhancing the reconciliation between the NU community and the former political prisoners.
The public enthusiasm on *The Indonesian Killings 1965-1966* was a reflection of the public curiosity on *what really happened* in the years of the transition from Sukarno’s rule to Suharto’s. People were eager to know not only on who should have been the most responsible for (designing the plot of) the killing of the six top Army officers on the eve of October 1, 1965, but also on what happened afterwards. This curiosity was, to a large extent, a reflection of the public suspicion on the historical truth of the Suharto’s New Order official narrative of the past. People were suspicious that the historical facts had been either manipulated (in the sense of being falsely written) or deliberately hidden. The suspicion was partly caused by the mismatch between what the official narrative told and untold, and what many people experienced. There was a gap between the ‘history’ and the ‘living memories’ of many elements of the Indonesian society.

In the official narrative it was told that the ‘communists were cruel’, and ‘the climax of their cruelty’ was ‘what they did on the eve of October 1, 1965’. The narrative then exposed the firm and quick measures of the army led by General Suharto to crush the allegedly-mastermind of the killing of the six top army officers, i.e., the PKI. However, it did not tell how the crushing of the PKI was carried out, and what effects it had resulted in the life of the Indonesian society at large. It was precisely on this ‘forgotten epoch’ of the past that *The Indonesian Killings 1965-1966* had filled in. The 1965-1966 massacre was then the most crucial past ‘to begin to remember’ publicly.⁴

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⁴ To my personal observations, everytime there is a public discussion on the 1965-1966 killings, a large number of audience come to participate the discussions. The audience are not only former political prisoners, who are mostly in their seventies, but also young people born and growing up during the rule of Suharto’s regime. They look enthusiastic to join the discussions. It means that the issue of the 1965-1966 killings has still attracted the public interests, as a part of the interests in the formation of Suharto’s regime itself.
By the story above I do not mean to put the circulation and the multi-copying and then the translation of *The Indonesian Killings 1965-1966* as the single factor enhancing the Indonesians ‘to begin to remember’ the 1965-1966 massacre. It was the fall of Suharto which had opened the box of Pandora, by which public articulation of the memories of the past violence was enabled. Just several months after the fall of Suharto in May 1998, former political prisoners of the ‘1965 affair’ – the neutrally-sounded terminology for the events on the eve of October 1, 1965 – began to publish their memoirs, autobiographies, and testimonies, in addition to establishing various organizations for ‘seeking the truth of the past’. These were aimed at getting public recognition on their state of being the victims, instead of the perpetrators of the past violence. It was in this search for the ‘truth of the past’ in order to get the public recognition as the victims, *The Indonesian Killings 1965-1966* was enthusiastically welcomed as their company, treated as the authoritative documents giving evidence to their truth claims. In the spirit of *pelurusan sejarah* (historical rectification), the community of survivors of the 1965-1966 massacre have used whatever it could be used for supporting their truth claims of the past. The meaning of ‘archive’ is then broadened. It does not only refer to a text in the sense of written documents published by the authorized institutions, but a text in a broader sense. To them, oral testimonies told by past witnesses like Sudiman are historical archives as well. Below is the continued narrative of Sudiman’s and enriched by his fellow neighbors, telling what happened to the people of the surrounding villages when the rainy season came, while the killings of the allegedly communists still continued.
When the rainy season came

Back to Kali Simping on February 2, 1999, Sudiman was still the narrator of the past violence in situ. He told that when the rainy season came in late November 1965, the shallow buried corpses appeared on the surface and flowed down to the lower part of the river. The corpses buried down in the north, being relatively away from the residential areas, flowed down to the south, where villages are only separated by three plots of land – approximately 50 meters – from the river. ‘As it rained hard everyday’, Sudiman told, ‘we did not have enough time to rebury the corpses. Then, what happened next? The putrid odor of the corpses began to disperse. Germs coming from the putrefied dead bodies were spread out. And …. this was the beginning of the epidemic of various diseases’.

Another informant, Sugito, aged 55, continued Sudiman’s story. He said that villagers began to realize that it was zaman pagebluk [epidemic age]. ‘Many people suffered from cholera. The explanation was simple. Flies coming from the putrefied dead bodies alighted on the food we ate. Then, we suffered from cholera.’

‘Fortunately’, Sugito added, ‘there was a medical aide in our neighboring village. He was really our savior. He saved our lives not only with his medical skill and knowledge, but also with his passion. He never charged us how much we had to pay for his treatment. Not a few villagers paid nothing as they had nothing. Yet, he never complained.’

‘Since the medical aide was a Christian,’ Sugito continued, ‘not a few of us converted to be Christians, although he never persuaded us to do so. At the moment, declaring and showing our religious identity publicly was one way of saving ourselves
from being suspected as Communists. Before converting to Christianity, we confessed to be Muslims, but we did not read the Koran, we never went to mosques, we never did the five-time daily prayers. Our Islamic identity was only showed when we were circumcised and getting married’.

Another informant, Paikem, aged 67, told about another disease many villagers, especially young kids, suffered from. It was scabies. She said that almost every child aged between one to five years old suffered from scabies. By that time the popular term was *gudik Gestok*, meaning scabies associated with the events on the eve of October 1, 1965.\(^5\) To her knowledge, the explanation was simple. Mites coming from the putrefied dead bodies were transmitted onto the skin of human body. It caused itchy. Young children were more vulnerable for suffering from this skin disease. Of parts of the body, the most vulnerable one to be struck by this disease was the buttock. As they did not stand on the itch, they scratched it. But, the more they scratched, the worse it would be.

‘Many children suffering from scabies’, Paikem continued, ‘had to wear dresses, for both boys and girls. It would be worse if they wore shorts, as shorts pressed the buttock. In addition, they had a trouble to sit down. Sitting down was painful, and would only worsen the condition of their buttocks. One more thing: as they scratched their buttocks quite often, when they recovered, it left scars. If you do not believe it, perhaps you can check with your own eyes on the buttocks of local villagers here who were between one to five years old when the mass killings happened in this river’.

The audience was surprised and laughing to hear the story of buttock above. They were laughing as well at Paikem’s challenge ‘to prove with your own eyes’ to those who

\(^5\) In the popular discourse, it was a mis-naming on what happened after that date, not on the events of that date.
may not have believed in her story: a challenge which did not need a response, as it was a form of rhetoric to show that the mass killings have really brought their own effects on the innocent generation when the historical tragedy happened. Effects which were seen and unseen. Effects which have never been recorded in the official archives so that official history would unlikely write them in. Yet, those effects remain in the living memories of those experienced such a human tragedy.

End remarks

I did not (and do not) know what sorts of memories foreign visitors like Mdm. Francois Mitterand and her compatriots might have brought to their home after visiting the river near the village where I grew up. Neither did I and my fellow neighbors expect much on their visit. However, we had to thank them as their visit had encouraged us ‘to begin to remember’: seeing the Indonesia’s past from our village. By doing so, at least we have constructed our ‘national’ narrative of the past from ‘below’. The story might be different, in the sense of not representing our lived experiences, if one takes the other way around.

Citing postcolonial term, my fellow villagers above have written history ‘from the margin’. Yet, when everybody makes such a claim, then where is the ‘center’?

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