

Buru Island: A Prism of the Indonesian New Order

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Abstract

From 1969-1979, the Indonesian New Order operated a violent prison island called Buru to imprison untried political prisoners category B. In this paper, I question the nature of violence in Buru Prison Island. I argue that Buru became extraordinarily violent because it was the place where the Indonesian New Order could fully gratified its totalitarian desire. In Buru, the total domination was achieved through rendering political prisoners superfluous. This process involved the enactment of strange upside-down type of life, arbitrary violence, and meaningless *corvée*. In the latter part of the paper, I draw a broader connection between the lives in Buru and the lives in the Indonesian New Order. In this part, I claim that Buru was a prism which refracted its experience outside its isolation showing how Buru was more than a violent prison island.

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“Saat itu ketika kami sudah berbaris rapi, siap untuk dihitung, dengan sorot senter mereka memeriksa dan meneliti wajah kami satu persatu, mencari seseorang. Tiba di wajah yang mereka cari, ditariklah teman itu dari barisan. Dipukulinya temanku hingga puas dan setelah itu temanku diperintahkan untuk tiarap, dengan bengis mereka pun menginjak-injak punggung temanku itu sekuat-kuatnya, hingga melelehlah tinja, keluar dari anusnya.” - Nursyamhari

Nursyamhari, a former political prisoner, writes this statement in his memoir. I translate, “[W]e lined up neatly, were ready to be counted [by the guards]. Using flashlights, they [guards] examined each of our faces, looking for a specific person. When they arrived in front of the face they had been looking for, the person was pulled out from the line. He was beaten until they [guards] were satisfied, then, he was ordered to hit the deck, and in ruthlessness they trampled the back of my friend as powerfully as they could, shit oozed from his anus.”² The brutality described above was perpetrated in Buru. It was an island internment camp operated on Buru Island, located in the eastern part of Indonesia during 1969-1979. Buru was a project of the New Order, an Indonesian political regime formally established in 1967. The birth of this regime was marked by violent anti-communist tragedies including the mass-incarceration of alleged communists. Until 1998, the New Order stood as an infamous authoritarian regime that wed order and stability with development, and in pursuit of the latter it would not hesitate to employ extrajudicial violence. The violent anti-communist tragedy of mass-incarceration is well embodied in Nursyamhari, who was untried but imprisoned in Buru for allegedly being a communist since he worked as a distribution officer of *Harian Rakyat* printing, a mass-media outlet directly connected to *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (Indonesian Communist Party; PKI). While the brutality of the New Order may be taken for granted as a reality among those who are engaged

² Nursyamhari, *Bulembangu, Kisah Pahit Seorang Tahanan G.30.S* [*Bulembangu, Bitter Story of a G.30.S Prisoner*] (Jakarta, Indonesia: Cipta Pustaka, 2009), 176.

in Indonesian historiography, I want to question why the New Order's prison system became so violent.

This question belongs to the study of violence in Indonesia, some works of which have partially addressed it. In a sense, these works have been stimulated by the recurring violence in Indonesia and efforts to find the reasons behind its ubiquity. Most of the existing works address violence perpetrated in public and rarely concern violence in detention, whereas my question specifically addresses the violent prison regime of the New Order. This paper will also explore how we can make the study of violence in the New Order detention to further our understanding about this political regime.

Some scholars in the field of violence in Indonesia have opted to gain more understanding of recurring violence by tracing its roots. A volume dedicated to this cause, edited by Freek Colombijn and J. Lindblad, aims to "trace the historical roots of violence in Indonesia" to answer the question of "why so many Indonesians suffer from so much violence today."³ Through different contributors, this volume tries to represent the historical continuity of violence, emphasizing army violence and communal violence perpetrated in public. Within this volume, R. Elson, provoked by "the prevalence of state-sponsored violence during the New Order," tries to make sense of it by demonstrating that "Suharto's justification for state-sponsored violence was a reflection of his intense fear of the wayward proclivities of the Indonesian people and of their consequent social and political eccentricities."⁴ Such an explanation may contribute to understanding the deeper reasons behind the justifications of state-sponsored violence during the

³ Freek Colombijn and J. Thomas Lindblad, introduction to *Roots of Violence in Indonesia*, eds. Freek Colombijn and J. Thomas Lindblad (Leiden, Netherlands: KITLV Press, 2002), 3.

⁴ R. Elson, "In Fear of the People, Suharto and the Justification of State-Sponsored Violence under the New Order," in *Roots of Violence in Indonesia*, eds. Freek Colombijn and J. Thomas Lindblad (Leiden, Netherlands: KITLV Press, 2002), 174.

New Order. This explanation, however, cannot explain the violence perpetrated behind the walls of isolation.

While historians like Elson emphasizes state-sponsored violence, others are less state-centric. For instance, a volume edited by Benedict Anderson claims that “violence in twentieth-century Indonesia has never been a legitimate monopoly of the state.”⁵ Instead violence “has been deployed” by “revolutionaries, middle classes, villagers, ethnic groups, privatized corporate apparatuses, quasi-official gangsters, the CIA,” and other agencies under “different circumstances” with “differing kinds of legitimization.”⁶ Despite making such a claim, it is regrettable that no essay is included about the violent birth of the New Order. Anderson himself admits that “a book of this type can’t be comprehensive,” as he and the contributors “acknowledge several striking absences” including “the great massacres of 1965-1966,” let alone the mass incarceration following the massacres.⁷ After all, as incarceration is a state-backed project, this topic is understandably outside the scope of the book. Other less state-centric work in the field of violence in Indonesia concerns on the communal violence. One new addition is a work from Yuhki Tajima regarding the violence among Indonesian civilians following the authoritarian breakdown in 1998. Tajima investigates “the spike in communal violence during Indonesia’s transition from Suharto’s the New Order regime.”⁸ He argues, “an elevated risk of violence emerges when there are mismatches between formal and informal institutions.”⁹ His work is valuable for explaining the systematic side of post-1998 recurring communal violence,

⁵ Benedict Anderson, introduction to *Violence and the State in Suharto’s Indonesia*, ed. Benedict Anderson (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2002), 18.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Yuhki Tajima, *The Institutional Origins of Communal Violence: Indonesia’s Transition from Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 4.

⁹ Ibid., 9.

although it doesn't explain the violent regime preceding the spike of communal violence, not to mention the elaboration of the preceding regime's prisons.

As state violence and imprisonment are connected to the process of criminalization, it is also valuable to look at how scholars develop ideas about crimes. A volume edited by Vicente Rafael touches on the topic of criminality in Southeast Asia by offering "ways to think about criminality comparatively less as a settled object of investigation than as an unsettling figure" that is attached to "the emergence of social types, state formations, and nationalist thought."¹⁰ In this volume, only one work tackles the issue of the New Order's political prisoners. That is the work of Maier, which concerns the banning of the prominent Indonesian author Pramoedya Ananta Toer's memoir and books. Despite elaborating a little on the violence perpetrated in Buru recorded in Toer's memoir, Maier is more concerned with discovering the reason behind the criminalization of Toer's published memoir and books than with investigating the violence perpetrated against Toer in Buru. Thus, he asserts that the "[T]he New Order's mythology was undermined by the book, and the New Order's ideological vision should be implemented without disruptions and questions."¹¹

In a broader sense, this paper will contribute to a larger theoretical concern about the methods through which totalitarian societies operate. I am not, however, claiming that the New Order was a totalitarian regime. I am inclined to accept the idea that the New Order had a totalitarian potential which did not fully materialize during the regime's time of

¹⁰ Vicente Rafael, "Introduction: Criminality and its Others," in *Figures of Criminality in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Colonial Vietnam*, ed. Vicente Rafael (1999; repr., Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2004), 9.

¹¹ Hendrik Maier, "Flying a Kite: The Crimes of Pramoedya Ananta Toer," in *Figures of Criminality in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Colonial Vietnam*, ed. Vicente Rafael (1999; repr., Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2004), 240.

operation.¹²David Bouchier argues that in the mid-1980s, the New Order tried to formalize a totalitarian theory of the state, known as the *integralistik* state, into the Indonesian state ideology.¹³By this maneuver, the New Order attempted to promote integralism as the “driving spirit” of the constitution and the national life.¹⁴The New Order introduced a new narrative to purify the Indonesian state from opposition, individualism, liberalism, certain binaries, and everything else that was in opposition to the idea of a total and all-encompassing state.¹⁵Adrian Vickers notes that in practice the “totalitarian aspirations” of the New Order “came to the fore” only during 1974 to 1988/89 when campuses were depoliticized, structures of the military and the bureaucracy were designed to marginalize Suharto’s opposition, and ideological campaigns were conceived to institutionalize the *integralistik* spirit in Indonesian public lives.¹⁶Accepting the notion that prison acts as a mirror of a regime, because “institutional innovations” invented in prison embody the vision of the regime, I see Buru as a part of the realization of the New Order totalitarian desire.¹⁷ I use the word “desire” instead of “aspiration”—like Vickers—to avoid implying intentionality, because as far as my research goes, I do not believe that I can claim that the New Order had a totalitarian intention.

In addressing the totalitarian desire of the New Order through studying Buru, I put attention on what Hannah Arendt refers as “[T]he totalitarian attempt to make men

¹² Adrian Vickers, “The New Order: Keeping Up Appearances,” in *Indonesia Today: Challenges of History*, eds. Grayson Lloyd and Shannon Smith (Lanham, M.D.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 75; David Bouchier, “Totalitarianism and the ‘National Personality:’ Recent Controversy about the Philosophical Basis of the Indonesian State,” in *Imagining Indonesia: Cultural Politics & Political Culture*, eds. Jim Schiller and Barbara Martin-Schiller (Athens, O.H.: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1997) 158-179.

¹³ Bouchier, “Totalitarianism and the ‘National Personality,’” 158.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁶ Vickers, “The New Order: Keeping Up Appearances,” 73; Bouchier, “Totalitarianism and the ‘National Personality,’” 164.

¹⁷ Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: a history of imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940* (Berkeley, C.A.: University of California Press, 2001), 302.

superfluous.”¹⁸ This experience is characterized by “a way of life in which punishment is meted out without connection to crime, in which exploitation is practiced without profit, and where work is performed without product.”¹⁹ Thus, in this paper, I will present the way Buru became a kind of totalitarian space, “a place where senselessness is daily produced anew.”²⁰

Relating to Arendt’s superfluity, in the remainder of this paper I will argue that Buru became brutal because it was the place where political prisoners were rendered superfluous through the direct projection of power of the New Order regime. Furthermore, prison is also a place that reflects the larger “social and human landscape” of its society, as the “existing social and cultural patterns” of the society are reproduced within prison.²¹ Therefore, Buru was more than a place where the New Order’s totalitarian desire mercilessly came to live; it was also a glass prism which refracted its unicolor light into dispersed multicolor lights to Indonesian society. In this sense, we can see a continuum of lives in Buru with the lives in Indonesia’s New Order.

This argument is established through examining primary sources in the form of Buru former political prisoners’ memoirs, recorded oral tape interviews with former political prisoners, and relevant government documents regarding Buru. In the first section I will discuss the degree of brutality in Buru by elaborating a comparison prominent in Buru memoirs between Buru and a Dutch colonial internment camp called Digul. In the second section, I will further illustrate lives in Buru from the point of view of the political prisoners. In the third section I will show how Buru became a place where the New Order totalitarian desire came to live through

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 457.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Carlos Aguirre, *The Criminals of Lima and Their Worlds: the prison experience, 1850-1935* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 221.

rendering *tapol* superfluous. In the fourth section, I will elaborate how the pursuit of answers to my question leads to the realization that Buru was a glass prism which refracted its experience outside to the Indonesian New Order in general. Throughout the paper, I will refer to political prisoners of Buru as *tapolan* abbreviation of *tahanan politik* (political prisoners).

I. Imperfect Duplication of Digul

There is a pattern in *tapol* memoirs—the comparison of Buru and Digul. Digul refers to Boven Digoel, a colonial internment camp established in 1927 by the Dutch Indies colonial government.²² Just like Buru, it was located in the eastern part of Indonesia, specifically in New Guinea. Digul was also established under anti-communist sentiment; the communist revolt that started in West Java in 1926 was the reason for its establishment.²³ The people who were sent to Digul comprised not only those who committed crimes during the revolt but also those who were considered a “potential threat” by the colonial government.²⁴ From its establishment until 1943, Digul was also a place to intern Islamists and nationalists.²⁵ While in Digul, prisoners were categorized based on their ideological affiliations; post-1965 alleged coup political prisoners were categorized in according to their involvement in the coup. Category A was for people considered to have had direct involvement in the coup and whom the New Order intended to bring to trial, although a Category A prisoner may have had to wait up to twenty-five years before being brought to trial.²⁶ Category C was for people for whom there were reasons to assume involvement either directly or indirectly in the coup. Some Category C prisoners were

²² Takashi Shiraishi, “The Phantom World of Digoel,” *Indonesia* 61 (1996): 93.

²³ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁴ Rudolf Mrazek, “Healing in Digoel,” *Indonesia* 95 (2013): 47.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Amnesty International, *Indonesia—An Amnesty International Report* (London, England: Amnesty International Publications, 1977), 31-32.

detained for only a short period of time.²⁷ Prisoners in Category B were assumed to have shown support for the coup or were members of PKI or related organizations.²⁸ All *tapol* in Buru fell under Category B. The unavailability of sufficient evidence to lawfully accuse Category B prisoners of involvement in the coup hindered the New Order from putting them on trial.²⁹ Nonetheless, they were imprisoned, as letting them go free was viewed as a threat to public order.³⁰ The logic of “storing away” certain people who were defined as a threat to order despite the lack of evidence and trial is another characteristic that binds Buru and Digul. By drawing similarities between Buru and Digul, I do not intend to draw a broader connection between the New Order and the colonial government, and certainly not to compare them. I write this section to show how the Buru experience is conceptualized in the mind of *tapol*, that Buru was more brutal than the colonial internment camp Boven Digoel.

How do *tapol* compare Digul to Buru? Hersri Setiawan, who was incarcerated because of his activism in *Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat* (Institution for the People’s Culture), a literary and social movement associated with PKI, writes in his memoir that “it is fair to say that Digul is the inspiration for Buru; conversely it is also fair to say that Buru is a duplicate of Digul.”³¹ Digul is featured in *tapol* memoirs “to stress how much worse the New Order regime was than the Dutch in their treatment of political prisoners.”³² Hersri continues, “just as the duplicate is never better than the original, so too Buru is worse than Digul.”³³

²⁷ Ibid., 38.

²⁸ Ibid., 32.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Hersri Setiawan, *Aku Eks-Tapol* [I am an Ex-Political Prisoner] (Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Galang Press, 2003), 149.

³² C. Watson, *Of Self and Injustice: Autobiography and Repression in Modern Indonesia* (Leiden, Netherlands: KITLV Press, 2006), 89.

³³ Setiawan, *Aku Eks-Tapol*, 149.

The comparison of Digul to Buru, however, was not merely a post-1998 matter. Suharto, in August 1974, five years after Buru had started operating, said that such a comparison is damaging to the credibility of his policy and that “some foreign journalists have tried to undermine Buru as an Indonesian Digul or concentration camp.”³⁴ Digul, after all, was a product of colonialism, an internment camp built by *penjajah* (colonizers). In the post-colonial sense, no form of betrayal was worse than to colonize one’s own comrades. Thus, Suharto played down the comparison by saying such a discourse was a way to discredit his policy.³⁵

In an English language brochure produced by *Badan Pemulihan Keamanan dan Ketertiban Daerah* (Regional Agency for the Restoration of Security and Order Region; Bapreru) and intended to avoid “prejudices and wrong impressions” about the policy of sending untried Category B prisoners to Buru, Attorney General Soegih Arto even mentioned that “resettlement to Buru Island is dissimilar to any old-dated or recent concentration camps abroad.”³⁶ The “old-dated” camp was likely a reference to Digul, and the reason given for the dissimilarity was that “in Buru Island there is no forced-labor; whereas the yields of their work are for their own benefit and for their family.”³⁷ From the first-hand account of *tapol*, however, it is clear that forced labor did occur, because they had no choice but to engage in *corvéé*, or forced labor.

Moreover, despite its being clear that the mass incarceration was intended to purify the public from people suspected of being communists, Suharto, in his explanation to the head of the visiting UK parliament delegation Dr. Alan Glyn who visited Jakarta in 1976, disengaged the

³⁴ I. Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik Pulau Buru, 1969-1979* [Political Prisoners on Buru Island, 1969-1979] (Jakarta, Indonesia: LP3ES, 2001), 165.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Soegih Arto, preface to *Brief Explanation of the Buru – Project* (1971), [?].

³⁷ *Ibid.*

label “political prisoners ” from the incarcerated.³⁸ Suharto instead labeled *tapol* as people who did “harm to the country.”³⁹ Because in the Bapreru brochure, *tapol* were clearly referred to as “political detainees,” this disengagement can be interpreted as a denial resulting from the intensified global human rights activists’ watchful eyes on the condition of *tapol* in Indonesia.⁴⁰

Despite denial on the part of the New Order, the comparison prevails as a legitimate way of representing the devastating brutality of New Order. In the mind of Indonesians during the New Order, no regime had been more brutal than that of the Dutch Indies colonizer (*penjajah Hindia Belanda*) which in mainstream nationalist rhetoric colonized pre-independence Indonesia for three and a half centuries. For *tapol*, however, the New Order replaced the brutality of the *penjajah*.

The way *tapol* conceptualize Buru as an imperfect duplicate of Digul is a good beginning to answer the question posed by this paper. If Buru was worse than Digul, what was the method of the New Order that made it possible for *tapol* to think of the regime’s prison system as more brutal than the one created by *penjajah*? What were the differences and similarities? As experienced by Hersri, the brutality in Buru started with stripping off *tapol*’s identity, as “personal names are no longer applied to them [*tapol*].”⁴¹ As a replacement, “they were given ‘photo number’ and ‘shirt number’ consecutively.”⁴² *Tapol*’s new identity was embedded in “one set of green khaki clothing, consisting of short-sleeved shirts and trousers, with numbers stamped on the chest or the buttocks part.”⁴³ Hersri realizes, however, that the numbers were not the new

³⁸ I. Krisnadi, *Tahanan Politik Pulau Buru*, 165.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Soegih Arto, preface to *Brief Explanation of the Buru – Project* (1971), [?].

⁴¹ Setiawan, *Aku Eks-Tapol*, 156.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

identity; instead, the fact that they only received “one set of clothes forever,”⁴⁴ is itself the new identity. One set of clothes forever meant that when “all the clothes are destroyed, eaten by time, rain, heat, and sweat, they (including me) [*tapol*] made their own shirts and shorts from fertilizer bags made of hemp.”⁴⁵ As wearing clothes is one way to represent self-identity, the inability of the *tapol* to choose their clothes was a way to strip them of their self-identity. For Hersri, “*Tapol* G30S’ shirt was a statement of ‘identity’ with the absence of ‘identity.’”⁴⁶ He adds, “[C]ompare this to Digul *tapol*, who, at least are visible in the photographs, after several years [of being interned] still wearing white clothes, shiny shoes, and ‘helmets’ like colonial government officials.”⁴⁷

Not only could Digul *tapol* wear respectable clothes, they also had food rations that “sufficiently met their caloric needs,” writes another Buru *tapol*, Kresno Saroso, who was carrying a book on pediatrics borrowed from *Badan Perpustakaan Uni Soviet* (The Uni Soviet Library) when captured by a fellow university student who was a member of *Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Indonesia* (Indonesian Students Action Forum).⁴⁸ Hence, unlike in Buru, “there were no *tapol* in the Dutch era who suffered from beriberi.”⁴⁹ When Sukarno and Hatta (Proclaimers of Indonesian independence) were released from Dutch detainment, they “were healthy” and “could lead the Republic of Indonesia.”⁵⁰ In contrast, Kresno and his comrades spent 14 years in Buru

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 157.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Kresna Saroso, *Dari Salemba ke Pulau Buru* [From Salemba to Buru Island] (Jakarta, Indonesia: Institut Studi Arus Informasi, 2002), 66.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

with a food situation comparable to a society in “embargo” in the lack of availability of basic materials for living.⁵¹

In Digul, despite the limitations, *tapol* had a choice: “whether or not they were willing to cooperate with the government [the Dutch].”⁵² Those who were willing “received wages as much as f 0. 75 per day,” while those who were not willing “received material goods once a month to sustain their lives.”⁵³ *Tapol* in Buru did not have the luxury of deciding whether or not to cooperate with the regime, let alone to receive wages. As Buru commander Colonel Samsi summed it up, “[D]o you want to eat stones or rice? If you want to eat rice you must cultivate as large a paddy field as you can. If you want to eat stones or die, it’s your call.”⁵⁴

While non-cooperative *tapol* in Digul who had the time also had the independence to govern their own lives in exile, *tapol* in Buru “were governed by the cues of bells and roll calls.”⁵⁵ Since “*tapol* in Buru were exploited labor,” whether they cooperated or not, “all of them had to produce (anything with exchange value) as long as the sun is still bright.”⁵⁶ At times, “the sunlight is extended with the lights from lanterns.”⁵⁷ In Digul, non-cooperative *tapol* “made themselves busy by working on handcrafts and selling services to *tapol* who cooperated with the regime.”⁵⁸ In 1927, “two Chinese shops were established” and Digul *tapol* “could engage in economic transactions at those shops.”⁵⁹ Whereas opening a shop in Digul was an independent decision made by *tapol*, in Buru, beginning in 1974, each unit of *tapol* was “required to establish

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Setiawan, *Aku Eks-Tapol*, 160.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Suparman, *Sebuah Catatan Tragedi 1965: Dari Pulau Buru Sampai ke Mekah* [A Note of 1965 Tragedy: From Buru Island to Mecca] (Bandung, Indonesia: Penerbit Nuansa, 2006), 268.

⁵⁵ Setiawan, *Aku Eks-Tapol*, 159.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 161.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

one shop.”⁶⁰ Despite the name of the project, which was “Cooperative Shop of Residents,” it was “essentially [a] marketing monopoly of units’ production, under the coordination (read: single monopoly) of ‘Mako Shop’ (Markas Komando [Mako: Command Headquarter]).”⁶¹

While life in Buru was marked by the ubiquity of violence and meaninglessness—I will elaborate this in a further section—for Tri Ramardjo, a *tapol* who spent his childhood in Digul, life in Digul was one of “harmony and friendliness.”⁶² In his imagination, Digul was like “a little village in Kalimantan.” In contrast, having later been interned in Buru, he states that “Buru is no Tanah Merah—Digul.”⁶³

Ultimately, for *tapol* of Buru, the difference between their lives and those of the *tapol* of Digul was clear, “like the earth and the sky.”⁶⁴ The *tapol* in Digul were “dissidents,” while the *tapol* in Buru were “murderers,” even though none of the latter had any idea of what was going on, let alone killing six generals and one adjutant in the failed coup of 1965.⁶⁵ For Buru *tapol*, the absence of respect stripped them of their personalities, inherent to their characters as human beings, while “in the eyes of the colonial regime, they [Digul *tapol*] were still regarded as people with personalities.”⁶⁶ Hence, when Toer thinks about Digul, he says, “compared to our experience in Buru, Digul was far more humane.”⁶⁷

II. Portrait of Life in Buru, A Strange Upside-Down Type of Life

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Tri Ramardjo, *Kisah-kisah dari Tanah Merah - Cerita Digul Cerita Buru* [Tales from Tanah Merah – Stories of Digul and Buru] (Bandung, Indonesia: Ultimus, 2009), 141.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Setiawan, *Aku Eks-Tapol*, 159.

⁶⁵ Nursyamhari, *Bulembangu*, 140.

⁶⁶ Setiawan, *Aku Eks-Tapol*, 159.

⁶⁷ Pramoedya Toer, interview by Hersri Setiawan, In Search of Silenced Voice, call number CG5-536A, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

From the comparison of Digul and Buru in the previous section, I have conveyed some features of lives in Buru, but what was Buru internment camp like in more detail? Reading *tapol* memoirs, I cannot help but to notice that the lives in Buru were marked with the daily occurrence of a strange reversal of normal life. The government policy says that “the construction of buildings and houses” is a part of the “settlement” phase in the sending of Category B detainees to Buru.⁶⁸ *Tapol*, however, lamented that they were forced to build most of the buildings and houses in Buru upon their arrival. As Toer writes in his memoir, “It was promised to us, the first wave of *tapol* walking through the Buru Island: ten barracks with walls and wooden poles, concrete foundations, zinc-roofed; tens of acres of deforested farming land, complete infrastructure. The real condition: half the number of promised barracks, with walls and roofs of sago leaves, no foundation, and seasoned wood poles.”⁶⁹

The story of the first wave *tapol* was circulated among the next waves of *tapol*. Despite the fact that all *tapol* were always ordered to build their own buildings in their unit, Suparman, a *tapol* captured for his reputation as pro-Sukarno journalist, thought that the fate of the first wave *tapol* was the worst. As told to him, the first wave *tapol* “...were sleeping under emergency tents, and the tents were insufficient, they slept under the sky, in heat and in cold. Painted the town red with mosquitos and leeches which crawled from the nearby swamps.”⁷⁰ Such experience was exclusive to the first wave of *tapol* because for the next waves, the authority

⁶⁸ Buru Resettlement Executive Authority—Office of the Attorney General of the Republic Indonesia, *Brief Explanation of the Buru Project*, 1971, 2.

⁶⁹ Taporal (Tapols-Oral History) Project Collection, inventory number 2, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, 5.

⁷⁰ Suparman, *Sebuah Catatan Tragedi 1965*, 132; Saroso, *Dari Salemba ke Pulau Buru*, 188.

would have ordered *corvée*, the *tapol* who were already in Buru to build barracks for the upcoming *tapol*.⁷¹

Not only did some *tapol* have to build their own prison, but also upon arrival, some *tapol*'s belongings were casually appropriated by the guards. Suyatno Prayitno, a teacher who became *tapol* recalls, "the guitar that I brought was taken by the guards; he said it was to lighten my belongings. I did not dare to do anything; I gave everything they wanted. I only grieved and regretted my stupidity."⁷² Some other things that the guards would appropriate from *tapol* were "rings, gem stones, sarongs, new shoes, and money."⁷³

By 1975, when the last wave of *tapol* arrived in Buru, the internment camp consisted of twenty-one units in total.⁷⁴ Some units could be as close to the next unit as 500 meters, while others could be located as far away as 5-6 kilometers.⁷⁵ Usually, each unit consisted of ten barracks made from bamboo, with walls of pounded bamboo or mangrove wood and roofs of sago leaves.⁷⁶ Inside each barrack, there were divans made of pounded bamboo extended to the left and right sides of the building.⁷⁷ Some barracks had a wooden floor, especially if a barrack was constructed in a stage-house model, while some others simply had no floor at all.⁷⁸ In a barrack which usually held fifty *tapol*, there would be two doors, and five windows on each

⁷¹ Ibid., 133.

⁷² Suyatno Prayitno, "Kesaksian Seorang Guru [Testimony of a Teacher]" in *Kesaksian Tapol Orde Baru: Guru, Seniman, dan Prajurit Tjakra* [Testimony of New Order Political Prisoners: Teacher, Artist, and Tjakra Soldier], eds., Suyatno Prayitno, Astaman Hasibuan, and Buntoro (Jakarta, Indonesia: Pustaka Utan Kayu, 2007), 71.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Suparman, *Sebuah Catatan Tragedi 1965*, 129.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Suparman, *Sebuah Catatan Tragedi 1965*, 131; Saroso, *Dari Salemba ke Pulau Buru*, 187.

⁷⁷ Suparman, *Sebuah Catatan Tragedi 1965*, 131; Saroso, *Dari Salemba ke Pulau Buru*, 188.

⁷⁸ Saroso, *Dari Salemba ke Pulau Buru*, 188-189.

side.⁷⁹ The lighting of every barrack relied on five hurricane lamps, despite there being two electric lamps with twenty-five watts of power.⁸⁰ The latter could light the barrack only on special days, as only on those days were the electric generators turned on.⁸¹

Around the barracks in every unit there were 2-3 meter high barbed wire fences.⁸² In the gate were posts built for a guard; there were also guard towers in each section of the fences.⁸³ In principle, *tapol* were prohibited from going outside the fences without permission from the guards, except when they were going to work.⁸⁴ Close to the fences, were the house of the unit commander, made of wood, with clapboard walls and zinc roofs.⁸⁵ Apart from barracks, there were religious buildings like a mosque and a church, a unit hospital, art buildings—only in some units—and houses of commanders and staff.⁸⁶

The safe haven for the sick *tapol*, namely the unit hospital, did not necessarily serve the sick in expected way. Sometimes non-medical staff took over the hospital and insisted on helping the sick *tapol* in their own strange way. One time, the agriculture staff tried to cure a *tapol* who had a stomachache by endlessly punching the *tapol*'s stomach while reciting the mantra, “[W]here is the hurting part? Here? Or here? Are you still hurting?”⁸⁷ On another occasion, a *tapol* complained that his body was feeling cold because of malaria. Instead of providing treatment, the staff who took over the hospital asked the *tapol* to run around the field

⁷⁹ Ibid., 188.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Suparman, *Sebuah Catatan Tragedi 1965*, 131.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 132.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 131.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 134.

⁸⁷ Hersri Setiawan, *Dunia yang Belum Sudah* [An Unfinished World] (Kockengen, 1993), 38, in Archief Joop Morriën, inventory number 417, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

which was about one and a half the size of a soccer field.⁸⁸ After running, the *tapol* reported to the staff, “[R]eporting in! No longer cold, Sir!”⁸⁹ Moreover, the doctors who were sent to the unit hospitals were usually young and inexperienced.⁹⁰ There were times when the young doctors actually learned from *tapol* who had a medical background and more experience in the field before serving their time in New Order detention.⁹¹

The daily routine of *tapol* spanned sixteen hours, from “four o’clock [in the early morning] until eight at night.”⁹² Those who worked “outside the designated time (before or after) would be considered as dissenters,” and as a consequence would be accused as “trying to find an opportunity to commit disorder and chaos.”⁹³ After waking up at four o’clock in the morning, *tapol* had thirty minutes to “eat breakfast” and “exercise.”⁹⁴ At half past four in the morning, *tapol* had to attend a roll call for half an hour.⁹⁵ From there, *tapol* would “get working equipment in unit warehouse and work until 12.00 noon, interrupted by lunch for an hour.”⁹⁶ After lunch, “[*tapol*] would resume the work until five in the evening without a break.”⁹⁷ The two hours of “spare time before 19.00 in the evening was used to do sports, fish, gather cattle food, shower, eat or to talk with friends of the same barrack.”⁹⁸

The working hours, however, seemed to change over time, as I found different descriptions of it in different memoirs. For instance, Suparman writes that, “we [*tapol*] work

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Suparman, *Sebuah Catatan Tragedi 1965*, 131.

⁹¹ Ibid., 131.

⁹² Achmadi Moestahal, *Dari Gontor ke Pulau Buru: Memoar H Achmadi Moestahal* [From Gontor to Buru Island: Memoir of H Achmadi Moestahal] (Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Syarikat, 2002), 291.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

from 06:00 in the morning until 17:00 in the evening.”⁹⁹ He also mentions that *tapol* had “two breaks,” at “09.00 in the morning for breakfast for fifteen minutes and lunch break at 12.00 for an hour.”¹⁰⁰ In another memoir, Kresno mentions that “[W]orking hour for *tapol* in Buru Island begins from seven o’clock in the morning until twelve o’clock noon. From twelve o’clock to one o’clock is break. Then, working hour begins again from one o’clock in the afternoon to five o’clock in the evening.”¹⁰¹

During the working hours, *tapol* in each unit were categorized into different kinds of *corvée* groups. The primary and most labor-intensive *corvée* was the agriculture *corvée*, where *tapol* collectively cultivated at least 50 hectares of paddy field.¹⁰² Those who were still young and strong would be assigned to work in timber *corvée*, while the sick would be assigned for internal *corvée*, the responsibility of which was to deliver food from the soup kitchen to barracks.¹⁰³ There were some other *corvée*, like salting, brick making, and logistic transport—the latter was exclusive to Unit IV *tapol*.¹⁰⁴

Tapol were also obliged to “serve” the guards and the commanders. In every unit, each barrack alternately being assigned the *corvée* to clean the commander’s “villa.”¹⁰⁵ Serving food for guards and cleaning as well as ironing guards’ clothes were other types of *corvée* that *tapol*

⁹⁹ Suparman, *Sebuah Catatan Tragedi 1965*, 148.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Saroso, *Dari Salemba ke Pulau Buru*, 187.

¹⁰² Razif, “Romusha dan Pembangunan: Sumbangan Tahanan Politik untuk Rezim Soeharto [Romusha and Development: The Contribution of Political Prisoners to Soeharto Regime],” in *Tahun yang tak pernah Berakhir—Memahami Pengalaman Korban 65: Esai-esai Sejarah Lisan* [The Year that Never Ends—Understanding the Experience of the victims of 65: Oral History Essays], eds. John Roosa, Ayu Ratih, and Hilmar Farid (Jakarta, Indonesia: Lembaga Studi dan Advokasi Masyarakat, 2004), 149.

¹⁰³ Razif, “Romusha dan Pembangunan,” 149; Saroso, *Dari Salemba ke Pulau Buru*, 185.

¹⁰⁴ Hersri Setiawan, *Diburu di Pulau Buru* [Hunted on Buru Island] (Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Galang Press, 2006), 41-42; Suparman, *Sebuah Catatan Tragedi 1965*, 167.

¹⁰⁵ Nursyamhari, *Bulebangu*, 153.

were forced to do.¹⁰⁶ There was also what *tapol* called mucus, whereinsome unit commanders and vice commanders would gather *tapol* who were considered “beautiful.”¹⁰⁷ These *tapol* would be required to wear makeup and wigs while dressing in *kebaya* (Indonesian traditional dressfor women).¹⁰⁸ The commanders and vice commanders would ask them to stay at their villas and become the house servants.¹⁰⁹

Being treated like servants or even slaves was not the only thing at Buru that marked the exploitative relationship between *tapol* and the guards or the commanders. The guards routinely appropriated the labor output of *tapol*, as recalled by Toer, “[T]he guards were the kings of the night. One *tapol*, holding a lamp, spied some guards who were about to steal goldfish from his pond. The *tapol* was shot. Likewise, another*tapol* brought a lamp to check his hennery after hearing a chicken cluck,he died of sprayed bullets.¹¹⁰ While the guards routinelymade small raids on *tapol*’s fruits of labor,before going home for their days off, some commanders openly required *tapol* to give them tribute. As told by Nursyamhari, “[W]e, the *tapol*, had to provide provisions of some tens of cubic [sic] of wooden board.”¹¹¹ He adds, “[I]sn’t it great! Slaves should serve their masters, but is it appropriate for slaves to provision the master who is taking a trip back home?”¹¹²

Ultimately, for *tapol*, their lives in Buru were a life of alienation. Everything seemed to be upsidedown. They were prisoners, but they were the ones who built the prison. Daily lives

¹⁰⁶ Moestahal, *Dari Gontor ke Pulau Buru*,291.

¹⁰⁷ Hersri Setiawan, *Dunia yang Belum Sudah*, 11, in Archief Joop Morriën, inventory number 417, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Indonesian exiles of the left Collection, inventory number 16, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, 19.

¹¹¹ Nursyamhari, *Bulembangu*, 189.

¹¹² Ibid.

were characterized by constantly engaging in work without products for themselves. When they did fruitful work in their spare time, the guards appropriated the outcome. When they became sick, they were beaten. Despite being poor, they had to provide for the rich. Buru was indeed a strange place to live, “a place where senselessness is daily produced anew.”¹¹³

III. Buru and the Production of Superfluity

The facts and evidence confirm that Buru was much worse than Digul. This reality raises the important question: Why was it worse? If the standard of “horrible” in the minds of Indonesians had been firmly established as Digul, then why would the New Order government not try to make a prison camp that was significantly better than what the awful *penjajah* had created? Why did Buru become more violent?

One explanation from *tapol* is that the New Order defined *tapol* as different type of human beings since they were perceived as traitors to the nation. As mentioned by Hersri, “in the eyes of the ruling New Order, ‘communist’ political prisoner is not ‘man’ but merely ‘human.’ ‘Man’ is ‘*zoon politicon* [social being],’ while ‘human’ is a monkey-like creature that doesn’t simultaneously have four hands and four feet, but two hands and two feet. They [human], in Javanese idiom, *ora diuwongke* [not seen as men], are perceived not as men, but merely as *manungsa* [human], incomplete men or *wong sing ora genep* [incomplete man].”¹¹⁴ Similarly, Haji Achmadi, a religio-communist and pro-Sukarno journalist who was detained in Buru mentions that “these disposable men who are being exiled [Buru *tapol*], when their cultural ability is abolished, what remains is merely a figure of a living body.”¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 457.

¹¹⁴ Setiawan, *Aku Eks-Tapol*, 155-156.

¹¹⁵ Moestahal, *Dari Gontor ke Pulau Buru*, 286.

In spite of their perceived unworthiness, the *tapol*'s labor was still valuable for the regime. Hence, they were “exploited as productive human resources and covered their own living cost (self-supporting), not burdening the state budget.”¹¹⁶ This exploitation, manifested in the forced labor endured by *tapol*, is clearly reflected from the original name of Buru, which was *tempat pemanfaatan*, literally, “utilization site.”¹¹⁷ This name reflects the objectification of *tapol* as merely productive flesh that could be exploited. As sarcastically noted by Nursyamhari, “Buru Island became an agricultural pilot project; who knows, with a little investment coupled with pushy and intimidating attitudes, it could become the food granary of Eastern Indonesia.”¹¹⁸ Could this be one of the reasons for sending *tapol* to Buru? In fact, by 1998, 27% of the rice consumed in Maluku came from Buru.¹¹⁹ Alongside Kairatu, an area replete with Javanese transmigrants on the neighboring island Seram, Buru became the rice granary of the whole Maluku Islands area.¹²⁰ Who brought and widely practiced the wet-rice agriculture in Buru? *Tapol* did.

Through *corvée*, the existence of *tapol* was reduced to violent, repetitive, and often meaningless work. A journalist once visited Buru and asked Toer his opinion about the most suitable way to develop Buru. Toer told the journalist that it was a hard question and narrated a vivid example of *tapol*'s meaninglessness: “Let me give you an example. Brother Dilar Darmawan here was an English Literature professor at a university. These past eight years he might have been producing a couple of bachelors in English Literature. Now, his work is hoeing.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Nursyamhari, *Bulembangu*, 140.

¹¹⁹ “Sketsa Nusa Makmur dari Indonesia Timur [Sketch of a Prosperous Island in Eastern Indonesia]” in *Kehidupan Napol Tapol G30/PKI di Pulau Buru: Kisah-kisah Pelarian ke Negeri Cina Hingga ke Belanda* [The Life of Political Convicts and Prisoners of G30/PKI on Buru Island: Tales of Escapes to the end of China to the Netherlands] (Yayasan Bina Kepribadian Bangsa, 1998[?]), 14.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 15.

How much is the output value of hoeing, and how valuable is this compared to two bachelors in English Literature, just two people, which should have been the [real] output value?”¹²¹

While *tapol* felt dehumanized as the consequence of the meaninglessness of violent *corvée*, the New Order considered assigning work as a way to help *tapol* realize their status as a complete man. In a book about Buru, Lieutenant General S. Sokowati states in the foreword that by working, *tapol* were being “helped to uphold their position as men.”¹²² Furthermore, the assignment of work for *tapol* should be considered as “an effort of the government to respect them as men, who, for their [*tapol*] physical and social development, should naturally be working.”¹²³ As explained by Bapreru in a developmentalist tone, “[B]ased on the principles of Pantjasila [Indonesian national ideology] and the aim of the State to build a just and prosperous society, spiritually and materially we are the opinion that: ‘Everybody should work to the best of his ability.’ Everybody, whether as member of a free society or as detainees and deprived of his freedom or still under arrest, is obliged to work within said institutions.”¹²⁴ While international human rights organizations like Amnesty International accused the New Order of applying the uncivilized and pre-modern practice of obligating work as a form of punishment, the New Order came up with its “humanitarian” justification, saying that “The obligation to work is not... ..[adding] penal servitude to his [*tapol*] punishment... ..the procuring of work will assist him [*tapol*] in upholding his integrity as a human being.”¹²⁵

¹²¹ Pramoedya Toer, *Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu* [The Mute’s Soliloquy] (Jakarta, Indonesia: Lentera, 1995), 18.

¹²² Djamal Marsudi, foreword to *Laporan Pertama Dari Pulau Buru* [First Report from Buru Island] (Jakarta, Indonesia: PT Intibuku Utama, 1971), 17.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Buru Resettlement Executive Authority — Office of the Attorney General of the Republic Indonesia, *Brief Explanation of the Buru Project*, 1971, 4.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

The international human rights community did not buy the discourse of the New Order and kept insisting that Buru was a forced labor camp. As stated by a human rights non-governmental organization based in the United Kingdom (UK) called TAPOL, “[T]echnically, Buru is a resettlement area but actually it is a forced labor camp where detainees are kept under conditions of rigorous isolation.”¹²⁶ In 1976, the New Order even tried to engage the Buru project with the transmigration scheme, which was a resettlement program available for people living in Java and Bali to resettle on other islands.¹²⁷ TAPOL, however, was skeptical about the transmigration rhetoric, claiming that the term was “used to conceal large scale deportations” which disrespected the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as *tapol*’s rights to choose their places of domicile were violated.¹²⁸

However contradictory the definition of working between the regime and *tapol* or the international human rights community, “working” (or forced labor) was not the only form of dehumanization endured by *tapol*. After all, the existence of *tapol* was completely in the hands of the regime from the moment they were captured. For *tapol*, being a political prisoner meant the deprivation of everything, from “breath” to “soul.”¹²⁹ As noted by the poet Rivai Apin, Deputy Commander Bapreru Sutarto spoke in the language of the extrajudicial, claiming that *tapol* were “still alive because of our [the ruler] pity. If we [the ruler] kill all of you [*tapol*], no one will charge us [the ruler]. All of you shall be killed.”¹³⁰

¹²⁶ “Conditions on Buru.” TAPOL, November 1973, 6.

¹²⁷ P. Fearnside, “Transmigration in Indonesia: Lessons from its Environmental and Social Impacts.” *Environmental Management* 21 (1997): 564.

¹²⁸ “Letter from a Tapol.” TAPOL, January 1975, 5.

¹²⁹ Moestahal, *Dari Gontor ke Pulau Buru*, 286.

¹³⁰ Indonesian exiles of the left Collection, inventory number 16, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, 2.

The ubiquity of violence became a part of dehumanization that *tapol* endured daily. The violence perpetrated against *tapol* occasionally left a permanent trace on them physically and mentally, if not taking their lives. Toer, whose hearing was reduced to only 25-30% by January 1979, kept a list of *tapol* who died or became missing in Buru since 1970.¹³¹ In 1978, he stopped compiling this list under a threat that such effort was considered sabotage against the Buru project.¹³² From his incomplete list, he identified 329 *tapol* who died or were missing. Among them, fifteen *tapol* committed suicide, while twenty-four *tapol* were killed. Some causes of death were unknown.¹³³ On one occasion, eleven *tapol* were killed in retaliation for the killing of Second Lieutenant Pandita Umar perpetrated by *tapol* Samyono and his friends. In addition, on the same occasion, twenty *tapol* became disabled, and tens of others were injured. Chief Executive of Bapreru Maluku Wing Wirjawan, after the retaliation, stated that the mass killing was a way to establish the humanitarian project of Buru. In his speech in front of *tapol* in October 10th 1972, he declared, “we will not remain silent if anyone of you tries to obstruct or sabotage this humanitarian project.”¹³⁴

Violence was perpetrated not only as a form of retaliation for a murder but also for simple, even arbitrary, causes. As Moestahal notes on his memoir, “*tapol* could be totally made over [in a violent sense] for sneezing or coughing in front of the guard posts.”¹³⁵ The elusive violent treatment produced continuous fear and tension among *tapol* which Apin captures in his letter, “[L]iving in fear and tension is so usual in Cikukecil [the punishment camp in

¹³¹ Toer, *Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu*, 314.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 290.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 291-303.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 306.

¹³⁵ Moestahal, *Dari Gontor ke Pulau Buru*, 294.

Buru/Jikukecil],” since “[T]here is always a possibility that all of a sudden the guards will be angry”; “[T]he atmosphere was as tense as the sea waves, come and go, come and go.”¹³⁶

As the New Order produced the myths of *tapol* as murderers and mentally polluted communists, the guards used to overinterpret the actions of *tapol* as related to their commitment to the undesired communism. One day, film director Basuki Effendi “was *dipermak*, a term for *tapol* being tortured until the shape of his face and his body changed” for “singing the song *Come Back to Sorrento*,” an English version of a famous love song from Italy.¹³⁷ Effendi was accused of throwing out a hint to make “a comeback for PKI!”¹³⁸ As a consequence, Commander of Unit XIV Batalareja First Lieutenant Sukirno snarled “[W]hat comes back, hah!?” while “hitting Effendi like a boxer facing a sandbag.”¹³⁹

On one bizarre occasion, a *tapol* “was tortured until his ribs were broken” and “he spent months being hospitalized.”¹⁴⁰ The torture occurred because the Deputy Commander, Platoon Commander, and Agriculture Staff interpreted the flower garden that the *tapol* had been ordered to make as “the burial mounds of *Tuparev (Tujuh Pahlawan Revolusi [Seven Heroes of Revolution])*.”¹⁴¹ That was because he, “[W]ithout himself [*tapol*] realizing, turned out the soil mound for the flower garden consisting of seven rows,” the number of murdered military

¹³⁶ Indonesian exiles of the left Collection, inventory number 16, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, 6.

¹³⁷ Setiawan, *Dunia yang Belum Sudah*, 36, in Archief Joop Morriën, inventory number 417, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 36-38.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

personnel, including six generals and one captain, which led to the 1965 massacre and mass imprisonment of alleged communists.¹⁴²

There are many similar cases of violence perpetrated against *tapol* being based on the guards' overinterpretation. Generally, the rules concerned symbols which connoted demonized leftist and communist thoughts. These included, for instance, "words like fellas, the people, comrades, sickle, hammer, banner, *marhaen* [a form of Indonesian socialism promoted by Soekarno], the image of the head of bull [the logo of National Party of Indonesia which promoted *marhaenism*], the number three or *tri* [Javanese: three] (remember the term '*TripANJI* Program PKI [Three Banners of the Program of PKI]'), the color red [the color of communism], the [leftist] songs *Blanja Wurung*, *Genjer-genjer*, and so many more."¹⁴³

As Arendt argues, in a totalitarian state, the ambition to achieve total power and domination over subjects can be enacted when the subjects are redefined as "a specimen of the animal-species man"—similar to Hersri's description of *tapol* being rendered incomplete men.¹⁴⁴ For this reason, humane characters of subjects are a threat to total domination, and any kind of legal rules are obstacles for the materialization of total power.¹⁴⁵ As total domination and total power are possible only when men are rendered superfluous, the creation of superfluity becomes an ever-present characteristic of a totalitarian state.¹⁴⁶

The production of superfluity lays in the core of the daily lives in Buru which was exactly what made Buru so violent. The New Order preconditioned the situation in which total power

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism: Part Three of The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, N.Y.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 155.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

and total domination could emerge and be sustained for a decade. As I have elaborated, the New Order realized its totalitarian desire not only through the extrajudicial imprisonment in the first place but also through the enactment of the strange upside-down type of life, meaningless *corvée*—in *tapol*'s point of view—and ubiquitous perpetration of violence. These elements occurred daily and immediately in the lives of *tapol*, rendering them superfluous. The superfluity of *tapol* was the very condition that enabled the New Order to achieve the effect of totalitarianism. Buru was indeed a productive gratification of the New Order's totalitarian desire.

IV. The Refraction of Buru

The question of why an infamously oppressive regime had a violent internment camp may sound insignificant at the first glance. One might easily presume that a brutal internment camp was a logical consequence of an oppressive regime. As I have discussed, however, investigating the prison in the New Order leads us to further our understanding of the totalitarian desire of the regime. Moreover, it is hardly surprising that politically sophisticated Indonesian readers of memoirs of *tapol* intuitively grasp the resonance between what happened in Buru and both the way the New Order operated in general and the lives of the Indonesian public during the New Order. This resonance, I would claim, has something to do with how Buru acted as a glass prism where the experience within the camp refracted its light into dispersed multicolor lights to Indonesian society. While the totalitarian desire of the New Order was immediately gratified in Buru, it was dispersed and delayed in Indonesian society. The dispersion of the materialization of the New Order's totalitarian desire may imply a larger arena for its gratification, but smaller in terms of the degree of intensity. Figuratively, the unicolor light symbolizes the focused and condensed manner of the materialization of the totalitarian desire in Buru, while the multicolor light symbolizes the weaker materialization of the desire in Indonesian society. How was the

situation in Buru refracted to Indonesian society during the New Order? In answering this question, I am going to show how the situation outside prison in the Indonesian New Order resonated with the situation in Buru.

The first refraction was how the New Order was able to operate outside the law—in fact, so important as a basis that some scholars label the New Order a criminal state. Vickers, for instance, notes that “[T]he undermining of all legitimacy for the institutions of ‘law’ (principally the security apparatus, the police, and the judiciary) meant that the New Order security state could more accurately be termed a criminal state.”¹⁴⁷ In a more specific way, Tim Lindsey claims that the methods of operation which included “violence, extortion, and secrecy” were what made the New Order a criminal state.¹⁴⁸ One striking example of the extrajudicial feature of the New Order was *Petrus*, an abbreviation of *Penembakan Misterius* (Mysterious Shooter). This phenomenon began in 1983, as a response to rising rates of criminality. Individuals with tattoos were casually identified as criminals and were abducted and killed by state apparatuses. Their dead bodies were left in open public spaces. By the end of 1983, the fatalities of *Petrus* had reached almost four thousand.¹⁴⁹ This extrajudicial state deployment of violence was meant to be “shock therapy” for the criminals, implying that “the government had the ultimate monopoly of violence.”¹⁵⁰ Hence, it could operate outside the law, or, in other words, the state was the ultimate criminal of all criminals. The logic behind *Petrus* was a refraction of the situation after

¹⁴⁷ Adrian Vickers, “The New Order: Keeping Up Appearances,” 75.

¹⁴⁸ Tim Lindsey, “The Criminal State: *Premanisme* and the New Indonesia,” in *Indonesia Today: Challenges of History*, eds. Grayson Lloyd and Shannon Smith (Lanham, M.D.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 284.

¹⁴⁹ John Pemberton, *On the Subject of “Java”* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 317.

¹⁵⁰ Adrian Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 176; James Siegel, “A New Criminal Type in Jakarta: The Nationalization of ‘Death,’” in *Figures of Criminality in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Colonial Vietnam*, ed. Vicente Rafael (1999; repr., Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2004), 227-230.

the killing of Pandita Umar, where eleven *tapol* were killed as an act of retaliation, a kind of New Order shock therapy. Both *Petrus* and the retaliation in Buru implied that only the rulers could operate outside the law; when the ruled tried that, their consequence would be the regime's brutal lawlessness.

The economic intent of sending *tapol* to Buru refracted the Java-centric developmentalist vision of the New Order. *Tapol* "were meant to bring a Javanese mode of agriculture to the relatively sparsely populated island, to 'develop' it under the eyes of the guards."¹⁵¹ This logic was similar to the underlying logic of the government's transmigration project, wherein Java comprised five of the six areas of transmigrants' origins.¹⁵² The transmigrants thus became agents of New Order development, in the form of introducing wet-rice agriculture to areas with preexisting agricultural diversity. In Buru, *tapol* introduced wet-rice agriculture to the locals who practiced swidden agriculture. This intervention transformed not only the ecological landscape of Buru but also the diets of locals who began to shift their eating habit to rice. This idea that *tapol* was meant to be some sort of agents of development rang true to the experience of *tapol*. In a modern developmentalist tone, a *tapol* claimed that they were the people who "civilized" the locals, as *tapol* taught them "house building, health maintenance, farming, husbandry, etc."¹⁵³ He continues by saying, "[V]iewed from the national development perspective, *tapol* in Buru have done so much to advance that area."¹⁵⁴

As I have previously elaborated, Buru was filled with the guards' extortion and appropriation of the output of the labor of the *tapol*. Such constant suction also characterized the

¹⁵¹ Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, 173.

¹⁵² Dietrich Keeschull, *Transmigration in Indonesia: An Empirical Analysis of Motivation, Expectations, and Experiences* (Hamburg, Germany: Verlag Weltarchiv, 1986), 110.

¹⁵³ Suyatno Prayitno, "Kesaksian Seorang Guru," 74.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

criminal state of the New Order in general. Just like in Buru, the accumulation of wealth was structured by the rulers to flow to the people on the top of the socio-economic relationship—money trickles up! For instance, similar to how the guards in Buru unethically tried to grab the fruit of *tapol*'s labor, the intelligence agents in Bali during the New Order were more interested in maintaining the local drug business and inventing ways to acquire money from the people than in serving their institutional function.¹⁵⁵ In fact, during the New Order generally the military apparatuses were more concerned about running businesses that were ambiguously legal if not illegal.¹⁵⁶ Similar to how commanders in Buru, preparing for a journey back home, would ask *tapol* to provide them with some kind of tribute, during the New Order, Suharto also extracted money from his underlings. For instance, Suharto utilized foundations to acquire wealth. In the name of a mosque-building foundation, he extracted Rp. 500 per month from each of the four million Indonesian civil servants as a compulsory contribution to this cause. It is estimated that 40% of the money went unaudited.¹⁵⁷ It is no wonder that this rent-seeking mentality of state apparatuses transformed the New Order to a kind of “corrupt and autocratic” state, a criminal state.¹⁵⁸

Revisiting the rules of using language in Buru in which several words were prohibited, another refraction of Buru becomes apparent in the New Order society. During the New Order, the Indonesian words that had acquired revolutionary and leftist connotations were redefined and

¹⁵⁵ Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, 76.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Michael Vatikiotis, *Indonesian Politics under Soeharto: Order Development and Pressure for Change* (1993, repr., New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 1993), 52.

¹⁵⁸ Howard Dick, “The Challenge of Sustainable Development: Economic, Institutional and Political Interactions, 1900-2000,” in *Indonesia Today: Challenges of History*, eds. Grayson Lloyd and Shannon Smith (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 212.

demonized.¹⁵⁹ One striking example is the previously glorious word of *bung*, the meaning of which encompassed brother, fella, and comrade. During the New Order, *bung*, which was also used to refer to the father of the Indonesian revolution Sukarno (*bung Karno*), lost its glory and universality. It was devalued and was primarily used to refer to people of lower strata.¹⁶⁰ Another example is the word *rakyat* (the people), a word which acquired political and heroic meaning during the time of early independence.¹⁶¹ Nicholas Herriman argues that, as the revolution produced educated and urbanized elites who assumed responsibility in shaping a newly independent nation, *rakyat* started to be conceptualized “in a manner strongly reminiscent of colonial conceptions of the native.”¹⁶² When the elites embarked on their “paternalistic” modernization, they started to ruralize and attribute ignorance to *rakyat*.¹⁶³ As *rakyat* belonged, in the view of the elites, to the rural area, they were “capable of a capricious brutality (particularly in an urban context), which could (only) be controlled by its social superiors.”¹⁶⁴ In the New Order, not only the dangerous unpredictability of *rakyat* but also their ignorance necessitated external control.¹⁶⁵ Thus, in the New Order, *rakyat* were devalued from heroic to villainous. In Buru, the words *bung* and *rakyat*, if spoken by *tapol*, were among the possible reasons which could provoke violent treatment from the guards. Apparently, just like in the public lives of the New Order, in Buru some words were redefined and demonized. In Buru, however, the control occurred not through the rules of the circulation of discourse—the New Order controlled the press—but through anticipation of raw violence.

¹⁵⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 139-141.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁶¹ Benedict Anderson, “The Language of Indonesian Politics,” *Indonesia* 1 (1966): 89.

¹⁶² Nicholas Herriman, “Objects of Manipulation: the People and the Rural Village in Indonesia’s Culture Wars,” *Southeast Asia Research* 18, no. 3 (September, 2010): 454.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ James Siegel, “Suharto, Witches,” *Indonesia* 71, (April, 2001): 61.

The New Order's fetish toward order and stability implied a fetish toward disorder and instability. Order and stability were fetishized as a way to reach a developed Indonesia, in which development became synonymous with order and stability; Suharto was often lauded—or self-lauded—as the “Father of Development.”¹⁶⁶ Communism was constructed as the ultimate enemy of order and stability—hence, anti-development.¹⁶⁷ This fetishization of the fear of counter-revolutionary disorder and instability was manifested in the New Order's discursive construct of communism. As fetishism is mainly ideational rather than material, the conflation of subversion and communism did not necessarily need solid material presence of disorder. In spite of the purges, mass-incarceration, and systematic destruction of Indonesian communists which gave birth to the New Order, the regime's formal existence for thirty years was fueled by a massive discursive campaign against communism. For instance, the film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (The Betrayal of September 30th Movement/PKI) depicted PKI as the mastermind of the coup in 1965, thus legitimizing the violent birth of the New Order.¹⁶⁸ Produced in 1984 by a state-owned film company, the film further demonized communism while at the same time representing Suharto and the army as a morally-driven *deus ex machina* confronting the betrayal.¹⁶⁹ This continuous construction of fear of communism is what Lindsey refers to as “the fear of nameless subversives on the verge of toppling the republic,” even though the New Order “was incapable of detection and produced no evidence.”¹⁷⁰ People who resisted the New Order's development project were often labeled as communists or traitors to the nation and were “subject to brutal

¹⁶⁶ Tania Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 57.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ariel Heryanto, *State Terrorism and Political Identity in Indonesia: Fatally Belonging* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2006), 6-9.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Lindsey, “The Criminal State: *Premanisme* and the New Indonesia,” 287.

treatment.”¹⁷¹ When Category B *tapol* were captured, interrogated, and finally incarcerated, the New Order did not have enough evidence to put them on trial. *Tapol*, however, were fetishized as the ultimate delinquent, such that the New Order had to operate above the law to calm the nation’s irrational fear of them. As the manifestation of the fear of New Order, *tapol* became the object of brutal treatment and false—often irrational—accusations, just like the people who resisted New Order’s “dams, toll roads, golf courses, plantations, transmigration schemes, mines, factories, timber concessions, and forest boundaries.”¹⁷²

Buru was closed in 1979. Some surviving *tapol* stayed in Buru as settlers, some were freed, and some were incarcerated elsewhere. Those who were freed received an additional status on their national identity cards: “ET” or *eks-tapol* (ex-*tapol*).¹⁷³ Through this additional status, their imprisonment was extended, as they received discriminatory treatment in public life, such as inability to access certain types of employment, to run for political positions, or even to vote.¹⁷⁴ After the closure of Buru, the New Order survived for nineteen years until its fall in 1998. During those nineteen years, as I have elaborated, refractions from Buru were still apparent in the lives of the people in the New Order as well as with the regime’s manner of operation. Apparently, the refraction from Buru transcended not only space but also time.

V. Conclusion

Buru is a symbol of prison brutality in independent Indonesia. While *penjajah* is associated with brutality in the mind of Indonesians, as I have shown, for *tapol*, the New Order was even more

¹⁷¹ Li, *The Will to Improve*, 54.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁷³ Carmel Budiarjo, foreword to *Constructive Bloodbath in Indonesia: The United State, Britain, and the Mass Killings of 1965-1966* (Nottingham, England: Spokesman Book, 2009), 10.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

brutal. This judgment was based on their comparison between the lives in Digul and Buru. In Digul, in spite of isolation, political prisoners were still considered as full human beings capable of choosing whether they wanted to engage with the colonial agenda. When they worked with the Dutch, they received wages. On the contrary, *tapol* in Buru did not have options to refuse the *corvée* assigned to them if they do not want to be violently punished, or even murdered.

Buru became violent, even more violent than Digul, because it was the place where the totalitarian desire of the New Order was able to be fully gratified. Rendering *tapol* superfluous through the Buru experience, marked with the intense combination of a strange upside-down type of lives, arbitrary violence, and meaningless *corvée*, the New Order succeeded in fully achieving totalitarianism. In Buru, *tapol* were transformed from complete into incomplete men, so that New Order could project its total power and domination directly to the superfluous bodies of *tapol*.

In spite of the isolation of Buru, the Buru experience travelled well far outside the prison island as well as to the future after its closure. Buru became a glass prism that refracted its experience to the world outside Buru, the public lives of the Indonesian New Order. While the totalitarian ambition revealed itself in a condensed and focused manner in Buru, it revealed itself in dispersion and delay outside the prison. Hence, Toer is right when he said, “[I]t is clear that *tapol* of Buru Island is more than a jailhouse. It has a connection with the face and the heart of the center of power.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵Indonesian exiles of the left Collection, inventory number 16, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, 11.

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