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# **Buru Island: A Prism of the Indonesian New Order**

Sindhunata Hargyono<sup>1</sup>

## **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 the Indonesian New Order fully gratified its totalitarian desire in Buru. The New Order achieved the total domination through rendering political prisoners superfluous. In the latter part of the paper, I situate Buru in a bigger picture and claim that Buru was a prism which refracted its experience outside its remoteness.

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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 (2009, 176), 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.

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 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 (2002, 3), 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." 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 (2002, 174), 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." Such an explanation may contribute to understanding the deeper reasons behind the justifications of state-sponsored violence

during the 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 (2002, 18) claims that “violence in twentieth-century Indonesia has never been a legitimate monopoly of the state.” 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.” 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. 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 (2014, 4) investigates “the spike in communal violence during Indonesia’s transition from Suharto’s the New Order regime.” 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, 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 (2004, 9) 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.” In this volume, only one work tackles the issue of the New Order's political prisoners. That is the work of Maier (2004), 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” (240).

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 operation (Bourchier 1997, 158–179; Vickers 2001, 75). David Bourchier (1997, 158) 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. By this maneuver, the New Order attempted to promote integralism as the “driving spirit” of the constitution and the national life (164). The 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 (165). Adrian Vickers (2001) 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 (164). Accepting the notion that prison acts as a mirror of a regime, because “institutional innovations” invented in prison embody the vision of the regime (Zinoman 2001, 302), I see Buru as a part of the realization of the New Order totalitarian desire. 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 (1966, 457) refers to as “[T]he totalitarian attempt to make men superfluous.” 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.” Thus, in this paper, I will present the way Buru became a kind of totalitarian space, “a place where senselessness is daily produced anew.”

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, as argued by Carlos Aguirre (2005, 221), 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. 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 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 *tapol* an abbreviation of *tahanan politik* (political prisoners).

### **1. 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 (Shiraishi 1996, 93). 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 (94). 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. From its establishment until 1943, Digul was also a place to intern Islamists and nationalists (Mrázek 2013, 47). 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 (Amnesty International 1977, 31–32). 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 detained for only a short period of time (38). Prisoners in Category B were assumed to have shown support for the coup or were members of PKI or related organizations. 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. Nonetheless, they were imprisoned, as letting them go free was viewed as a threat to public order (32). 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" (Setiawan 2003, 149). 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" (Watson 2006, 89). Hersri (2003, 149) continues, "just as the duplicate is never better than the original, so too Buru is worse than Digul."

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" (Krisnadi 2001, 165). 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.

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” (Buru Resettlement Executive Authority—Office of the Attorney General of the Republic Indonesia 1971, ?). 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” (?). 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 label “political prisoners ” from the incarcerated. Suharto instead labeled *tapol* as people who did “harm to the country” (Krisnadi 2001, 165). Because in the Bapreru brochure, *tapol* were clearly referred to as “political detainees” (Buru Resettlement Executive Authority—Office of the Attorney General of the Republic Indonesia 1971, ?), 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.

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 (Setiawan 2003, 156), the brutality in Buru started with stripping off *tapol*'s identity, as "personal names are no longer applied to them [*tapol*]." As a replacement, "they were given 'photo number' and 'shirt number' consecutively." *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." Hersri realizes, however, that the numbers were not the new identity; instead, the fact that they only received "one set of clothes forever," 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." 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.'" 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” (157).

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). Hence, unlike in Buru, “there were no *tapol* in the Dutch era who suffered from beriberi.” When Sukarno and Hatta (Proclaimers of Indonesian independence) were released from Dutch detainment, they “were healthy” and “could lead the Republic of Indonesia.” In contrast, Kresno and his comrades spent 14 years in Buru with a food situation comparable to a society in “embargo” in the lack of availability of basic materials for living (Saroso 2002, 66).

In Digul, despite the limitations, *tapol* had a choice: “whether or not they were willing to cooperate with the government [the Dutch].” 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” (Setiawan 2003, 160). *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” (Suparman 2006, 268).

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.” 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.” At times, “the sunlight is extended with the lights from lanterns” (Setiawan 2003, 159). In Digul, non-cooperative *tapol* “made themselves busy by working on handcrafts and selling services to *tapol* who cooperated with the regime.” In 1927, “two Chinese shops were established” and Digul *tapol* “could engage in economic transactions at those shops.” 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 one shop.” 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])” (161).

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.” 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” (Ramardjo 2009, 141).

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” (Setiawan 2003, 159). 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 (Nursyamhari 2009, 140). 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” (Setiawan 2003, 159). Hence, in the late 1990s, when Hersri interviewed Toer as a part of an oral history project called In Search of the Silenced Voice, Toer (In Search of Silenced Voice, call number CG5-536A) said that, “compared to our experience in Buru, Digul was far more humane.”

## **2. Portrait of Life in Buru, A Strange Upside-Down Type of Life**

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 (Buru Resettlement Executive Authority—Office of the Attorney General of the Republic Indonesia 1971, 2). *Tapol*, however, lamented that they were forced to build most of the buildings and houses in Buru upon their arrival. As Toer (Taporal [Tapols-Oral History] Project Collection, inventory number 2, 5) 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.”

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" (Saroso 2002, 188; Suparman 2006, 132). Such experience was exclusive to the first wave of *tapol* because for the next waves, the authority would have ordered *corvée*, the *tapol* who were already in Buru to build barracks for the upcoming *tapol* (Suparman 2006, 133).

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." Some other things that the guards would appropriate from *tapol* were "rings, gem stones, sarongs, new shoes, and money" (Prayitno 2007, 71).

By 1975, when the last wave of *tapol* arrived in Buru, the internment camp consisted of twenty-one units in total. 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 (Suparman 2006, 129). Usually, each unit consisted of ten barracks made from bamboo, with walls of pounded bamboo or mangrove wood and roofs of sago leaves (Suparman 2006, 131; Saroso 2002,

187). Inside each barrack, there were divans made of pounded bamboo extended to the left and right sides of the building (Suparman 2006, 131; Saroso 2002, 188). 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 (Saroso 2002, 188-89). In a barrack which usually held fifty *tapol*, there would be two doors, and five windows on each side. The lighting of every barrack relied on five hurricane lamps, despite there being two electric lamps with twenty-five watts of power. The latter could light the barrack only on special days, as only on those days were the electric generators turned on (188).

Around the barracks in every unit there were 2-3 meter high barbed wire fences. In the gate were posts built for a guard; there were also guard towers in each section of the fences (Suparman 2006, 131). In principle, *tapol* were prohibited from going outside the fences without permission from the guards, except when they were going to work (132). Close to the fences, were the house of the unit commander, made of wood, with clapboard walls and zinc roofs (131). 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 (134).

The safe haven for the sick *tapol*, namely the unit hospital, did not necessarily serve the sick in expected way. As noted by Hersri Setiawan in 1993 (Archief Joop Morriën, inventory number 417, 38) 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?”

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 which was about one and a half the size of a soccer field. After running, the *tapol* reported to the staff, “[R]eporting in! No longer cold, Sir!” Moreover, as observed by Suparman (2006, 131) the doctors who were sent to the unit hospitals were usually young and inexperienced. 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.

The daily routine of *tapol* spanned sixteen hours, from “four o’clock [in the early morning] until eight at night.” 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.” After waking up at four o’clock in the morning, *tapol* had thirty minutes to “eat breakfast” and “exercise.” At half past four in the morning, *tapol* had to attend a roll call for half an hour. From there, *tapol* would “get working equipment in unit warehouse and work until 12.00 noon, interrupted by lunch for an hour.” After lunch, “[*tapol*] would resume the work until five in the evening without a break.” 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” (Moestahal 2002, 291).

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 from 06:00 in the morning until 17:00 in the evening.” 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” (Suparman 2006, 148). 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” (Saroso 2002, 187).

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 (Razif 2004, 149). 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 (Razif 2004, 149; Saroso 2002, 185). There were some other *corvée*, like salting, brick making, and logistic transport—the latter was exclusive to Unit IV *tapol* (Setiawan 2006, 41-42; Suparman 2006, 167).

*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” (Nursyamhari 2009, 153). Serving food for guards and cleaning as well as ironing guards’ clothes were other types of *corvée* that *tapol* were forced to do (Moestahal 2002, 291). As written by Hersri (Archief Joop Morriën, inventory number 417, 11), there was also what *tapol* called *mucus*, wherein some unit commanders and vice commanders would gather *tapol* who were considered “beautiful.” These *tapol* would be required to wear makeup and

wigs while dressing in *kebaya* (Indonesian traditional dress for women). The commanders and vice commanders would ask them to stay at their villas and become the house servants.

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 (Indonesian exiles of the left Collection, inventory number 16, 19), “[T]he guards were the kings of the night. One *tapol*, holding a lamp, spied some guards who were about to steal tilapia 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.” While the guards routinely made 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 (2009, 189), “[W]e, the *tapol*, had to provide provisions of some tens of cubic [sic] of wooden board.” 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?”

Ultimately, for *tapol*, their lives in Buru were a life of alienation. Everything seemed to be upside down. They were prisoners, but they were the ones who built the prison. Daily lives 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, in Arendt’s (1966, 457) words it was “a place where senselessness is daily produced anew.”

### 3. 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 Setiawan (2003):

“...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].” (155-56)

In a similar tone, 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” (Moestahal 2002, 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.” 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” (Moestahal 2002, 286). This name reflects the objectification of *tapol* as merely productive flesh that could be exploited. As sarcastically noted by Nursyamhari (2009), “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” (140). 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 (Sketsa Nusa Makmur dari Indonesia Timur 1998[?], 14). Alongside Kairatu, an area replete with Javanese transmigrants on the neighboring island Seram, Buru became the rice granary of the whole Maluku Islands area (15). 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 (1995) 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. 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?” (18)

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 (1971, 17) states in the foreword that by working, *tapol* were being “helped to uphold their position as men.”

Furthermore, he mentions that 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.” As explained by Bapreru (Buru Resettlement Executive Authority —Office of the Attorney General of the Republic Indonesia 1971, 4.) 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.” 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” (Buru Resettlement Executive Authority—Office of the Attorney General of the Republic Indonesia 1971, 4).

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” (TAPOL 1973, 6). 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 (Fearnside 1997, 564). 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 (TAPOL 1975, 5).

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” (Moestahal 2002, 286). As noted by the poet Rivai Apin (Indonesian exiles of the left Collection, inventory number 16, 2), 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.”

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 (1995, 314), 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. In 1978, he stopped compiling this list under a threat that such effort was considered sabotage against the Buru project (290). 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 (291-

303). 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 10<sup>th</sup> 1972, he declared, “we will not remain silent if anyone of you tries to obstruct or sabotage this humanitarian project” (306).

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” (Moestahal 2002, 294). The elusive violent treatment produced continuous fear and tension among *tapol* which Apin (Indonesian exiles of the left Collection, inventory number 16, 6) captures in his letter, “[L]iving in fear and tension is so usual in Cikukecil [the punishment camp in 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.”

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 Sorento*,” an English version of a famous love song from Italy. As noted by Hersri (Archief Joop Morriën, inventory number 417, 36) who

witnessed the torture, Effendi was accused of throwing out a hint to make “a comeback for PKI!” 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” (36-38).

On one bizarre occasion, Hersri (Archief Joop Morriën, inventory number 417, 38) recalls that a *tapol* “was tortured until his ribs were broken” and “he spent months being hospitalized.” 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].” 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 personnel, including six generals and one captain, which led to the 1965 massacre and mass imprisonment of alleged communists.

Hersri (Archief Joop Morriën, inventory number 417, 38) notes that 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.”

As Arendt (1968, 155) 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. 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. 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 (155).

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 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.

#### **4. 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 (2001, 75), 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.” In a

more specific manner, Tim Lindsey (2001, 284) claims that the methods of operation which included “violence, extortion, and secrecy” were what made the New Order a criminal state. 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 (Pemberton 1994, 317). 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” (Vickers 2013, 176; Siegel 2004, 227-30). 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 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” (Vickers 2013, 173). 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 (Kebschull 1986, 110). 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.” He continues by saying, “[V]iewed from the national development perspective, *tapol* in Buru have done so much to advance that area” (Prayitno 2007, 74).

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 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. In fact, during the New Order generally the military apparatuses were more concerned about running businesses that were ambiguously legal if not illegal (Vickers 2013, 76). 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 (Vatikiotis 1993, 52). 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 (Dick 2001, 212).

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 demonized (Anderson 1990, 139-41). 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 (141). Another example is the word *rakyat* (the people), a word which acquired political and heroic meaning during the time of early independence (Anderson 1966, 89). Nicholas Herriman (2010) 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.” When the elites embarked on their “paternalistic” modernization, they started to ruralize and attribute ignorance to *rakyat*. 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” (454). In the New Order, not only the dangerous unpredictability of *rakyat* but also their ignorance necessitated external control (Siegel 2001, 61). 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 reason 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.

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.” Communism was constructed as the ultimate enemy of order and stability—hence, anti-development (Li 2007, 57). 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 30<sup>th</sup> Movement/PKI) depicted PKI as the mastermind of the coup in 1965, thus legitimizing the violent birth of the New Order. 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 (Heryanto 2006, 6-9). This continuous construction of fear of communism is what Lindsey (2001, 287) 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.” People who resisted the New Order’s development project were often labeled as communists or traitors to the nation and were “subject to brutal treatment” (Li 2007, 54). 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” (58).

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*) (Budiarjo 2009, 10). 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. 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.

## 5. 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 brutal. This judgment was based on their comparison between the lives in Digul and Buru where the latter was perceived as a more violent internment camp.

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 desire revealed itself in a condensed and focused manner in Buru, it revealed itself in dispersion and delay outside the prison. Hence, Toer (Indonesian exiles of the left Collection, inventory number 16, 11) 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.”

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