

# Oral History in Indonesian Contemporary Historiography: A Case Study of Female Political Prisoners in Plantungan Camp 1969 – 1979

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## Abstract

In the Indonesian contemporary historiography study, the approach of oral history is important. In contemporary history, oral history is used to explore sources and collect data and facts. One of the examples is the study of Female Political Prisoners in Plantungan Camp due to the movement of 30 September 1965. Through the approach of oral history, the violence, trauma, and stigma toward female political prisoners can be revealed. This research intends to reconstruct the story of female political prisoners in Plantungan Camp, Kendal, Central Java. The Camp was formerly functioned as a concentration camp of female political prisoners who were involved in “Gerakan 30 September 1965.”

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## Introduction

In historical study, writing a story from the experience of a living historical actor is a controversial matter. In journey of life, someone faces various experiences in his/her career. In fact, the experience which were encountered not always joyful, frequently, it could be something traumatic. (Nugroho, 1984: 6).

Based on the conventional definitions, history was defined as a continuous dialogue between the present and the past to understand and plan the future. Hence, in order to maintain the quality of dialogue, reliable sources were required. Each of them has its own methodology and analysis on what must be done and how to do it correctly. Among the historians, only a few people can accept something which has not been documented, as the term “no document, no history” (Morrison, 2000: 1). If people keep referring to that opinion, Indonesians will not have the habit particularly of writing what they have experienced. For Indonesians who are accustomed to the oral tradition, it is difficult to fulfil the opinion of the historians who override the oral history. As stated by James, if oral sources were limited and people did not appreciate them as something which can be correctly verified, it was just the same as closing the door against most people of the world who exist, live, and die to

document and differentiate them. Indonesia's heritage in term of folklore, oral tradition, and oral information became the evidence of a living oral culture and self-discovery (Morrison, 2000, p. 2).

According to Djoko Suryo, the oral history is considered a new approach in the contemporary historical writing, even though this approach has been known in the period of classic historical writing. In the classic historical writing, oral tradition is a reflection in traditional historiography (Suryo, 1991, p. 14). Mona Lohanda stated that oral history is defined as a record of memories spoken by informants based on their direct experience. Meanwhile, Harsja W Bachtiar said that oral history has two main roles in general. The first collects important information from main characters directly involved in it, the latter represents common society in the history so that their history remains persistent. The oral history provided sources which were unavailable in the conventional sources in the form of documents (Lysa, 2000, p. 62).

Similar to conventional history, the exploration of oral history sources also uses the technique of sources exploration, for instance the historical method applied in written sources. The main function of oral history in contemporary history is to serve as the means to extract or collect historical data and facts (Vansina, 2014). Those data and facts are then used to formulate a historical reconstruction (historiography). As stated by Djoko Surya, historical reconstruction is obtained through the making process of history, aiming to reconstruct the history as the real actuality (historiography as actuality) into a history arranged in a written method (historiography as written), namely historiography. In conventional history, historical activities are extracted through written sources, then in oral history, historical activities are conducted through oral sources, namely remembered history (Surya, 1991, p. 14).

A similar thing was stated by Paul Thompson that oral history provided sources which were basically similar to published autobiographies. As an autobiography, oral history can complement the perspective which cannot be found in document sources. Oral sources create a more realistic reconstruction of the past. In reality, if it is compared with other sources, oral history enables the reconstruction of various points of view which existed from the beginning. Oral history provides media to reconstruct a more realistic and balanced historical narration. Therefore, oral history has a radical implication for the whole social message of history (Thompson, 2012, p. 5-7).

Nugroho Notosusanto has conducted a record of those stories by using the approach of oral history. At glance, narrating a history of a person who is still alive was considered unnecessary, because it will cause a controversy. It was caused by the fact that contemporary history often involves living actors, making it seemingly not a part of the real "history" (Notosusanto, 1984, p. 6).

Contemporary history is defined as an era of those who lived together, along with the history readers and writers as well. David Thomson in Notosusanto (1984) stated that what was called as contemporary history comprises of 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Nugroho, contemporary history in Indonesia has initiated since the

period of *Kebangkitan Nasional Indonesia* (Indonesian National Awakening). However, due to the age of Indonesian historians who almost did not experience the era of National movement, the definition was shifted. The era of National Movement was no longer included in the periodization of contemporary history. Furthermore, the periodization category of contemporary history is also shifted. Its perspective is no longer starts in the National Movement era, but in the Japan era. Thus, the boundaries of contemporary history from one generation to another keep shifting (Notosusanto, 1984, pp. 6-7).

Several difficulties were encountered in applying contemporary history approach, one of those is the greater subjectivity from the historical actors whose stories were written. It was because the actors who experienced the event is still alive. In several cases, they pretend to put a greater role to themselves compared to actual reality. The absence of time gap on the actors strengthens the subjectivity level, particularly those related to the interpretation in analyzing the sources (Notosusanto, 1984: 8). In contemporary history, since the actors mostly are still alive, the approach of oral history becomes the method often used to collect the sources. The usage of the approach of oral history in contemporary history is to provide more data which were rarely found in conventional documents. Therefore, the approach of oral history was considered more appropriate to be applied in contemporary history (Notosusanto, 1984, pp.10-15).

In temporary history, implementing the approach of oral history is highly relevant because the historical actors still could be found. Their testimony is a data source which is required to be explored in oral history. Interview is the basis of all research of oral history. It can be in the form of narrative interview, elite interview, group interview, and life experience interview--which is a discourse between two or more people about the issues. Interview method is effective if it is conducted with a dialogue between two people, namely interviewer and informant (*interviewee*). The interviewer must possess broad knowledge to acquire information from the *interviewee*. The interviewer must be careful in selecting data from the informants, without having to wait for the information being told to the interviewer. In terms of interviewing the informant, the interviewer does not prepare by reading references related to the problem extracted from the informant, the interviewer will not be able to explore deeper information from the informant, to analyze the primary source, and consider the questions and answers. Therefore, the informants will not function as they should and the information obtained from the interviewer will not have sufficient quality (Notosusanto, 1984, p. 16).

Oral history has an important meaning as written by Paul Thompson that it changes the whole characteristics of historical writing. At least, oral history has provided new evidences by shifting new area, challenging several assumptions, and judgements which have been the reference of many historians ever since, and reviewing the groups which have never been in the study of history. The scope of history is also broadened, it simultaneously shifted the social message into more democratic (Thompson, 2001, pp. 3-9).

A strong motivation to write contemporary history is caused by the existence of great and rapid changes in the modern era. In several developed countries, those changes were not felt that great and rapid because the condition of the society has been stable. On the other hand, in developing countries, for instance Indonesia, a change, particularly in 1942 was felt so drastic. The great changes sometimes made the actors lose their orientation. Those changes often become confusion and ignorance for the people who experiencing them. Corruption is one of the cases. Currently, corruption are considered as a new matter. In fact, it was deeply rooted in history and has been a serious discussion for the society.

Due to the rapid change in the developing society, corruption was perceived as a new matter. It triggered a confusion and anxiety in society. Thus, contemporary history by applying the approach of oral history is needed in order to counterbalance towards the rapid changes with the available sources. Any oral source that can be recorded in a certain method, probably has not been considered as a part of "history". However, one day when oral sources have been documented systematically, it will be a part of the real "history" in the future time. According to Asvi Warman Adam, oral history has given a sort of discovery to the historians. Furthermore, it gave a chance to develop a research in the future, and recover the oldest skill in the profession of history, namely interview (Adam, 2000, p. xviii).

Themes, such as military history, social history, political history, environmental history, local history, economic history, agricultural history, maritime history, female history, and other themes which can be categorized into contemporary history can apply the approach of oral history. The research aims to reconstruct the story of female political prisoners in Plantungan Camp, Kendal, Central Java by using the approach of oral history. Plantungan, Kendal, Central Java is a concentrated camp of female political prisoners involved in the incident of "Gerakan 30 September 1965."

Every September 30<sup>th</sup>, we were reminded of a national tragedy. The tragedy left a deep collective trauma and wound for Indonesians. The incident was initiated by the murder of seven Generals in Jakarta. The political situation at that time was chaotic along with the widespread hoax, as a result, the security condition was unstable. In a short time, the horizontal conflict was inevitable. The conflict initially occurred in Jakarta and spread to Java and Bali. The scope of the conflict shifted from local to national conflict. In such condition, many people committed acts of violence and burnt the houses or buildings owned by Indonesian Communist Party (PKI).

The tragedy created a new problem for Indonesians. Besides the civil war, it also leaves new problem for PKI members and their followers. After PKI and their *ouderbouws* were dispersed, a problem rose for the people who were accused of being involved in that incident. The same thing happened to Gerakan Wanita Indonesia (Gerwani) which was considered being involved in the incident of 30 September 1965. The newspapers at that moment contained the news about the involvement of Gerwani members, such as *Berita Yudha*, *Angkatan Bersendjata*, and *Kompas*, between October and December 1965. They were arrested and jailed. Initially

they were placed in the detention centers in Bukit Duri (Jakarta), Wiragunan (Yogyakarta), and Bulu (Semarang).

The situation of the detention centers was insufficient because the increasing number of prisoners which was estimated to be increasing up to 30% in 1968, resulting in the consequence of their great life cost. Therefore, the policy issue of the New Order government was to move the female political prisoners of B group to Plantungan. According to the notes of the *Himpunan Surat Keputusan/Perintah*, the instructions and other provisions related with the matter of *Kamtibmas* on July 1969 until February 1974, there were 500 people placed in Temporary Detention Center (Tefaatra), Plantungan. The placement was aimed to prevent the prisoners to develop communist ideology opposing the ideology of Pancasila. Tefaatra was also called as inrehab Pulau Buru, a utilization camp of political prisoners in the era of New Order (Amurwani, 2011, p. 151).

### **Plantungan, Female Political Detention Camp**

The life in Plantungan Camp can be seen in three patterns of interaction relationship. The first pattern is the interaction relationship pattern among the female political prisoners. The second one is the interaction relationship pattern between the female political prisoners and the camp wardens. The third one is the interaction relationship pattern between the female political prisoners and the local citizens. In building the interaction relationship were social spaces built by the local inhabitant of Plantungan Camp. In a life fully and strictly controlled by the wardens, the prisoners were not allowed to talk to each other. They were strictly monitored. In order to communicate with each other, the female political prisoners used code language. The interaction among the female political prisoners were limited. They were also not allowed together with more than two people. If it was done, they would receive punishments because they had done a “political movement” (gerpol), a term used by the wardens when the political prisoners interacted with other political prisoners. Their movement space was greatly limited and continuously monitored.

Intrigues were often attempted by the female political prisoners to acquire “freedom” from the wardens. These female political prisoners would cooperate with the wardens to provide reports on their friends who conducted violations (Hearman, 2009, p. 25). As the reward, they would acquire “freedom”. In this case, the female political prisoners whose information could be trusted by the wardens, would get different treatment than their friends. As stated by Foucault that authority must be understood as a form of immanent authoritative relation in the space in which the authority is valid. Authority must be understood as something maintaining that authoritative relationship, forming the chain or system of that relation, or even isolating them from the others from an authoritative relation. Therefore, authority is a strategy in which authoritative relation is the effect (Kamahi, 2019, pp.119-120).

The female prisoners in Plantungan camp could communicate freely to the wardens. However, it was what often stimulated the conflicts among the female

political prisoners in Platungan. This condition was usually utilized by the wardens to make the political prisoners not violating the rules in the detention center. The prisoners were prohibited to write and read newspapers or books. In order to overcome the restriction of those activities, several political prisoners arranged words which were then turned into a song to alleviate their longing of their families or to reminisce an event which was considered important and meaningful for them. A similar thing also applies with the people outside the complex. They were strictly prohibited to interact with the people outside. Everytime they were needed to do activities outside the detention complex, there was always a strict monitoring (Amurwani, 2011, p. 219). That relationship shows how an authority is produced in a certain way by the state.

### **Investigating the Collective Memory of the Female Political Prisoners**

In the study of history, writing a story from an experience of a living historical actor is a controversial matter. In one's life journey, various experiences were faced in his/her career. In reality, the experience faced was not always joyful, oftentimes, it was unpleasant experiences.

As a beginner in conducting historical research, there are several considerations in deciding to choose oral history. The limitation to obtain written documents is the main reason besides the difficulty in accessing the source itself at that time, particularly the events related with the incident of 1965. Another consideration is the development of a paradigm to reveal the history of common people at that time among the young historians. History is not only possessed by influential people and political elites. In the effort to conduct the camp life reconstruction of female prisoners in 1969-1979, using oral history is the appropriate choice. Therefore, the initial step is conducting a library research and searching for various documents in various libraries.

The various collected data, in the form of legal products and primary and secondary sources from personal notes or owned by the states, can not provide any description about the life of a community, the prisoners. The whole life description of the relationship between the prisoners and the community inside the camp, even with the community outside the camp is greatly shallow. By realizing that fact, it is necessary to add more data which can be added into a work of an oral source.

In digging oral sources, the approach of oral history is highly required. Referring to the opinion of Djoko Suryo, there are three elements required in oral history, namely: 1) structure and process, 2) acts and interaction of human life, and 3) sociocultural context recorded in the past (Suryo, 1991, p. 16). The change from the life of society in general into the camp life of the female political prisoners causes changes of interaction and regulation patterns created by the camp community of female political prisoners themselves. In the historical process, the prisoners are presumed to have a collective experience in facing the changes occurring around their life, which means the welfare aspect in giving meaning of life in their community. Their collective experience in responding to the changes from a free

society to a community of female political prisoners gives descriptions about a phase of camp life community of female political prisoners which has not been known by people in general.

The investigation through oral history from historical witnesses and actors of the camp community of female political prisoners is expected to give an in-depth description about a structure and process of social activities and interaction of that community. In order to obtain a deeper and wider description, it is necessary to visit the location and do several interviews with the historical witnesses and actors. The interview were conducted to both the camp staffs and female political prisoners, a particular technique and approach are required. There are several cooperative camp staff who give all the information easily, but there are also those who mind to answer the questions. The same thing applies to the female political prisoners. Sometimes the prisoners find it difficult to reveal the experience residing in their memory. Perseverance and patience are necessary things to be able to dig data deeper. Therefore, before conducting an interview, a guide line is commonly created beforehand about the things which will be asked and arranging the guide line to develop the obtained information.

The interview result is then transcribed into texts. In the science of history, texts are not only translated into written meanings, but also into words which are given meaning. According to Gadamer, hermeneutic approach sees an ongoing interpretation based on the dialectic process between the researcher's subject and the object studied. Moreover, Gadamer explains that the text here is the written one which is different in term of socio-culture and era from the researcher and the object studied. As stated by Gadamer (Magetsari, 2018, p. 21) it is called as the thing between the one who understands and the one who is understood. This reciprocal process separated with distance and time requires a "mediator", namely language. Ricoeur also sees the existence of a dialectic process in understanding a text. There is a reciprocal process between the text and the reader. In this case Ricoeur shares the same opinion with Gadamer (Magetsari, 2018, p. 22). Those texts are then given meaning and interpreted to reconstruct a historical event.

Eventually, the texts in a wider scope of knowledge can be defined as an artefact because a text originally being non-verbal after being transcribed into an important source. Those texts are understood from their words and language structures so that the object being studied can be understood as a meaningful thing. Accordingly, the scope of hermeneutic approach depends on how it is seen. If the approach is based on materialism, what is revealed will be dependent on social behavior and system (Magetsari, 2018, p. 24).

In order to arrange a social system of female political detention camp community, in-depth observation and interview on the social witnesses and actors in the female political detention camp community are required. It is necessary to give explanation about each interaction patterns undertaken by the female political prisoners. Those political prisoners often experienced various kinds of pressure, both normatively and psychologically. For instance, during the family visit time, a

political prisoner was forced not to acknowledge her children. Even though it was hard for them to do that, they only could see their children afar so that it would not be known that those children are their own children. The confession of a mother to her biological children will bring a high risk for their future. It was a heavy burden for a mother to be apart with her family, especially with their children until an unknown time (Amurwani, 2011, p. 235).<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between the male wardens and the female political prisoners often violated the morality. Sexual harassments were often experienced by the female political prisoners. The strong patriarchal culture caused authority dominance toward the female political prisoners. They could not resist when they were harassed sexually. A political prisoner even got pregnant for three times.

In 1977, the female political prisoners were released gradually until 1979. The release period was not an easy period for them. As an ex political prisoner, they experienced social outcast. They kept receiving punishment from the society. Various occupations both in formal and informal sectors are shut for them. The stigma which had been adhered to them could not just be removed. The existence of "*bersih lingkungan*" in the New Order period forced them to change their family status, particularly their children. They were forced to change the status of their children as the biological children of their far relatives or other families who want to take care of them. They were all done so that the children could be accepted by the society and have the opportunity to work in the formal sector.

Suspicious on ex female political prisoners in the society keep on occurring. Even there are people who straightly deny their presence. That is why the ex-female political prisoners isolate themselves from the surrounding society. The reality must be accepted by them because the society in general already has values and norms built from the experience and comprehension on history. Those ex political prisoners changed their identities with the new ones so that they could be accepted by the society in their new environment.

After the reform, the ex-political prisoners tried to open their self to the society. They started to make testimony to the audience who wanted to listen to their testimony. Various discourses so far considered *taboo* started to be discussed. Slowly, the dark mist started to be unveiled. Various efforts were done to return them so that they would be wholly accepted in the society. The historical vengeance created conflicts among humans and everlasting trauma. The bittersweet of history has been experienced by the people of this nation. Then, what is left from that incident is historical wisdom. The willingness to understand the context of an incident in a national dynamics journey. The willingness to make peace with the past and to learn

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<sup>1</sup> The interview conducted on Sutiah, Mia Bustam, as well as the diary of dr. Sumiarsi stated that. The heaviest pressure for a mother is when the family visit time in which their children also came to see them. Their longing of their family, especially their children must be resisted. Their desire to hug their children must be eliminated so that their children would not be involved in their involvement as a member or follower of a forbidden organization.



appreciating differences wisely and humanely for the nation's unity in the present and in the future (Amurwani, 2016, p. 4).

### Conclusion

Oral history is required to obtain deeper information and more detailed description of a community which are not obtainable from written sources. In the digging of oral history, a communicative relationship between the interviewer and the informants is required. In verifying the data, a distance between the interviewer and the informants is required. A data cross-check is required by using various sources. Therefore, it is expected that from the data digging and interpretation, a result which is as objective as it can be is obtained. Through hermeneutical approach and dialectic process, it is expected that an interpretive understanding of texts is obtained. The understanding and interpretation of texts is what can be used as the data to reconstruct a historical event.

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