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COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF THE 1968 TRISULA OPERATION: STATE VIOLENCE AND RURAL NARRATIVES IN BLITAR SELATAN

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ABSTRACT

The 1968 Trisula Operation represents a critical yet under-researched episode of political violence in post-1965 Indonesia. While national historiography often portrays this military campaign as a heroic restoration of order, localized experiences in rural communities like Blitar Selatan reveal a more complex landscape of trauma and displacement. Understanding these vernacular memories is essential for addressing the long-term impact of state violence on social cohesion and collective identity in post-authoritarian societies. The objective of the study: This study aims to examine how local communities in Blitar Selatan reconstruct and narrate the memory of the 1968 Trisula Operation. It explores the interplay between state-mandated historical narratives and lived experiences of violence, displacement, and survival. This research employed a qualitative oral history approach. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten (10) purposively selected informants, including elderly residents and retired military personnel, between September 2023 and March 2024. Data were analysed using a multi-stage thematic analysis based on the framework of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). The analysis followed a rigorous three-stage coding process: initial (open) coding to identify experiential markers, axial coding to group codes into thematic categories such as 'spatialised trauma', and selective coding to integrate findings with theories of the 'state of exception' and 'communicative memory'. Results: The findings reveal that the Trisula Operation was experienced as a 'state of exception' where legal protections were suspended, turning civilians into 'bare life'. Narratives highlighted a duality in state intervention: the destructive force of indiscriminate violence and forced relocation, alongside the productive introduction of religious and educational institutions as tools of social discipline. Memories are marked by an enduring 'ecology of fear', particularly regarding local geography, yet they also show resilience through the transmission of counter-memories that challenge official state propaganda. Unique Contribution: Unlike previous scholarship that focuses on the peak massacres of 1965–1966, this study provides a distinctive chronological focus on the 1968 Trisula Operation. It contributes a nuanced 'gray zone' perspective of victimhood, moving beyond binary oppositions of perpetrator versus victim to show how survivors negotiate trauma, adaptation, and religious transformation under military governance. The study concludes that collective memory in Blitar Selatan functions as a contested terrain where official monuments and local testimonies coexist in tension. The normalization of military dominance in everyday life remains deeply

embedded in the community's social fabric, suggesting that historical justice requires acknowledging these marginalized rural narratives. Key Recommendation: Future studies should explore the intergenerational transmission of these memories among the youth in Blitar Selatan to understand how 'postmemory' shapes current civic identities and perceptions of state authority.

KEYWORDS: Collective Memory; Political Violence; 1965 Killings; Trisula Operation; Blitar Selatan.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the 1965 anti-communist purge in Indonesia, the New Order regime led by Suharto sought to consolidate its authority through various political and military operations. One of the most significant but often overlooked actions was the 1968 Trisula Operation, a military campaign in Blitar Selatan, East Java, designed to eliminate alleged remnants of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). The operation was not only a military maneuver but also a symbolic demonstration of the regime's commitment to restoring order, enforcing loyalty to the state ideology, and establishing national stability. Central to this project of state making was the construction of a collective memory that legitimized authoritarian power.

Collective memory, as defined by Alea et al., (2013), is a socially shared recollection that serves both to sustain identity and to derive lessons from the past. It enables communities to remember significant historical events that occurred long before their time and renders these events meaningful for present and future generations. Dudai (2004) argues that collective memory is shaped not merely as an accumulation of facts, but as a form of group belief objectively constructed and deeply internalized. Furthermore, Bietti (2018) emphasizes the role of collective memory in reinforcing group cohesion and preserving historical consciousness through shared narratives**.**

Studies of collective memory across various societies reveal that memory is never neutral. In China, for example, Mengna (2020) explored how collective memory about women's intellectual education during the early 20th century reflected broader ideological shifts within universities and society. In Japan, memory has been shown to be manipulated and even erased by state agendas, as Akmalie & Aminah (2023) demonstrated through their analysis of the novel *The Memory Police*. Similarly, in the UK and Argentina, research has revealed how women's activism and political resistance during periods of state repression are remembered, reinterpreted, or silenced depending on the political climate (Bietti, 2013; Buesa, 2019).

Recent scholarship on the 1965–1966 violence has increasingly emphasized localized dynamics and intergenerational memory transmission. Sendra (2025) for example, demonstrates how rural massacres in Gunung Kidul were shaped by village-level rivalries and coercive mobilization. The case of Blitar Selatan complements this perspective but shifts the chronological focus to 1968, showing that the logic of violence extended beyond the peak massacres and into counterinsurgency operations framed as the restoration of order. Similarly, G. Leksana, (2020;2023) has highlighted how memories of anti-communist violence become embedded in rural social relations and transmitted across generations. This tension resonates with Madinier (2014) who argues that the historiography of 1965 remains shaped by distortions between official commemoration and critical scholarship.

In Indonesia, scholarship on the 1965-1966 killings has primarily focused on mass violence, anti-communist purges, and the political transition to authoritarianism. However, relatively little attention has been paid to how local communities experienced and now remember peripheral operations such as Trisula. This study responds to that gap by examining the collective memory of the Trisula Operation among the residents of Blitar Selatan, a region that was central to the operation but marginalized in national historical narratives.

At the time, the government initiated the *Panca Krida* program, part of the First Development Cabinet launched in June 1968, which explicitly included the eradication of all residual elements of the G30S/PKI movement. These policies formed the ideological foundation of what the regime called "national development," tightly linked to political security and the suppression of dissent. As a manifestation of this, the 1968 Trisula Operation was commemorated through the construction of the Trisula Monument, a physical symbol of victory over internal enemies. However, as Iliyasov (2025) contends, such monuments are never neutral they serve as symbolic dialogues between political elites and the public, shaping historical meaning, legitimacy, and collective identity.

The memory of the 1968 events continues to reveal how the New Order regime sought to control historical narratives through propaganda and memorialization. For the people of Blitar Selatan, these memories are not just historical recollections but lived experiences of fear, displacement, and political labeling. Furthermore, the ambivalent articulation of suffering in this region complicates dominant frameworks of victimhood discussed by (Wicaksono, 2021). Rather than asserting a singular identity as victims, villagers articulate layered memories that blend coercion, adaptation, and survival.

This article seeks to address the following research question: How do local communities in Blitar Selatan remember and narrate the 1968 Trisula Operation, and what do these memories reveal about state violence, legitimacy, and the politics of fear in

post-1965 Indonesia? To answer this, the study employs a qualitative methodology using oral history interviews with ten (10) elderly residents and retired military personnel. The analysis focuses on thematically coding narratives to uncover how memory is shaped, silenced, and mobilized, and what these reveals about the relationship between state power and popular memory in post-authoritarian Southeast Asia.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND STATE VIOLENCE

Collective memory emphasizes how social groups reconstruct and transmit past events to provide meaning for present identities and social relations (Assmann, 2011; Halbwachs, 1992). Memory is not a neutral record but a socially framed and contested process. It is shaped by cultural practices, rituals, and narratives that enable communities to define themselves through selective interpretations of history. Connerton, (2017) highlights how remembering and forgetting are enacted through silence, repetition, and embodied practices, making memory both preservation and suppression. Collective memory, therefore, emerges from the interaction between personal recollections and group frameworks (Olick et al., 2011).

In authoritarian contexts, memory becomes a political instrument. States manage the past through censorship, propaganda, and institutionalized forgetting (McGregor, 2009). This aligns with Foucault (2012) notion of disciplinary power, in which control extends beyond physical violence into the production of truth regimes. Agamben's (2005) concept of the state of exception further demonstrates how authoritarian regimes suspend normal legal and moral orders to justify extraordinary acts of repression. These frameworks are essential to understanding Indonesia's New Order regime, which legitimized mass violence against suspected communists in the mid-1960s and silenced survivors for decades.

Southeast Asia provides an important arena for examining memory politics under authoritarianism and its aftermath. In Indonesia, Hearman (2018) and McGregor (2022) have examined how survivors and activists reconstruct the violence of 1965-1966, challenging official narratives that portray the purge as necessary for stability. Comparable dynamics exist in the region, Reynolds, (2011) discusses how Thai state narratives obscure episodes of political violence, while scholars of the Philippines have traced how memories of martial law continue to shape civic identity across generations. These studies reveal both state strategies of silencing and the emergence of counter-memories within local communities and civil society.

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Building on these debates, this study analyzes oral histories from Blitar Selatan, a rural community targeted during the 1968 Trisula Operation. As an extension of the anti-communist purge, the operation illustrates how state violence permeated daily life, uprooted communities, and created long-lasting trauma. By situating villagers' and soldiers' recollections within broader theories of collective memory and authoritarian power, the study highlights tensions between official history and lived experience. It also contributes to regional discussions on how marginalized Southeast Asian communities remember repression, negotiate civic identities, and transmit trauma across generations.

3. METHODS

3.1. Research Design

This research employs a qualitative design using an oral history approach to explore how the people of Blitar Selatan remember the 1968 Trisula Operation. *Blitar Selatan*, East Java, was chosen as the research site because of its historical significance as the center of the operation and its enduring symbolic importance in Indonesia's memory politics.

3.2. Participants

The subjects of this study were ten residents of Blitar Selatan, purposively selected based on their direct involvement in or experience of the 1968 events. They included elderly community members, former local officials, and retired military personnel who served or were affected during the operation. To

protect confidentiality, only initials are provided. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the participants.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants.

No.	Initial	Age
1.	DJRN	75
2.	WSN	69
3.	MKR	102
4.	SMR	97
5.	KMT	68
6.	PRT	98
7.	KTR	80
8.	RNU	78
9.	BND	87
10.	NR	76

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on their direct experience of or involvement in the 1968 Trisula Operation. Initial access was facilitated through local community networks and village intermediaries familiar with the historical events. Snowball sampling was subsequently used to identify additional participants, particularly elderly residents whose memories had not previously been documented**.**

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected between September 2023 and March 2024 through in-depth semi-structured interviews, each lasting 60 to 120 minutes. The interviews focused on recollections of daily life before, during, and after the operation, perceptions of military intervention, and the transmission of these memories across generations. With participants' consent, the interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically following Braun & Clarke, (2006) framework. Field observations and secondary sources such as photographs, local documents, and government publications were also consulted to contextualize the oral accounts.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a multi-stage thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, supported by principles of data condensation and display outlined by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014).

To ensure analytical rigor, the coding process proceeded in three stages:

1. Initial (Open) Coding: Interview transcripts were reviewed line-by-line to identify recurring concepts and experiential markers. Initial codes included "river fear," "*janur* markers," "forced relocation," "screening," and "military-led prayers," capturing participants' lived experiences.
2. Axial Coding: Related codes were grouped into broader thematic categories to identify relationships between individual recollections and structural mechanisms of state intervention. For instance, codes such as "river fear" and "wrongful targeting" were categorized under themes relating to spatialized trauma and sovereign violence.
3. Selective Coding: In the final stage, core themes were refined and interpreted in light of Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory and Agamben's concept of the state of exception. This step enabled the analysis to examine how everyday narratives intersected with broader regimes of power and memory.

Triangulation was conducted by cross-referencing oral testimonies with archival materials and official documents, including Keppres No. 28/1975. Reflexive memos were maintained throughout the research process to monitor interpretive decisions and minimize potential bias. This approach ensured that themes emerged inductively from participants' narratives while remaining theoretically informed.

3.5. Ethical Considerations and Researcher Positionality

Given the political sensitivity of the 1965-1968 violence in Indonesia, particular attention was paid to ethical considerations. Prior to each interview, participants were informed about the aims of the study and provided verbal and written consent. They were assured of anonymity, and pseudonymous initials are used throughout this article. Interviews were conducted in locations chosen by participants to ensure comfort and privacy. Special care was taken when discussing traumatic experiences. Interviews were paused or redirected if participants showed

signs of emotional distress. While formal psychological support services were not required, sensitivity to participants' well-being remained a priority throughout the research process. Interviewing both civilian survivors and retired military personnel required careful analytical balance. Rather than privileging one narrative over another, the study treats each account as a situated memory shaped by social position, institutional affiliation, and retrospective interpretation. As the primary researcher, I maintained reflexive field notes to monitor potential interpretive bias, particularly given the contested nature of Indonesia's 1965–1968 history. Although formal member checking was not systematically conducted due to participants' advanced age and logistical constraints, clarifications were sought during interviews to ensure accurate representation of participants' intended meanings.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Fear And Insecurity Before the Operation

Collective memories from Blitar Selatan consistently recall the years leading up to the 1968 Trisula Operation as a time of profound fear and uncertainty. Residents described the atmosphere with the local term *geger* a word that literally means "turmoil" or "communal uproar," but in this context evoked a pervasive sense of disarray, distrust, and danger. Across interviews, respondents emphasized that daily life was punctuated by insecurity thefts, robberies, kidnappings, and sudden acts of violence blurred the line between common criminality and political intimidation.

As Mbah Mukari (MKR, October 23, 2023) recalled:

Before the Trisula Operation it was not peaceful. Many robbers, many thieves… even cattle disappeared. Tukijan, a villager I knew, had three cows stolen. When he reported it, the police only took down the descriptions and then left. People were terrified to even look at the robbers because they feared being slaughtered in retaliation. No one dared to intervene."

Other witnesses echoed this sense of everyday insecurity but framed it through the lens of political infiltration. WSN, who lived through the events, remembered the presence of fugitives linked to the 1965 upheavals who blended into village life.

These outsiders, he explained, built influence gradually by exploiting the limited knowledge and isolation of local residents:

I saw Ir. Surahman myself. He was from Jakarta, a fugitive. To hide his tracks, he even changed his name. They lived among us eating, chatting, acting like neighbors. But at night, they gathered people and said, 'Later there will be geger, the time of upheaval will come.' Children were told to plant kangkung and randu as cover. We were taught to throw knives and hide in ruba-ruba by the rivers. They used our ignorance; they took advantage of our simplicity." (WSN, October 12, 2023)

These testimonies underscore two intersecting dynamics: the prevalence of crime that hollowed out trust in local authorities, and the deliberate embedding of PKI fugitives within village communities. Several respondents highlighted that the terrain itself forests, hills, and rivers created natural hiding places. Makeshift shelters known as *ruba-ruba* dotted the landscape, offering cover for fugitives and intensifying the sense that "enemies" might be lurking nearby.

Fear was not only a product of violence but also of ambiguity. Respondents repeatedly stressed that villagers could not tell who was "with" or "against" whom. Even the categories of authority were blurred. Many said that in those years, they referred to all uniformed personnel simply as *polisi* (police), without distinguishing between military and police units. This conceptual confusion compounded the dangers of speaking out or aligning with one side. As WSN explained, "If you followed the army by day, you could be killed at night." The perception that loyalties shifted with terrifying speed produced a climate where silence and avoidance became survival strategies.

MKR recounted how he and other men avoided sleeping at home, choosing instead to stay overnight at the village office alongside the *karteker* (caretaker officials). In his words:

"*Life was full of suspicion. We no longer trusted even our neighbors. At night I slept at the village hall with the karteker, never at home. If someone showed the soldiers a path during the day, by nightfall he might be dead. Who could we trust? No one. That is why we say it was geger a time when the ground under our feet felt unstable*." (MKR, October 23, 2023)

Such recollections resonate with scholarly observations about the role of ambiguity in civil conflict. Kalyvas (2006), for example, notes that in contexts of fragmented authority, ordinary people often face lethal uncertainty about categories of friend and enemy. The testimonies from Blitar Selatan strongly echo this pattern: a community unable to reliably identify allies or adversaries, caught in what might be called the "gray zone" of violence.

The psychological toll of this insecurity was immense. Respondents recalled how ordinary routines farming, fetching water, attending community gatherings were overshadowed by the risk of abduction or reprisal. Some spoke of women being afraid to go to the fields alone, or children

forbidden to stray far from home. Rumors spread faster than facts, amplifying fears and eroding trust. As one respondent observed, "We stopped visiting each other's homes at night. Even weddings or *kenduri* (communal feasts) were haunted by suspicion. If someone disappeared after a gathering, people whispered: maybe the PKI took him, maybe the soldiers did."

Beyond immediate insecurity, these memories reveal how fear reorganized social life. Routines that normally sustained cohesion communal work, evening gatherings, mutual assistance were disrupted or abandoned. Instead, villagers developed strategies of withdrawal and self-protection. The erosion of trust in both neighbors and authorities illustrates what Green (1994) has described as "fear as a social practice": a condition that not only reflects danger but actively reshapes how people relate to each other and their environment.

Taken together, the accounts from Blitar Selatan depict a society in which criminal predation, political infiltration, and challenging geography converged to create pervasive insecurity. The memory of *geger* is thus not just a recollection of violence but a moral landscape in which uncertainty and fear dominated daily life. Importantly, these memories also set the stage for subsequent acceptance or at least resignation toward the sweeping military intervention that followed. When the Trisula Operation began, many villagers saw it as the only possible response to a reality in which they felt perpetually unsafe, even if the operation itself would later produce its own traumas. This atmosphere of fear not only destabilized daily life but also eroded the very categories of trust, belonging, and authority. As the next section will show, such uncertainty laid the groundwork for blurred identities and the arbitrary violence that followed.

4.2. Blurred Identities and Arbitrary Violence

While insecurity shaped daily life in the months before the Trisula Operation, villagers remembered the operation itself as a moment when boundaries between perpetrators, sympathizers, and bystanders collapsed. Oral histories repeatedly emphasized the arbitrariness of violence, where the criteria for guilt were fragile, shifting, and often based on rumor or coincidence. Several respondents pointed to the widespread use of aliases by fugitives, which created deadly confusion once the army launched its campaign.

RNU explained how this practice cost innocent lives:

"*People were arrested or shot simply because their names were the same as those used by PKI fugitives. Tuwoh and Darto, our local neighbors, were executed even though they had nothing to do with the movement. At that time, there were no identity cards, no photos, only names. If your name matched, your life could end.*" (RNU, personal communication, October 23, 2023)

This testimony captures the atmosphere of lethal uncertainty. Choices that might have seemed loyal to one side could, within hours, be interpreted as betrayal by the other. As a result, many villagers resorted to silence, withdrawal, and calculated avoidance as survival strategies. The widespread use of aliases among fugitives further blurred these boundaries. Respondents recalled that many fugitives deliberately adopted common local names to disguise themselves, which created conditions for tragic cases of mistaken identity.

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Such memories underscore both the fragility of local identification systems and the atmosphere of fear in which innocence offered little protection. In the absence of reliable documentation, suspicion itself could become a death sentence. Scholars of political violence note that in contexts of fragmented authority and limited information, "identification by proxy" often produces arbitrary violence (Kalyvas, 2006; Valentino, 2005). The testimonies from Blitar Selatan resonate with this dynamic, showing how fragile distinctions between combatant and civilian collapsed into lethal ambiguity.

The oral histories also highlight the ways in which ordinary villagers became entangled in suspicion simply by providing hospitality or being coerced into cooperation. PRT explained:

"*Not everyone killed in those days was guilty. People here were ignorant and afraid. Some were just forced to help or to provide food, and that already made them look like accomplices. If a group of armed men asked for cassava or rice, you could not refuse. But later, when the soldiers came, they would say you had fed the PKI. People were trapped.*" (PRT, personal communication, October 23, 2023)

Here, the line between coercion and complicity becomes impossible to draw. Villagers' memories reveal how survival demanded compliance with whoever was present at the moment whether

fugitives demanding food or soldiers conducting searches yet those same acts of compliance could later be reinterpreted as evidence of guilt.

Several informants also remembered that accusations were not always motivated by political loyalties alone but sometimes by local rivalries. One respondent noted that feuds over land or family disputes could easily be reframed as political collaboration, with devastating consequences. This suggests that the Trisula Operation created opportunities for personal grievances to be weaponized through the language of suspicion, further entangling politics with everyday social life.

The arbitrariness of violence blurred not only categories of guilt and innocence but also moral frameworks. Villagers remembered how survival often depended on symbolic markers or sheer chance. As one elder commented, "Sometimes it was just about who you stood next to, or whether you happened to share a name. Good people died, while others survived only because no one accused them" (MKR, personal communication, October 23, 2023). These recollections echo Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy's (2011) argument that collective memory is interpretive, shaped by how survivors assess injustice as much as by what actually occurred.

The legacy of these blurred identities continues to shape memory in Blitar Selatan. Residents today recall the 1968 events less as a military operation against insurgents than as a period when innocence could not shield them from danger. The testimonies emphasize betrayal, mistaken identity, and coerced complicity rather than heroic struggle or clear-cut battles. In this way, the collective memory of the Trisula Operation reflects what Connerton (2008) has described as the persistence of "silenced memories," where communities remember primarily through accounts of injustice and loss rather than through official narratives of order.

Ultimately, the oral histories portray a community trapped in a zone of indeterminacy. The categories of "victim," "perpetrator," and "sympathizer" collapsed into each other, leaving civilians profoundly vulnerable to both sides of the conflict. The violence of 1968 is remembered not simply as the elimination of insurgents but as the unraveling of moral and social boundaries that once held the community together. The resulting trauma and mistrust remain embedded in Blitar Selatan's collective memory, shaping how later generations understand the dangers of political violence and the fragility of social trust.

4.3. Operation Trisula as State Legitimacy

Collective memories of the Trisula Operation also emphasize how military action was framed and remembered as a project of state legitimacy. While many villagers recalled the period as *geger* a time of chaos and fear the state narrative presented the operation as a successful effort to restore order and eliminate subversion. This duality reflects the contested nature of memory in authoritarian contexts. Residents remembered how the army reshaped local life by relocating scattered houses to roadside locations in order to monitor movement more effectively. As one informant explained, "Our houses were scattered in the hills, but during the Trisula Operation the army moved them to the roadside. It did not matter whose land it was, the important thing was surveillance" (WSN, personal communication, October 12, 2023). Others recalled how entire communities were gathered at the village square for screening, where each person was interrogated about alleged links to the PKI (MKR, personal communication, October 23, 2023).

From the military perspective, such measures were framed as necessary security strategies. A former soldier described the use of *pagar betis* (human barricades) combining villagers, local guards, and soldiers to encircle hiding places: "During the operation, we used *pagar betis* three villagers with bamboo spears in front, soldiers behind, and planes above dropping leaflets telling people to surrender" (NR, personal communication, March 10, 2024). These practices reinforced the image of a comprehensive state apparatus, mobilizing both civilians and armed forces under the banner of national security. The operation was further memorialized through the construction of the Trisula Monument, which institutionalized the event into what Assmann, (2013) calls *cultural memory*. Whereas local communities recalled displacement, coercion, and fear, the state presented the monument as a symbol of victory over subversion and a testament to the New Order's capacity to secure stability. As Iliyasov (2024) argues, monuments function as symbolic dialogues between political elites and society, shaping public remembrance in ways that affirm state legitimacy.

In this sense, the Trisula Operation illustrates how authoritarian regimes deploy both coercion and commemoration. Through physical control of space, mass mobilization, and symbolic architecture, the New Order transformed a violent and traumatic episode into a foundational narrative of political stability, embedding its legitimacy in both memory and monument. Yet if the monument enshrined the state's narrative of victory, villagers' oral histories

preserve a more ambivalent legacy one marked as much by trauma and silence as by order and stability. The next section explores how these memories of suffering, displacement, and religious transformation continue to shape community identity.

4.4. Trauma, Transmission, And Social Transformation

The memories of villagers also testify to the enduring trauma generated by the Trisula Operation. Respondents recalled how bodies of those killed were disposed of in rivers, leaving deep psychological scars and transforming the landscape itself into a site of fear.

As one elderly resident recounted:

"*They were not buried but thrown into the river. For almost three years, people here were afraid to go to the river or eat fish, because the fish were believed to have eaten human remains. We bathed only in wells, and mothers warned their children never to play by the stream."* (Katirin, personal communication, October 23, 2023)

This testimony reveals not only the horror of death but also the disruption of ecological and cultural routines. In Javanese villages, rivers were more than physical resources; they were sites of gathering, rituals, and everyday sustenance. Their contamination with human bodies marked what Alexander (2004) has called a *cultural trauma*, in which the social fabric and collective identity are wounded alongside individuals. Other accounts describe how symbolic markers determined life or death. During the operation, some villagers were given necklaces of young coconut leaves (*janur*) to signify innocence, while those without such markers were treated as guilty. PRT remembered:

"If the soldiers put a janur around your neck, it meant you were good. If not, you were considered bad. Some cried with relief when the janur was placed on them, while others trembled in fear when they did not receive one." (PRT, personal communication, October 23, 2023)

In Javanese culture, *janur* is typically a sign of purity and festivity, often used in weddings and village ceremonies. Its deployment as a political marker inverted its meaning, transforming a symbol of life and celebration into an emblem of survival amid violence. Agamben's (2005) notion of *bare life* is relevant here: identity was stripped down to arbitrary, external signs, reducing villagers to bodies that could be classified, spared, or destroyed based on fragile criteria. The traumatic experiences of 1968 were not confined to the immediate generation. They were transmitted through family stories, silences, and changes in everyday practices. Several respondents emphasized that villagers became cautious in their interactions, avoiding open discussion of political matters and teaching their children to remain silent about the past. One middle-aged informant recalled:

"When we were children, our parents always said, ojo ngomong do not speak carelessly. If you asked about 1965 or Trisula, they just told you to be quiet. We grew up knowing that certain words were dangerous, even if we did not fully understand why." (Anonymous, personal communication, October 2023)

This illustrates how memory was transmitted not only through explicit storytelling but also through embodied silences and prohibitions, confirming Connerton's (2008) argument that societies remember through what is not said as much as through speech. Hirsch's (2008) concept of *postmemory* also applies: the second generation inherited the trauma of their parents through fragments, warnings, and omissions, which continued to shape their sense of vulnerability. At the same time, some memories pointed to transformations framed as positive by survivors. Many recalled how the military introduced Islamic practices, built mosques, and taught villagers how to pray. As two respondents explained:

"People here knew nothing about religion. Soldiers built a mosque and taught us how to recite Al-Fatihah and perform the prayers. For the first time, children learned how to pray in the mosque." (Ranu & Parti, personal communication, October 23, 2023)

These recollections highlight the ambivalence of memory. For some, the same operation that brought violence and fear also introduced structures of religious life and moral order. From the perspective of survivors, this dual legacy trauma on one side, transformation on the other remains a defining feature of how the operation is remembered. Scholars of religion and politics in Java (Hefner, 2000) have shown that state interventions in religious practice often served dual purposes: as instruments of social discipline and as frameworks for community building. The memories of Blitar Selatan echo this ambivalence.

Several respondents even contrasted the "before" and "after" of the operation in moral terms. Before, they recalled, villages were scattered and poorly organized, with weak religious knowledge. After, houses were relocated to roadsides, mosques were built, and communal prayers became part of daily life. Yet this transformation was inseparable from the coercion that produced it. As one resident reflected: *"We learned religion, yes, but it came with blood. The mosque was built, but so many graves were left*

unmarked." (Anonymous, personal communication, October 2023).

The dual character of these memories trauma and transformation illustrates the ambivalence of collective memory in post-conflict societies. On the one hand, the recollections reveal what Loisa et al. (2020) describe as the persistence of "difficult pasts" that continue to shape group identity and intergenerational fears. On the other hand, they resonate with Bietti's (2018) argument that collective memory can serve as a resource for cohesion, providing a shared framework for interpreting the past and orienting the future.

Comparative perspectives underscore the significance of this ambivalence. In Cambodia, memories of Khmer Rouge atrocities are transmitted through silence and selective commemoration, shaping how younger generations relate to violence (Hinton, 2008). In Argentina, memories of dictatorship are both traumatic and mobilizing, fueling human rights activism (Jelin, 2003). The villagers of Blitar Selatan similarly navigate between silence, pain, and adaptation, showing how local memories of repression contribute to broader debates about memory politics in Southeast Asia and beyond.

In Blitar Selatan, the memory of the Trisula Operation thus functions both as a painful reminder of arbitrary violence and as a foundational narrative of survival, adaptation, and moral instruction. It demonstrates how violence can wound communities, alter their ecological and cultural worlds, and yet simultaneously generate new forms of identity and practice. For survivors, memory is not only a record of suffering but also a guide for teaching caution, morality, and resilience to future generations.

5. DISCUSSION

The memories collected in Blitar Selatan must be situated within the wider trajectory of Indonesia's post-1965 political consolidation. As survivors emphasized, the 1968 Trisula Operation was inseparable from the aftermath of the failed coup of 1965 and the subsequent purges. The fugitives who fled to Blitar Selatan were targeted by the New Order not simply as remnants of a defeated movement but as enduring symbols of political disorder that threatened Suharto's emerging regime. This interpretation resonates with Crouch, (2007) and Elson, (2001) analyses of Suharto's reliance on the military's *dwifungsi* (dual function) as both guardian of security and a political actor. The oral testimonies of fear, screening, and displacement collected in this study thus reflect more than local anxieties; they embody the mechanisms through which authoritarian regimes anchor legitimacy in violence and discipline. Taken together, these narratives suggest that the Trisula Operation functioned not only as a counterinsurgency campaign but as a mechanism through which communicative memory was reshaped under conditions of exception and later stabilized through cultural forms of commemoration.

A striking theme in the narratives is the difficulty villagers experienced in distinguishing perpetrators from ordinary residents. Survivors recalled the porous boundaries between fugitives, sympathizers, and neighbors an uncertainty compounded by state practices of screening and categorization. Later formalized in Keppres No. 28/1975, individuals were classified into Golongan A (direct perpetrators), Golongan B (sympathizers), and Golongan C (those minimally associated), institutionalizing suspicion as part of governance (Munif Ashri, A., & Syahwal, 2023). Yet memories from Blitar Selatan reveal the collapse of such bureaucratic distinctions under conditions of sovereign violence. Here, the 'state of exception' (Agamben, 2005) was not merely a legal theory but a lived spatial reality where the boundary between the fugitive and the citizen evaporated. By reducing individuals to 'bare life' where survival depended on the arbitrary whim of a screening officer or a coerced act of hospitality the Trisula Operation transformed the rural landscape into a zone of indistinction. This trauma, as preserved in local oral history, exposes the failure of official categories (Golongan A, B, C) to capture the ontological insecurity of being a 'Homo Sacer' in a state-mandated killing zone.

Beyond repression, survivors consistently remembered the Trisula Operation as a turning point in local social transformation. Houses scattered across hillsides were forcibly relocated to roadside locations, schools were established under military oversight, and Islamic practices were introduced as tools of discipline. These recollections correspond with Karmiati, (2023) analysis of Suharto's strategy to strengthen religiosity as a counter to communist influence and with Safei, H., & Hudaidah, (2020) observation that education was mobilized to produce Pancasila-oriented citizens. For many villagers, the memory of learning prayers for the first time or attending newly built schools was inseparable from the coercion and violence that accompanied these changes. This duality underscores how authoritarian interventions often combined the destructive with the productive, embedding new religious and civic norms even as they inflicted trauma.

The findings also resonate with broader scholarship on the militarization of governance

under the New Order. Farchan (2022) documents how by 1968, military officers held 68% of gubernatorial posts, while Yosarie & Kosandi, (2023) show that military figures extended their influence into village administration. Oral testimonies from Blitar Selatan confirm this pattern: respondents recalled how local leaders were appointed directly from military ranks, normalizing the fusion of military and civilian authority. This intertwining of governance and coercion exemplifies what Hadiz, (2006) have described as the "New Order's authoritarian corporatism," where civilian life was structured around military logic. Collective memory in Blitar Selatan thus preserves not only experiences of violence but also the normalization of military dominance as an everyday reality.

The findings from Blitar Selatan support Leksana's notion of embedded remembering, yet they also reveal a distinctive ambivalence: first-generation survivors simultaneously reproduce trauma and acknowledge elements of moral or religious transformation introduced under military supervision. In Blitar Selatan, the distortion between official and critical narratives is not merely discursive but spatial and embodied manifested in monuments, relocated settlements, and silences within family narratives. Furthermore, the ambivalent articulation of suffering complicates dominant frameworks of victimhood discussed by Nanda Wicaksono (2021). Rather than asserting a singular identity as victims, villagers articulate layered memories that blend coercion, adaptation, religiosity, and survival. This suggests that memory politics in post-1965 Indonesia cannot be reduced to binary oppositions between perpetrators and victims, but must account for the 'gray zones' of rural experience. These tensions also illustrate the ongoing negotiation between communicative memory preserved within families and cultural memory institutionalized through monuments and state narratives.

These tensions reflect the ongoing negotiation between communicative memory preserved within families and cultural memory institutionalized through monuments and state narratives. State propaganda reframed the Trisula Operation as a heroic campaign of national salvation, commemorated through monuments and official textbooks. In contrast, villagers' oral histories emphasize fear, displacement, and arbitrary categorization. The coexistence of these two layers reveals the contested terrain of remembrance in authoritarian contexts. Whereas the Trisula Monument enshrines the state's narrative of victory, local testimonies operate as vernacular counter-memories, exposing the silences and contradictions embedded within official history. This dynamic reflects Assmann (2011) distinction between cultural memory stabilized through symbolic forms and communicative memory transmitted through everyday interaction.

The ambivalence of memories in Blitar Selatan also illustrates what Alexander, (2004)terms *cultural trauma*: events that leave lasting imprints on collective identity by rupturing taken-for-granted social frameworks. Trauma here was ecological, social, and intergenerational. The fear of rivers, the symbolic weight of *janur* markers, and the prohibition against political speech all point to disruptions that persisted long after the violence ended. Hirsch (2008) notion of *postmemory* helps explain how these experiences were transmitted to younger generations: through warnings, silences, and embodied practices rather than formal instruction. Such dynamics reveal the dual power of memory to both constrain and sustain community life.

Comparative insights further highlight the broader implications of these findings. In Cambodia, survivors of the Khmer Rouge similarly transmitted trauma through silence and selective commemoration, producing what Hinton, (2008) calls a "genocidal legacy" that shapes national identity. In Argentina, memories of dictatorship have fueled human rights movements, demonstrating how traumatic pasts can become resources for political mobilization (Jelin, 2003). In the Philippines, Marcos-era atrocities are contested in contemporary memory battles, illustrating how authoritarian legacies remain sites of struggle. The case of Blitar Selatan contributes to this comparative field by showing how localized campaignsoften overshadowed by national narratives of 1965 generate their own distinct memory practices, blending trauma, adaptation, and reluctant acceptance.

What emerges, then, is not a simple opposition between victimhood and complicity or between resistance and submission, but a more nuanced landscape of memory. Villagers simultaneously recall trauma and transformation, fear and religious awakening, displacement and the promise of order. This complexity challenges binaries often employed in both state narratives and scholarly accounts, underscoring the need for more localized, nuanced understandings of how authoritarian violence is remembered.

Finally, the study raises normative questions about reconciliation and historical justice in

Indonesia. The memories of Blitar Selatan highlight the enduring costs of silenced histories: generations taught to remain quiet, ecological landscapes haunted by violence, and communities whose narratives remain absent from national discourse. If collective memory is, as Bietti (2018) argues, a resource for social cohesion, then acknowledging these local testimonies is essential for building inclusive historical narratives. At the same time, their ambivalence reminds us that memory is not only about mourning but also about adaptation and survival. Recognizing this complexity is crucial for any attempt at reconciliation in post-authoritarian Indonesia.

6. CONCLUSSION

This study has examined how the 1968 Trisula Operation is remembered in Blitar Selatan, demonstrating that collective memory of post-1965 violence extends beyond the well-documented massacres of 1965–1966 into later counterinsurgency operations. Rather than functioning solely as a military campaign, Trisula emerged in local memory as a transformative episode in which fear, coercion, surveillance, and social reorganization reshaped everyday rural life. The findings highlight the ambivalent character of memory in authoritarian contexts. Villagers recall both trauma and transformation: arbitrary violence and blurred identities coexisted with new forms of religious instruction, spatial reorganization, and institutional discipline. This ambivalence complicates simplified binaries of victimhood and complicity and underscores the need to understand memory as a layered and negotiated process. By foregrounding oral histories from a rural community often marginalized in national narratives, this study contributes to scholarship in two significant ways. First, it shows how authoritarian legitimacy is sustained not only through repression but also through the production of cultural memory embedded in monuments, religious practices, and educational structures. Second, it demonstrates how communicative memory persists within families and local communities, sometimes reinforcing, sometimes quietly unsettling official narratives. More broadly, the case of Blitar Selatan underscores the importance of localized perspectives in debates on memory politics and post-authoritarian governance in Southeast Asia. Recognizing the complexity and ambivalence of these memories is essential for developing more inclusive historical narratives and for advancing conversations on reconciliation and historical justice in Indonesia.

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