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24

Robert Lemelson and Seinenu M. Thein-Lemelson

24.1 Introduction

On a sweltering August day in 2013, in Burma's¹ former capital city of Yangon,² exactly 25 years after government troops massacred thousands of civilians in the street, several thousand of those who survived gathered at a large convention center in order to commemorate the anniversary of the 1988 demonstrations, pay tribute to the heroes of the Uprisings, and honor the memory of those who perished. For three extraordinary days, paintings, photography, and poetry lined the walls of a temporary gallery that had been constructed on the grounds of the convention center,

documenting the experiences of dissidents under the military dictatorship, including the imprisonment, torture, and deprivation that many endured.

Inside the main auditorium, scenes from 1988 of troops shooting at unarmed civilians flashed onto a screen as the tune from a 1970s pop song "Dust in the Wind" blasted from loudspeakers with new Burmese lyrics: "Oh ... fallen heroes of the democracy movement ... History written with our blood ... corpses lying on the roads ... this is the country where martyrs live." The halls of the convention center thundered as the entire audience clapped, pumped their fists, and sang along. Speaker after speaker took to the podium, talking at length about their memories of the massacres of 1988 and the years of struggle that followed, addressing an audience that included parliamentarians, former political prisoners, activists, university students, school children, housewives, military officers, and members of the monastic order. The speeches were impassioned, the mood celebratory—this was a fete, rather than a somber memorial.

In Jakarta, that same year, almost 50 years after Indonesian military and paramilitary brutally slaughtered hundreds of thousands of civilians in what was framed as an anti-communist purge, a group of survivors sat with community members during an event that was meant to commemorate these tragic events. The atrocities committed in 1965 were discussed at length in front of an audience that consisted largely of students too young to

¹In 1989, Burma was renamed the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. There has not been uniform adoption of the name Myanmar. Because the change in name was an arbitrary decision on the part of the military junta, many prodemocracy activists within the country, as well as other nation-states, have not officially adopted the new name. Others have argued that the name Myanmar is more inclusive, because Burma references only the dominant ethnicity (the Bamar or Burman).

²In 1989, Rangoon was renamed Yangon.

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remember the massacres. Neither of the two experts speaking that day had personally lived through the atrocities of 1965 and the event itself had been organized by outsiders not personally impacted by the killings.

As part of the event, a film, made by the first author about the 1965 killings and their aftermath, was screened. *Genjer, Genjer*, a song that had been a rallying cry for the Indonesian communist party, was part of the soundtrack for the film. As the song played, a small group of survivors, now well into their 80s and 90s, quietly sang along to the lyrics, while some sobbed silently. The mood inside the auditorium was somber. More than 50 years had passed since the mass killings in Indonesia and only now were survivors coming forward and breaking their silence, albeit cautiously and in small numbers.

The fundamental difference between the two scenes depicted above lies in the response of both survivors and the general population to historically situated political atrocities and state attempts to prevent their memorialization. In Indonesia, a state-sponsored imposition of silence with regard to the events of 1965 appeared to be largely successful, with survivors remaining silent for decades. In Burma, the opposite was the case. Just a short time after the military purportedly ceded control to democratic rule in 2011, survivors of the 1988 massacres were coming forward in astounding numbers, relating their narratives to the larger society, exposing past human rights violations, and publicly confronting those who committed the atrocities. The events of 1988 were emerging as integral to the public discourse on human rights, democratization, identity, and nationhood.

What accounts for these differences in remembering, discussing, or even confronting past historical traumas? What might these differences mean about how survivors in these two societies experience, understand, and regulate fear, anxiety, sadness, and other emotions implicated in traumatic experience? What might these differences mean for the overall course of posttraumatic responses in the individuals who experience political atrocities?

24.2 Overview of Chapter

An attempt to situate traumatic experience in relation to culture is a complex undertaking, requiring multiple levels of analyses (Hinton & Good, 2015; Hinton & Hinton, 2014; Hinton & Kirmayer, 2013; Hinton & Lewis-Fernandez, 2011; Hinton & Simon, 2015; Kirmayer, Lemelson, & Barad, 2007; Rechtman, 2000). Universalizing accounts that explain trauma at the foundational level of the neurobiology of fear have been productive in providing an understandable model for posttraumatic experience and formulating a diversity of treatment modalities (Dias, Banerjee, Goodman, & Ressler, 2013; Foa & Kozak, 1998; Powers, Halpern, Ferenschak, Gillihan, and Foa (2010); Shin and Liberzon (2012); see also LeDoux, 2014 on the concept of fear in current neuroscience research). However, explanations that rely upon neurobiological models of fear are incomplete unless individual experiences of trauma and posttraumatic response are situated at more complex levels that account for the unique political, historical, and psychocultural contexts in which they occur. This is particularly true in relation to the study of individual outcomes. While there is a robust literature that indicates that individuals often do respond to traumatic experience with resilience, it is not clear what specific factors facilitate recovery (Bonanno, 2004).

This chapter explores the relationship between the personal experience of trauma and larger cultural and political processes that can shape individual outcome by examining two historic national tragedies in Southeast Asia: one in Burma, and the other in Indonesia. We will utilize a comparative case analysis of two individuals—one Indonesian, and one Burmese—who underwent significant traumas that were part of historically situated political atrocities. By exploring these two case studies in detail, we hope to illuminate the complex interplay of psychocultural, social, political, and even religious variables that frame traumatic exposure and the cultural models that orient trauma survivors to interpret their individual

experiences in particular ways. We hope especially to highlight that individual outcome to traumatic experience is not only determined by neurobiology and personality, but that resiliency and recovery can be impacted both by immediate social factors and larger structural ones that reflect the politics, culture, religion, and history of a particular society.

24.3 Comparing Two National Tragedies of Trauma: Burma and Indonesia

Indonesia and Burma have had similarly troubling modern political histories: both countries had opposition movements that posed a significant enough threat to the ruling regime that they were brutally suppressed, resulting in the death and imprisonment of several thousand individuals in Burma (Lintner, 1990) and upwards of a million in Indonesia (Robinson, 1995). Both nations are also marred by a history in which a state military and police apparatus, through violent and nonviolent measures, including imprisonment, censorship, propaganda, intimidation, social control, and manipulation of cultural narratives, attempted to silence survivors of these atrocities and hide the reality of their traumas.

In Burma, we will focus on the 1988 Uprising and subsequent massacres as seen through the eyes of a former student activist who was a long-term prisoner of conscience. In Indonesia, we will focus on the events that led up to the 1965 massacres, as narrated by a farmer who witnessed and survived the mass violence in Bali in late 1965. We then explore the commonalities and differences in the psychocultural, familial, social, historical, religious, and political factors that shaped both traumatic experiences and subsequent outcomes in Burma and Bali.³

³Due to the scope of this chapter, we will not be able to explore potential genetic predispositions, developmental life course issues, or other psychobiological factors that would predispose either of these subjects to developing post-traumatic stress disorder.

24.3.1 Historical Context in Indonesia: The September 30th Movement and Mass Killings

Up until 1965, the communist party of Indonesia (or *Partai Komunis Indonesia*-PKI) was one of the largest political parties in the country. According to official accounts put forth by the Indonesian Government, on September 30th, 1965, a “communist conspiracy” within the military resulted in the murder of seven high-ranking military officials. The September 30th Movement, as purportedly enacted by the communist party, was the justification for a wave of mass killings instigated by General Suharto that spread throughout Indonesia in 1965 and that culminated in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians (Anderson, 1987; Cribb, 2004; Roosa, 2006; Wardaya, 2006; Wertheim, 1979). The primary victims of the violence were actual or alleged PKI members and others accused of being sympathetic to the communist cause, including members of artist communities and women’s organizations (Dwyer, 2004; Pohlman, 2004, 2008, 2014). Perpetrators of the violence were primarily military and paramilitary forces, though some civilians also participated in the killings, either voluntarily or under coercion.

Estimates for the number of people killed nationwide are somewhere between 500,000 and 1 million. On the island of Bali between 80,000 and 100,000 (approximately 5–8% of the population) were killed between December 1965 and March 1966 (Cribb, 1990; Dwyer & Santikarma, 2003; Robinson, 1995). Thousands more were imprisoned and subjected to torture, forced labor, and other harsh conditions, with many prisoners being held for decades (Fuller, 2000).

24.3.2 History of Political Repression Following the 1965 Mass Killings

The events of 1965 had reverberations for decades, as the “New Order” regime of former president Suharto (1966–1998) led a campaign

to frame the events of 1965 in ways that stigmatized the communists and those perceived as supporting them (Lemelson, Supartini, & Ng, 2010; Rochijat & Anderson, 1985). The state was devoted to weeding out internal dissent by continuing the purge, control, and surveillance of supposed communists. Families of former and alleged PKI members became the target of discriminatory laws which limited their civil rights: they were prevented from entering the military, teaching, and working for the government, and deterred from any other occupation deemed socially significant. Their ability to travel both in the country and abroad was severely restricted.

Furthermore, the New Order regime put forth a monolithic state narrative regarding the events of 1965 that hid the atrocities committed by military and paramilitary and framed the events of 1965 as the Indonesian nation-state protecting itself from communists (Anderson, 2012; Heryanto, 2012). The state-built museum at the site of the murder of the military officers reinforced this narrative, as did the yearly memorials attended by Suharto himself, and mandatory annual screenings of a film portraying the communists as vicious killers.

Any public discussion of the events of 1965 that was at variance with this official state version was forbidden and those who engaged in it were jailed or “disappeared.” The enforced silence affected every level of Indonesian society, from family relationships to village life, large-scale social organizations, all the way up to national politics, only beginning to crack after the fall of the Suharto regime in the wake of the Asian economic crisis of 1998 (Dwyer, 2009; Dwyer & Santikarma, 2006; Zurbuchen, 2002, 2005).⁴

⁴It is perhaps not coincidental that the two documentary films that have explored the 1965 tragedy from the perspective of the victims have “silence” in their titles (“40 Years of Silence” Lemelson 2008; “The Look of Silence” Oppenheimer 2014).

24.3.3 Historical Context in Burma: The 1988 Uprising and Subsequent Massacres

In September 1987, the Burmese Government demonetized the national currency and the savings of hundreds of thousands of families were wiped out. The demonetization, public outcry over the death of a student killed during a protest (the Phone Maw incident), as well as the deepening poverty and despair born out of 26 years of economic mismanagement by General Ne Win’s military-run socialist regime were the catalysts for a growing opposition movement led largely by university students (Fink, 2009; Lintner, 1990).

This student-led movement culminated in several protests throughout the spring and summer of 1988—which were all brutally crushed by government authorities. Particularly noteworthy is what is now known as the Red Bridge incident (Lone, 2014). On March 16th, 1988, military and paramilitary officers attacked thousands of students who had gathered for a protest near Inya Lake in Yangon. Eyewitness accounts report that both male and female students were beaten with clubs and chased into the lake, with paramilitary holding students’ heads under water until they drowned.^{5,6} At least 49 students suffocated in a military van; for others, atrocities began once they were taken into custody. There were reports of brutality and torture inflicted in the interrogation rooms and prisons, including the rape of female students by military, police, and paramilitary officers (Lintner, 1990).

The most remarkable set of protests came on August 8th, 1988—what came to be known as the 8888 *Uprising*. Whereas previous demonstrations had been largely confined to the capitol city of Yangon, this protest spread to major cities throughout Burma and included members of the monastic order, university students, government employees, school children, laborers, dockworkers, housewives, and even members of the mili-

⁵Interviews conducted with former 1988 activists, Yangon, May 2014.

⁶Interviews conducted with former Yangon University students, Sydney, February 2014.

tary. In response to the protests, troops opened fire on unarmed civilians in almost all major cities. The killings continued for several days and it is estimated that more than a thousand were killed just in Yangon.

Immediately following the bloodshed of the 8888 demonstrations, Sein Lwin stepped down as head of government.⁷ For a few weeks in August and September, after this announcement, it seemed that the military had withdrawn from public life. The withdrawal was short-lived, however, because in late September members of the military reasserted themselves through a coup. Once again, the killings began and it is estimated that at least 10,000 perished in just 2 days (Lintner, 1990).

24.3.4 History of Political Repression Following the 1988 Uprising

After the massacres of 1988, the state continued to impose silence on dissidents, their families, and the population at large. From the earliest days of the movement, the worst atrocities were employed in interrogation centers and prisons, where victims were psychologically and physically tortured, starved, and dehumanized. Some prisoners were kept in cells meant for military dogs for months at a time, some were left in solitary confinement for several years at a time, and others were used as forced labor. Many perished from injuries or other diseases (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 2005; Fink, 2009; Lemere & West, 2011).⁸

The prison system was intertwined with the vast military intelligence system. The Burmese state surveillance system required household registries for every family, with the military conducting surprise inspections in the middle of the

night. Any overnight guests and any travel had to be registered with the local authorities. Military intelligence organized a vast neighborhood surveillance network (Fortify, 2015; Pitman & Htusan, 2015; Slow, 2015).⁹

State attempts to prevent protests led to strict prohibition of public meetings. Universities were closed down for months, sometimes years at a time (Fink, 2009). The university system was restructured into new regional campuses, such that if large-scale protests did occur, the military could swiftly and easily crush any dissent.

This explicit repression was matched by state control of the media. The military government put forth the prevailing narrative that the democracy movement in 1988 had plunged Burma into chaos and violence, and it was only the military that could restore the nation. From the outset, the military regime called themselves the “State Law and Order Restoration Council” as part of this rhetoric. After 1988, the government built several military museums in order to further this myth and signify their own glory. Total censorship of international magazines, newspapers, television news programs, the Internet, and other media completed the silence and control (Fink, 2009; Skidmore, 2003).

We now turn to how these complex histories framed and were reflected in two individual narratives of survivors of these national traumas.

24.4 Indonesia Case Study: Kereta¹⁰

Nyoman Kereta, born in the mid-1940s, is a poor rice farmer in rural central Bali. In early 1966 Indonesian military and paramilitary forces entered his village looking for suspected communists. The

⁷General Ne Win, Burma’s dictator from 1962 to 1988, had officially stepped down as president and chairman of the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) after public outcry over the Red Bridge incident and Sein Lwin had been appointed both party chair and president in July of 1988.

⁸Interviews conducted with former political prisoners and their families, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Sydney, Yangon, Mandalay, June 2014 to April 2015.

⁹Interviews conducted with former political prisoners and their families, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Sydney, Yangon, Mandalay, June 2014 to April 2015.

¹⁰Nyoman Kereta’s case study is also explored in the ethnographic films: “Shadows and Illuminations” and “40 Years of Silence: An Indonesian Tragedy” by the first author and discussed at length in the following publications: Lemelson and Suryani (2006), Lemelson and Tucker (2012), and Lemelson (2014).

troops singled out a number of villagers and marched them to a local cemetery. Although a PKI member himself, Kereta escaped this roundup, but followed the villagers to the cemetery, and from a hiding place in a tree witnessed them being hacked to death with machetes. Local members of the PKI were also forced to participate in these mass killings, as a way of proving their loyalty to the new regime. The next evening, Kereta's cousins colluded in his father's murder, luring him out of his compound to be set upon by paramilitary members, some of whom were Kereta's neighbors. Kereta watched as his father was brutally tortured and killed.

It was after these traumatic events that Kereta began to experience both social withdrawal and fear. He began to experience an "inner pressure" weighing down on his body, as well as heart palpitations. For months after the massacre he had difficulty eating, lost weight, and began looking gaunt. He had difficulty sleeping, experiencing nightmares. He was easily startled, and his mind would go blank for extended periods of time. Perhaps, most striking, given the very dense nature of Balinese social relationships, was that Kereta withdrew socially and stopped participating in community work projects.

Kereta eventually married and his wife gave birth to a son and then a daughter. Their daughter, however, died immediately after birth. Kereta describes this as the most difficult time in his life. He cried continuously. It was at this time that Kereta began seeing small, black figures, which he believed to be spirits known as the *wong samar*, a commonly recognized form of potentially dangerous spirits in Bali. He reported that these spirits would enter his body and take possession of him. When possessed by these spirits, Kereta would avoid social contact by hiding in solitary places, such as the rice fields and canyons. His experiences with the *wong samar* caused him to withdraw even further from village life, and avoid social contact, with even his own family. Sometimes he refused to leave his room at all.

Over the years Kereta's experiences with spirit beings waxed and waned. In 2002 and 2003, when Indonesia held its first democratic elections, he experienced a relapse of symptoms. He

reports that this time the spirits were asking him to rejoin the PKI. Kereta began wearing a camouflage military jacket and helmet, believing that this prevented the spirits from entering his body and causing him to become a communist.

Although Kereta's family is largely supportive of him, there has been no dialogue about the death of his father or the massacre of the other villagers. It was only at the end of the first author's 2-year fieldwork, after having interviewed him multiple times, that Kereta confided that he had experienced this trauma. Neither he nor his family mentioned it in any other contexts. Even then, he would not fully disclose all aspects of what he had witnessed until a number of years later. Kereta had literally remained silent about 1965 for 40 years.

From a psychiatric perspective, Kereta has the cardinal features of chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with psychotic features, according to the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association [APA] 2013, pp. 271–280). From the time of witnessing the murders to the present, he has had persistent symptoms of increased arousal and associated physiological reactivity, as indicated by tachycardia, difficulty concentrating, confusion, and dizziness, and he has had nightmares and other persistent sleep disturbances. He experienced both numbing and flooding/flashback states.

24.5 Burmese Case Study: Thura¹¹

Thura's first experience with trauma was in 1988 when he took part in a student protest that culminated in the Red Bridge incident. Thura, along with hundreds of other students from Rangoon University, began marching from their campus towards Inya Lake. The group was soon surrounded by paramilitary troops (the *Lone Htein*

¹¹A pseudonym is used in order to protect the identity of the subject. In arriving at a pseudonym, the authors selected a name that is common among the Burmese majority population in order to avoid references to ethnic identity. Other minor details are also altered in order to further protect the identity of the subject (please see Skidmore, 2003).

or riot police) on all sides, who ordered them to disperse. The students resisted and began to sing songs, including the Burmese national anthem. Thura approached the head officers to negotiate with them, but the negotiations were unsuccessful and the troops eventually stormed the students, killing some and brutally beating many more. Many students were also arrested, illegally detained, and brutalized inside the prisons. Thura managed to escape that day but witnessed violence inflicted on other students.

Following these events, Thura continued to organize and participate in protests. On August 8th, 1988, Thura witnessed the military fire into the crowds near the Shwedagon Pagoda. Some time during the protests, Thura narrowly escaped being shot. He recalls a bullet flying so close to his head that he could feel how much heat it was radiating. Even with atrocities all around him, Thura remained focused on his goals, possessing a larger sense of purpose. After the military had seemingly withdrawn following August 11th, he began traveling to other parts of Burma in order to organize representatives from different townships.

After the military coup was announced on September 18th, Thura realized that he could not safely return home again and relied on friends to remain in hiding. Even while in hiding, he continued to communicate with others and organize dissident acts, including passing out newsletters, putting up banners, and holding secret meetings. Thura was eventually captured. Soldiers surrounded him on the street as he was walking to a friend's home during the evening hours, put a hood over his head, bound his hands and feet, and took him to an interrogation center, where he was deprived of adequate food, drink, and sleep for several days, and tortured.

After several days of interrogation, the intelligence officers asked him to sign a statement denouncing his activities. He refused and was almost immediately transferred to a prison. Once he arrived at the prison, he realized that he would be there for a long time. His thoughts turned to survival and how he could make the best of his situation.

Thura was imprisoned for over a decade, during which time he was deprived of basic needs on

a daily basis, including adequate food, drink, medicine, and sanitation and was subjected to physical violence and other forms of torture. He was kept in solitary confinement for months at a time. Rather than falling into depression or despair, he tried to maintain as normal a routine as possible. He made a habit of remaining awake during the daylight hours, occupying himself with completing various goals, such as memorizing English vocabulary words. Because he did not sleep in the daytime, he was typically able to fall asleep right away at night.

After he was released from prison, he eventually began to reconnect with other dissidents who had also been imprisoned. There was a sense of solidarity that had emerged in the prisons that made former rivalries that had existed during their student days recede. He eventually married. Thura continues his political work to this day. Like other democracy activists of his generation in Burma, Thura always wears white in order to commemorate his time as a political prisoner (prisoner's uniforms during his time of imprisonment were white). He goes into work each day and continues to act in ways that are proactive, engaging in advocacy, conducting meetings with activists and foreign dignitaries, teaching, and writing. Much of the social activities that he engages in are within the community of tight-knit democracy activists, many of whom were also involved in the 1988 movement and have spent time in the prisons.

Although he is familiar with the discourse on trauma, Thura has not sought treatment all these years and appears to be functioning well without intervention. From a psychiatric perspective Thura has almost none of the diagnostic features of PTSD, according to DSM-5 (APA 2013, pp. 271–280). While he obviously remembers distinctly the multiple trauma inflicted on his body and mind, analysis drawn from ethnographic interviews indicates that almost none of his experiences fit into the psychiatric model of PTSD.¹²

¹²Please note that there are narratives of 1988 and life in Burmese prisons whereby survivors report symptoms that fit the clinical model of PTSD [please see Lemere and West (2011)].

Rather than remaining silent, he talks often and energetically about politics and his entire life is devoted to furthering democracy in Burma.

24.6 The Psychocultural Context of Fear and Silence: Contrasting *Ngeb* and *Abhaya*

Kereta and Thura's strategies for coping with their trauma are shaped by localized understandings of fear in relation to human suffering, existential meaning, and desired forms of personhood. While there are no definitive cultural explanatory models that map directly onto the Western clinical explanatory model of PTSD in either Indonesia or Burma, there are numerous descriptors related to fear in both languages that resemble the Western concept of psychological trauma. We will focus on two models of fear—one in Burma and one in Bali—that situate trauma and posttraumatic responses in their cultural context.

In Bali, fear and trauma can be seen as culturally translated and encapsulated by the concept of *ngeb* (Lemelson, 2014; Lemelson & Suryani, 2006; Lemelson & Tucker, 2012). *Ngeb* is understood specifically as an illness that emerges when one has witnessed something horrific, frightening, or bizarre. As a result of these frightening experiences, sufferers of *ngeb* put themselves in a self-imposed exile, being characterized by *mem-bisu*, meaning muteness or lack of participation in the social world. The concept of *ngeb* is also resonant with the Balinese practice of *puik*, which can be translated as intentional silence and social avoidance (Geertz, 1973; Bateson & Mead, 1942; Santikarma, 1995).

Kereta described himself as suffering from *ngeb*, believing that this “illness” began after witnessing the massacres in his village (Lemelson, 2014; Lemelson & Suryani, 2006; Lemelson & Tucker, 2012). It is interesting to note that Kereta has several neighbors who are similarly characterized as *ngeb*. Since *ngeb* can be viewed as a means of mute political protest, Kereta and others from his village who are seen as suffering from *ngeb* can be thought of as silent witnesses to the atrocities that were committed in 1965

(Lemelson & Tucker, 2012). Moreover, because *ngeb* can also be translated as a fear of resisting cosmological authority, in Bali this political culture of silencing was also reinforced by a set of cosmological beliefs that, likewise, served to suppress social memory.

In contrast to Bali where silence and withdrawal are seen in some ways as being an expected, although undesirable, response to intense fear, in Burma, fear is seen as an emotion to be tamed and overcome. The Buddhist mantra *abhaya* (“fear not”) is often privately and publically invoked in relation to fearful situations, with the goal of dispelling and containing the fear, rather than avoiding the fearful stimulus by withdrawing.

Thura does not talk about fear in relation to the events of 1988, his time in prison, or his life afterwards. This is not for lack of an adequate vocabulary because Burmese descriptors for fear-like states commonly occur in everyday discourse (Skidmore, 2003). His preference not to dwell on fear cannot be taken as an attempt to avoid painful memories because Thura talks freely about his experiences during 1988 and while in prison. While he is willing to commemorate and bear witness to the past, a large part of his coping appears to involve downregulating negative emotions like fear.

Buddhist concepts such as *abhaya* have been adopted into the language and discourse of the Burmese prodemocracy movement of which Thura is a part. In a series of now-famous essays, Burma's most well-known dissident and political prisoner, Aung San Suu Kyi, wrote that one of the main tasks facing Burma is achieving “freedom from fear.” She states that fear is “not a natural state for civilized man” (Kyi, 2010, p. 184) and that the defining characteristic of those engaged in the Burmese democracy movement is that they have faced their fears again and again, over decades (Mackay, 2011). For Thura and other activists their commitment to the political cause that has defined their lives is equated with their degree of fearlessness.

This adoption of the Buddhist concept of *abhaya* by the Burmese prodemocracy movement is interesting in light of the fact that there are many tenets within Theravada Buddhism

that bear a resemblance to emotional and social withdrawal (Obeyesekere, 1985). While a prevalent discourse within Buddhism encourages disengagement, prodemocracy activists have chosen to emphasize the opposite (e.g., bearing witness, effecting change) while still evoking Buddhist concepts such as fearlessness (Kyi, 1992). Thura never invokes less agentic Burmese Buddhist notions such as *kan* (fate) nor emphasizes his *dukkha* (suffering) in relating his experiences, which stands apart from what has been observed to be common practice in Burma (Spiro, 1982).

It is significant that although both *abhaya* and *ngeb* have both spiritual and political connotations, the two subjects do not employ both sets of meanings to their experiences. Kereta's understanding of his experiences is almost entirely cosmological. This stands in contrast to Thura, whose explanations of his experiences are almost entirely political.

24.7 The Familial and Social Context of Fear and Silence: Embeddedness Versus Isolation

A main feature of Kereta's response to the experience of trauma has been the extent to which he is socially avoidant. Kereta's withdrawal into the spirit world can be regarded in some ways as a rejection of a human world that he viewed as untrustworthy (Lemelson & Tucker, 2012). The focal area of this basic distrust is the family system (Wikan, 1990) and local hamlet. Kereta's own cousin encouraged the paramilitary to kill Kereta's father and one of Kereta's sisters is now married to a paramilitary officer, who participated in the 1965 killings. It is common for victims and survivors of 1965 to remain in the same villages as perpetrators, hence forced to see them on a day-to-day basis. Survivors were forced to remain silent about past atrocities in order to maintain social harmony—a quality valued in the socially dense world of the Balinese village, where families traditionally rely on one another in order to carry out communal work projects.

Rather than being socially avoidant, Thura is deeply embedded in a tightly knit community of political dissidents. His embeddedness within this community started in the early days of the democracy movement and continues to the present. Student dissidents relied on each other to both further the movement and ensure their own safety. They often hid with one another, sleeping in the same beds, and eating communally.¹³

Prison life often increased their sense of solidarity to one another, because they were reliant on one another for solace, safety, company, and even caregiving in times of sickness or food scarcity.¹⁴ Thura reported feeling concerned about what life would be like in prison on the car ride over, but once he realized how many other political prisoners there were in his cellblock and how many of them he already knew, he felt more at ease. Although there were rules that prohibited the prisoners from speaking to one another, they found ways in which they could communicate surreptitiously and older, more educated prisoners would often tutor the younger student activists.

Thura, along with his friends in the democracy movement, regularly and diligently enacts many practices, including commemorating multiple events throughout the year to honor the memory of 1988. The community of dissidents possesses a shared vocabulary, consistently referring to those who were massacred or perished as “fallen martyrs.” This stands in contrast to Indonesia, where those who were killed are referred to as “victims” at best, and more commonly thought of as despised PKI members.

After his release, Thura began wearing white (the color of prison uniforms) in order to memorialize his time in prison. His actions stand in complete contrast to those of Kereta, who actually resorted to wearing a military uniform (a green camouflage jacket and helmet) on a daily basis in order to “protect” himself from spirit

¹³ Interviews conducted with former political prisoners, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Sydney, Yangon, Mandalay, June 2014 to April 2015.

¹⁴ Interviews conducted with former political prisoners, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Sydney, Yangon, Mandalay, June 2014 to April 2015.

beings whom he claims try to entice him to join the communist party. Kereta's donning of the uniform worn by his perpetrators is a stark example of the hegemony of the cultural narrative put forth by the Indonesian Government surrounding the events of 1965. Kereta's own psyche was usurped by those attempting to subordinate him to such an extent that, even 40 years after the atrocities had taken place, he seeks solace through the donning of a uniform that his perpetrators were wearing the day they enacted the killings and inflicted the trauma.

Thura's relationships with others in the activist community was forged over many years of shared goals, shared pain, and shared privations as they worked towards a common cause. Thura took pledges with other students during the earliest days of the 1988 Uprising that they would continue on with the movement until they were able to reach their goals. This loyalty not only to a cause, but also to fellow activists, stands in contrast to the isolation that Kereta experienced.

24.8 The Political and Societal Context of Fear and Silence: Coherence Versus Fragmentation

Burma and Indonesia have similar geopolitical histories. In both countries, the military was an ever-present part of day-to-day life. In both nations, the military sought to safeguard and consolidate its power through the employment of paramilitary forces.

However, there are also crucial differences in these histories that have clearly impacted how individual citizens processed and coped with the traumatic experience of state violence. In Indonesia, recruited members of the paramilitary were often integrated into local village life, which meant, in the wake of violence, perpetrators and survivors were forced to reside in the same villages for decades. Kereta's avoidance of village work projects is understandable in light of the fact that participation in such activities necessarily required that he interact with perpetrators and

families of perpetrators—some of whom were in his own kinship network.

In Burma, it was often the case that there was much more of a physical and, hence, psychological separation between survivors and perpetrators. The 1988 democracy movement began amongst university students, the vast majority of whom were urban, middle class, and from well-educated families. Those who carried out the brutalities, including paramilitary, prison staff, and foot soldiers, were often from less educated families and lower rungs of the socioeconomic strata (Prasse-Freeman, 2012). Military families typically resided in separate compounds and military officers made their way through a system of education that stood apart from the university system from which the student movement had emerged. While there are cases of military and prodemocracy activists within the same extended family (Fink, 2009), it was rarely the case that they had to physically reside in the same compound as one another and it was almost never the case that a family member would be directly responsible for the death of another family member, as happened in Kereta's family. In Thura's case and in the case of many other political prisoners there was little opportunity for prolonged interaction between perpetrators and victims outside of the prisons and the interrogation rooms.

Although Burma and Indonesia have had large-scale police state apparatus in place, in Indonesia, in the period of reform inaugurated with the fall of the New Order in 1998, there was a diversifying of political parties, media outlets, and civil society organizations. After 1998 there was an increasing diversity in understanding of what happened in 1965, but running parallel to these new and alternative discourses was the very entrenched dialogue and continuation of the state narrative that framed communists as "enemies" of Indonesia and their elimination as justified. The entrenched fear of being affiliated with the communist party existed in an environment where many other aspects of civic life *resembled* diversity. This seeming diversity and the appearance of a society that was, on the surface, open to new ideas may have ironically made the manipulation

of facts surrounding 1965 by the Indonesian Government more palatable and believable.

Kereta's own family and neighbors recapitulated the narrative put forth by the state, believing that Kereta was an instigator of the events of 1965. It was only in 2004 that Kereta's family and fellow villagers finally forgave him for causing the "disorder" of the events of 1965 (Lemelson & Tucker, 2012). More than anything, the propaganda put forth by the Suharto regime fragmented and disoriented survivors of 1965 such that they could no longer identify who were the true perpetrators.

This diversity stands in contrast to Burma, wherein the political apparatus and state surveillance up until recently were all encompassing, regulating every aspect of life. There was a bifurcation of institutions following the 1962 coup and the only two stable, viable societal bodies were the military-run government, with its vast bureaucracy, and the monastic order. This bifurcation of institutions, a nonexistent civil society, a centralized education system, and complete control of the media by the state ironically worked against the military in terms of gaining broader acceptance of the cultural narratives that they put forth about 1988.

In the face of a monolithic state entity that regulated virtually all aspect of information transfer, the Burmese populace often relied on what can be termed broadly as rumors (Skidmore, 2003). Rather than having veiled secrets locked away in an otherwise seemingly forward-moving society (as was the case in Indonesia, post-New Order), the Burmese populace was, itself, locked away. A Burmese colleague of the second author once compared Burma under military rule to the unhappy residents of Plato's cave—chained inside a dark cave and unable to emerge into the light, the Burmese were reliant on the flickers and shadows that fell on the cave wall to inform them of what lay beyond the cave, in the outside world, where true "reality" resided.

Thus, although the military bombarded the populace with propaganda after 1988, there was a shared understanding that there were other narratives and other realities. The propaganda that the military put forth was characterized by an obtuseness, a lack of sophistication, and, as such, never truly captured the imagination of the people. As

university students, many of whom had fine arts background, student organizers of the 1988 movement were much more adapt at lending imagination to the longings of the people through the circulation of narratives. Thura's family, friends, and other civilians conveyed to the second author that they never believed that Thura or any of the young people involved in the 1988 Uprising were ever "enemies" of the state. Rather than recapitulating and internalizing the state-sponsored narrative about what occurred in 1988, they viewed Thura and other student activists as heroes. Thura's beliefs about himself, his own actions, and the ideals associated with the democracy movement, therefore, have a deep coherence not only with those in his immediate social environment, but also with the larger society.

24.9 Conclusion

Both Thura and Kereta lived through political violence and large-scale atrocities, but their long-term outcomes and journey through and, in Thura's case *beyond*, traumatic experience are vastly different. Their divergent trajectories illustrate the importance of contemplating the complex interaction of psychocultural, familial, social, political, spiritual, and historical factors that can either support individuals' strengths and resiliencies and allow them to sublimate traumatic experience and connect meaningfully with others or render them more vulnerable, increasing their sense of isolation and alienation from their social world.

Thura is deeply committed to a political movement and has deep cohesion with the world around him, even after having experienced what, to many others, would have been life-debilitating forms of violence and social control. Kereta withdrew into delusion as a compensatory measure in response to his experiences with political violence, having been, in almost all ways, permanently silenced as a social and political actor. Kereta remains alienated from those around him, even within the context of his own family, while Thura is deeply embedded within a large, supportive, network of dissidents and possesses a strong, active voice in the larger society.

Perhaps what is most fascinating about the two case studies in relation to trauma is that Kereta did not, himself, experience physical violence or torture. Kereta had witnessed the massacres of villagers without himself being physically harmed and without his body being broached in any way. Moreover, Kereta's exposure to trauma was contained in both time and space. He witnessed the atrocities within the boundaries of his village, over a matter of days. Thura, in contrast, was repeatedly exposed to various forms of physical and psychological trauma for almost his entire adult life, across many different collective and personal spaces. Rather than simply witnessing violence directed at others, he often had direct, bodily experience with violence, torture, and physical constraint.

Remarkably, it is Thura—the subject who has experienced, multiple, severe, and sustained traumatic exposure—who appears to have the better outcome. Key factors that contributed to his outcome are social support, coherence with the world around him, sense of meaning and purpose, a high sense of agency, continued communication with those around him (a lack of silence), an ability to self-regulate through goal setting, and cultural explanatory models that supported a productive engagement with fear. The very different trajectories of the two subjects help us understand how the social and political landscape, following traumatic events, can be shaped to allow victims of trauma to thrive, rather than recede into silence.

Shaping the political and social landscape such that it facilitates, rather than hinders, recovery from trauma remains complex issues in both Burma and Indonesia. After the fall of the New Order, artistic productions, biographies, autobiographies, documentary films, and even journalistic exposés covering aspects of 1965 mass killings became more common. Although, with each passing year, there are more and more of these efforts, and an increasingly open attitude in Indonesia towards exploring the truth of the events of 1965 (Schonhardt, 2012), movement towards a societal space that is safe and open for survivors has been unusually slow. Furthermore, efforts towards truth and reconciliation, in a judicial sense, appear to be a long way off and with

the passing away of both survivors and perpetrators the prospects of holding tribunals or trials become increasingly unlikely.

Burma's journey towards national reconciliation and accountability is only now beginning. Strong leadership from activist groups such as the 88 Generation and the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU), as well as the social, political, historical, and psychocultural factors highlighted in this chapter, contributed to an environment where there have been an astonishing number of survivors coming forward and narrating individual and collective experiences of the atrocities related to 1988, just a short while after the transition into a nominally civilian government.

Even with such seemingly rapid progress towards an open society, a long-term strategy is needed to ensure that an environment, where survivors of trauma feel safe coming forward with their stories, is maintained. More permanent infrastructures are needed to ensure that these narratives do not disappear after this generation of leaders and dissidents have passed away. Past atrocities need to be memorialized in such a way that they will become enduring aspects of national identity and so that they will be transformed from personal experience and the shared history of a small group of dissidents into the collective history of an entire nation.

Activists, journalists, students, and others who come forward with their stories continue to be brutalized, imprisoned, and killed (Kha, 2015; Nyein, 2015a, 2015b; Zaw, 2014). Continued advocacy is therefore needed to ensure that those exposing past and ongoing human rights violations on the part of the military and government are protected. This has been especially true in the months leading up to the 2015 elections (Mann, 2015). A particularly disturbing trend has been the brutal suppression and continued imprisonment of student activists affiliated with the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU)—a group that was active during 1988 and whose current members constitute the younger generation of the tightly knit network of activists that came of age during 1988 (Mann, 2015; Nyein, 2015c; Weng, 2015; Weng & Snaing, 2015).

A recent legal memorandum summarized political atrocities and crimes against humanity committed by specific members of the Burmese army in military campaigns that were waged in Eastern Myanmar (Harvard & International Human Rights Clinic, 2014), but there has been no comparable studies done on human rights violations committed in 1988. As in Indonesia, the prospects of tribunals or trials for perpetrators appear to be a distant goal, but it will be interesting to note whether or not the Burmese prodemocracy movement eventually adopts the language of trauma to commemorate their history and to advocate for a social and moral order in which survivors and their families would be entitled to compensation and those who inflicted the trauma should be brought to justice.

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