

Dialita Choir: Constructing Memory of Indonesia's 1965 Event

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Dialita (meaning 'Over Fifty Years Old') is an Indonesian women's choir made up of former political prisoners from the Indonesian Communist purge of 1965. The group was formed in 2011, with all members being above fifty years of age. More than five decades later, Dialita's music serves as an important movement for transforming the negative stigma associated with them, facilitating reconciliation, and restoring the nation's forgotten memory of the event. The group launched their album *Dunia Milik Kita* (Our Own World), in 2016, followed by a second album, *Salam Harapan* (Greeting of Hope), in 2019. Many of their songs were written during their imprisonment. These songs capture their emotions, circumstances, and aspirations. They served as their non-violent resistance in prison, helping them combat boredom and instilling a spirit of survival.

Keywords: Dialita, Indonesia 1965, Indonesia Communist Purge, Women Movement, Political Trauma, Nation Memory.

Introduction

Dialita (meaning 'Over Fifty Years Old') is an Indonesian women's choir made up of former political prisoners from the Indonesian Communist purge of 1965. Established in 2011, most members of this choir are now over fifty years old. More than 50 years since the purge, the Dialita choir is crucial in altering the negative stigma attached to them, promoting reconciliation, and restoring the nation's forgotten memory of this event. Their music serves as a historical testament and an integral part of the national memory. During the purging of communism in Indonesia, the Suharto (1966-1998) regime destroyed all artistic works created during the Sukarno era (1945-1965). Consequently, the younger generations born after the 1965 incident are mostly unfamiliar with these songs and their historical context.

In 2016, Dialita released their first album *Dunia Milik Kita* (Our Own World), followed by *Salam Harapan* (Greeting of Hope) in 2019. Many of their songs were composed while they were imprisoned. These songs express their feelings, despair, and hopes. They also serve as a form of non-violent resistance within the confines of prison, helping them fight against boredom and instill a spirit of survival.

For Dialita's members, singing is a form of self-therapy, aiding healing from traumatic experiences. Moreover, by singing, they offer support to other victims of the 1965 purge. The income generated from their performances is used to assist other survivors in receiving the necessary treatments. For Dialita, these songs are important tools for combating impunity, telling an alternative narrative of the 1965 incident that challenges the dominant narrative by the Suharto regime, and revealing the history that has been suppressed by the new order regime. At every concert, Dialita communicates not only their trauma but also a message of peace. On May 18, 2019, Dialita was honored with the Gwangju Prize for Human Rights for "showing the path to reconciliation and healing through music" (Dipa, 2019).

Dialita Starts to Sing Again

On December 4th, 2011, the members of Dialita sang together for the first time, marking the formation of their choir (Trianingsih, 2020). The choir, which formed organically, was made up of mothers, daughters, friends, wives, and sisters of the 1965 incident's victims. These women initially came together in the Mother and Child Care Community (Komunitas Peduli Ibu dan Anak - KPIA) to conduct charity work and support fellow survivors, particularly those facing economic hardships in their old age. They raised funds by selling secondhand goods (Widianto, 2017). "When we were selecting second-hand goods, we were singing along, and from there came the idea to form a choir. The Name Dialita stands for Over Fifty Years Old," said one of Dialita's members, Uchicowati (Widianto, 2017).

During the communist purge of 1965-66, political prisoners were divided into three groups: Group A, directly involved in the coup attempt; Group B, indirectly involved; and Group C, primarily new members of the PKI. Many people who were not affiliated with the communists at all were also arrested, and the victims of these false arrests continue to bear the stigma.

After being released in the late 1970s, the survivors did not gain freedom immediately. They lost jobs, homes, lands, pensions, and other belongings, and couldn't find employment in both the public and private sectors (Farid, 2007, p.2017). The New Order government issued regulations forbidding former political prisoners from taking up professions that could influence public opinion, such as writing, performing arts, and government roles. Marked as political prisoners (Eks-Tapol) on their identity cards, they faced further discrimination, as did their children and relatives. Many of them chose to hide their pasts to protect their children from public discrimination and kept their experiences of the tragedy to themselves.

When the 1965 event broke out, most of Dialita's members were still teenagers. None of them were involved in the coup attempt, but they were nonetheless imprisoned without trial for years. Utati Koesalah, for example, became a political prisoner when she was 22 years old. When she was young, Koesalah loved to sing and dance. She joined Pemuda Rakyat (a student organization affiliated with PKI) to develop her talent. However, she was accused of being a communist and she was forced to confess that she was a member of the party. Because of that, she was imprisoned in Bukit Duri for 11 years.

In 2000, Koesalah began writing down the song that she and other prisoners had composed. Koesalah felt the songs were well-written and it would be a shame to be discarded. Uchicowati, a fellow member of Chinese descent, encouraged her to start collecting and rewriting the songs they composed in prison. This initiative turned into a project as Koesalah and Mudjiati, who had been

detained together in Bukit Duri, started collecting and rewriting the songs (Yes No Wave, 2016). However, the negative stigma associated with communism made them hesitant to sing these songs publicly.

Before releasing their first album, Dialita was only known within their own circles. They often performed at small events like seminars, book launches, and symposiums. They focused only on raising funds to support other survivors. Their breakthrough came in 2015 at the Biennale Jogja XIII, where they reached a younger audience and caught the attention of the independent record label Yes No Wave, based in Yogyakarta.

Yes No Wave invited young musicians to get involved in rearranging the songs. These young musicians included Frau, Cholil Mahmud, Sisir Tanah, Lintang Raditya, Kroncong Agawe Santosa, Prihatmoko Moki, and Nadya Hatta. This collaboration resulted in a more contemporary sound that appealed to younger listeners (Trianingsih, 2022). The cover illustration of Dialita's first album depicts wild plants such as *Limnocharis flava* and *Centella asiatica*. These plants are wild plants that often grow in the yard or garden areas with hard and rocky terrain. These plants are also commonly served as food for the victims of 1965 while in prison.

Since then, Dialita's songs have become a bridge to the lost historical memory for the younger generation. Their second album produced by Rumahbonita, not only aimed to break taboos around discussing the 1965 event but also hoped to inspire the younger generation to believe in the possibility of a life without deception (Putri, 2019). From its inception until the Covid-19 pandemic, Dialita performed more than 70 times.

The Songs as Counter-Memory

Early in 2023, Indonesia's President, Joko Widodo, acknowledged 12 severe instances of human rights violations, including the mass killings of 1965. The state also promised to restore victims' rights. This acknowledgement is inseparable from the community's efforts against false narratives including through art. The arts also make everyday reconciliation between the victims and society possible. Reconciliation could connote forgiveness and forgetting, but this is a complicated process because each party has a different view of reconciliation. Time and context become important dimensions of the reconciliation debate (Villa-Vicencio, 2006, p. 59-60).

For the 1965 victims, reconciliation is about state recognition and apology. But for the state, reconciliation is the attempt to resolve past violations, but they refuse to apologize to the victims. The Indonesian government has made efforts to resolve the conflict by holding the 1965 Symposium in 2016 in Jakarta, but it ended up with many rejections from the community and civic organizations, and consensus has yet to be reached. Since the mass killing occurred, many Indonesians have strived to reveal the truth, yet strict censorship imposed by the New Order government has hindered open discussion about the event.

Dialita songs are a counter-memory of slanderous narratives about themselves and the bloody event. The public's acceptance of Dialita's songs made people understand more about the events of 1965 which had only been spoken about by the New Order regime. Dialita Choir also brings back the songs that have important historical and political contexts for Indonesia in the early days of its independence. Generations after 1965 barely know the history of Indonesia at that time because all artworks related to communism and Sukarno from that period have been banned. The New Order

regime had chosen to discard all memories related to Sukarno's power, and Dialita counters the dominant memory through their songs. Dialita transforms their collective trauma into art. Even though they went through painful times during and after their detention, the songs they composed were filled with hope, solidarity, and the spirit of life. For the survivors, Dialita is a safe space. They share their feelings and talk about the 1965 event without any worries. Singing together mitigates their fear and serves to bolster each other.

Koesalah said the songs they composed at that time were intended to calm other prisoners that were frightened and felt the pain of being imprisoned. Instead of showing disappointment and depression, most of the songs are more about hope and passion for life. "When they were just imprisoned, many young women were depressed, they screamed and cried. To calm them down, then we made songs that contained hope and enthusiasm to continue living life. Music is the way we struggle in prison," said Koesalah (Koesalah, personal communication, January 22, 2022).

They were not writing down the songs, they only memorized the songs. Writing it down could be dangerous for detainees because the officers will check all their possession, including their notes. "Singing was not prohibited, but the contents of the song will be checked by officers. So, every time there is a performance, they will ask what song or dance we want to perform, and what is the meaning behind it," said Koeslah (Koesalah, personal communication, January 22, 2022).

Decades after their release, the songs remained unheard. In rewriting the songs, they relied only on their memories. Koesalah predicts there are many songs from prison that are still not known. Unintentionally, Dialita finally started to collect other memoirs and songs from other survivors. So far, they have archived 30 songs from prison, while 20 songs have been recorded and included in their album. Some of the songs were written in the local language.

Salam Harapan is one of the songs written during the labor camp at Bukit Duri prison. Murtiningrum wrote the lyrics and Zubaidah Nungtjik composed the notation (Ardiyan, 2019). Zubaidah Nungtjik, a teacher and one of the West Irian liberation volunteers, was a songwriter in Bukit Duri. Songs like *Tetap Senyum Menjelang Fajar* (Keep Smiling Before Dawn) and *Salam Harapan* (Greeting of Hope) were written by Zubaidah for birthdays. As the Happy Birthday song was deemed inappropriate for prison celebrations, inmates changed the birthday song to the *Salam Harapan* and *Tetap Senyum Menjelang Fajar*. These songs are prayers and hopes for prisoners who have birthdays so that they can always be strong in facing life's storms. They were often performed in the morning while presenting flowers plucked from the prison yard (Koesalah, personal communication, January 22, 2022).

Dialita's first album features several songs from the early days of Indonesia's independence such as *Viva Ganefo*. This track was the theme song for the Ganefo (Games of the New Emerging Forces) sporting event held in 1962, which was created as a counter to the Olympic games. The lyrics, written in Spanish, articulate resistance to imperialism and colonialism. Another song, *Padi untuk India* (Rice for India), relates to Indonesia's aid to India during a food crisis under British colonial rule in 1946. This assistance, amounting to five hundred thousand tons of rice, marked a significant international achievement in Indonesia's first year of independence (Zara, 2020).

Today, Dialita does not sing alone. Younger generations carry on their movement, and their memories have become the nation's collective remembrance. These younger generations have

translated Dialita's experiences and songs into various art forms, including books, fine arts, theater, and film.

With the younger generation's gradual acceptance and the victims' willingness to talk about their past, art can serve as a narrative of everyday reconciliation to encourage civilian dialogue on the 1965 issue without the need for formal institutions or special courts. Dialita hopes their songs can contribute to the reconciliation efforts between the state and the victims, helping prevent similar incidents in the future (Uchikowati, personal communication, January 22, 2022). By discussing the 1965 event through art, Indonesian society can slowly gain an understanding of the event and open the possibility of reconciliation between the victims and the community, even though the state has yet to officially apologize.

Conclusion

Music is an effective means to tell the history and trauma of the past for Dialita members. Dialita's songs became a bridge between the victims and the generation who did not know about the history of 1965. These young generations who finally care and are literate in history reinterpret the stories of the survivors and their songs into new works. Even though they were written in prison in a state of depression and misery, Dialita's songs do not contain anger. Their songs are more about the spirit of life and hope. Songs are also a means of strengthening prisoners to survive in prison.

Dialita's songs provide a different perspective on the events of 1965. Dialita's songs were then reinterpreted by the younger generation into other artistic forms, such as films, books, and theatrical. For Dialita, singing the songs they had composed in prison became healing for wounds and healing for the trauma they had experienced. They also hope that music can be a way of reconciliation so that similar incidents do not happen again in the future.

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