Coming to Grips With the Banality of Mass Murder in Indonesia's Past

Sunday 7 July 2013, by Soe Tjen Marching (Date first published: 5 July 2013).

"The deeds were monstrous, but the doer … was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous," Hannah Arendt wrote in her 1978 book "The Life of the Mind: Thinking, Willing." She was writing in particular about Adolf Eichmann, one of Adolf Hitler's henchmen and who was responsible for the murder of millions of Jews.

Arendt argues that Eichmann was somehow not capable of thinking independently. It was thoughtlessness that drove him, as the evil was masqueraded so well that its perpetrator did not recognize the cruelty of his deed. It was his unawareness of this evil that made him able to commit such "monstrosity."

And this seems to be what we find in "The Act of Killing," a documentary film about the mass murders committed in 1965-66 in Indonesia, released last year.

The film, by Joshua Oppenheimer, an American director based in Copenhagen, takes place mainly in Medan, North Sumatra. There, we meet Anwar Congo, portrayed as a loving grandfather who asks his grandchildren not to hurt the ducklings — and a national hero. Don't compare him to Rambo — he is not at all muscly. He is even rather soft-spoken and skinny. Sometimes, he even looks subdued compared to his close companion, Herman Koto. Yet he also boasts about having killed thousands of people by various means, including torturing them slowly in horrific ways, slitting their throats or strangling them.

Proudly, Anwar boasts about his "heroic" acts. Other perpetrators of violence Oppenheimer met have also been bragging about murder. One of them recalls how he has raped hundreds of girls, speaking horrendously in front of the camera: "The nice ones are the 14 and 15 years old. Still young and fresh!"

At some point, Anwar, Herman and the other perpetrators even seem to be involved in what looks like a bragging competition in describing their "bravery" (read: cruelty). But this was one of the biggest episodes of mass murder in human history, in which countless numbers of others were also inhumanely tortured or imprisoned without trial.

Some of their assailants at first seemed very excited about Oppenheimer's project, claiming to know the "truth" and that this history should be revealed, so that young people do not forget the past. The "truth" for them is their sustained heroism and the sustained slander and defamation of the so-called communists, their families and even descendants.

But their reaction slowly changes when some of them start to become aware that the people they killed were ordinary human beings, not merely objects to be discarded. In the film, the re-enactment of the events of 1965 (with plenty of makeup to show the brutality, along with dolls, fire and wire) has made them aware that their victims have undergone massive trauma and suffering. The role reversals seem to have a huge impact on Anwar, who plays his own victims.

This film has made fiction become “reality” for the perpetrators, whereas before, the reality was some kind of fiction for them: the mass-murder, as Anwar admitted, was some kind of manifestation of his imagination influenced by gangster movies.

But are they really unaware of what they have done? Is it Arendt’s banality of evil that drove them?

I guess it is a lot more complex than this, as another perpetrator, Adi, seems to be more aware than Anwar and the other perpetrators featuring in the film of what they have done. He says: “We are actually crueler than the communists.” Also, when he is fishing with Anwar, Adi demonstrates that he knows that the New Order government has imposed a slanted version of history. Adi seems to represent hope for me, when he says: “If we succeed with this film, the whole history will be reversed 180 degrees.”

But no! Later, he stresses that he has no regret for what he has done — narrating the horrific murders that have been committed, while strolling through a shopping mall. In the car with Oppenheimer, he insists arrogantly: “War crimes are defined by the winners. I am the winner, so I can make my own definition!”

Oppenheimer’s camera shows a somewhat different story when Adi is seen together with his wife and daughter. Somehow separated from them as well, as he is immersed in his thoughts with deep lines on his forehead. But it is Anwar who shows real remorse. He even starts throwing up at one of the sites where he murdered his victims.

The film’s portrayal of these perpetrators is powerful and amazing, and Oppenheimer has admitted that he gained their trust because of his being an American, and because the United States supported the anti-communist violence. As he states: “They loved American movies and Americans … When I arrived, they just assumed ‘Oh, this guy must love us.’ ”

This leads me to question whether the banality of their mass murder, or that of evil, is really that simple.

These people may merely have been at ease performing their unawareness (or denial) of their crimes in front of a perceived ally. Later, Anwar shows remorse as he becomes aware of Oppenheimer’s true intentions. Was Anwar previously really unaware? Or has Anwar’s awareness of Oppenheimer’s political stance somehow led him to demonstrate his awareness and his remorse concerning the crimes that he has committed? After all, we represent ourselves differently vis-a-vis different people.

We may never know the definite answers to these questions. But Oppenheimer’s hard work and dedication have brought these nuances and complexities to light. He has spent 10 years filming a documentary with several Indonesian crew members who are only acknowledged as “anonymous” out of fear for their safety. “This is my gift to Indonesia,” said Oppenheimer. A wonderful gift, a touching and important one.

Soe Tjen Marching

P.S.

* The Jakarta Globe, 10:23 pm July 5, 2013:
http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/opinion/coming-to-grips-with-the-banality-of-mass-murder-in-indone

sias-past/

* Soe Tjen Marching is the author of the novel “Kisah di Balik Pintu” and the founder of Lembaga Bhinneka.