



CULTURE, MIND, AND SOCIETY

# Widening the Frame with Visual Psychological Anthropology

Perspectives on Trauma, Gendered  
Violence, and Stigma in Indonesia

Robert Lemelson · Annie Tucker



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# Culture, Mind, and Society

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*To the memory of Dorothy Lemelson, with the deepest love, admiration, and respect.*

*Blessed is the righteous judge.*

## Series Editor's Preface

Robert Lemelson and Annie Tucker's book is a textual ethnography of ethnographic films. The films discussed inquire into central inter-related issues in the anthropology of suffering—traumas and their effects, gendered violence, and stigmatization. They were all produced based on Lemelson's long-term fieldwork in Indonesia. *40 Years of Silence* (2009) documents political and psychological traumas of the mass killings in 1965–1966; *Bitter Honey* (2015) follows familial violence that comes with polygamous marriages; and *Standing on the Edge of a Thorn* (2012) presents family dynamics around poverty, mental illness, and gendered ethics of marriage and sexuality. The films—to be watched before and alongside reading the book—use various cinematic techniques and genres. Yet, the topics selected and the methods used underline core paradigmatic stances of psychological anthropology—closely following individuals' experiences and doing so within their social contexts, cultural logics, and political milieus. Indeed, the authors suggest that through making and watching them, ethnographic films become crucial vehicles to reflect upon, inquire into and teach about personal lives as experienced in their broader contexts. By describing, interpreting, and analyzing

the diverse contexts and deliberations through which these films were produced and outlining their theoretical significance, *Visual Psychological Anthropology* (VPA), as the authors call this unique field, receives new depths. Hence, the book offers fruitful paths for future collaborations between visual and psychological anthropology beyond accompanying the films. In particular, theorizing the process of visually translating human intimacy is achieved by offering four layers: Interpreting the films' *contents*, documenting the *fieldwork*, discussing the *editorial work*, and deliberating *epistemological and moral concerns*.

*First*, interpreting the various personal and interpersonal experiences documented in the films within the politics, social dynamics, culture logics, and history of modern Indonesia. Violence, traumas, stigmatization, and de-stigmatization, the authors argue, are tied up with political oppression that echoes social discrimination. The films' broader context is thus linked with poverty and suffering within families and their losses, conflicts, and the subjugation of women. Individual emotional responses, like shame (*malu*) or anger (*marah*), are deeply gendered forms. Further, local religiosities shape ethics of surrender, patience, helping others, resilience and activism.

*Second*, introducing the complicated research and the in-depth, person-centered interviews and conversations that allow the production of such films. This aspect lies at the base of an ethnography of ethnographic films—inviting readers to thorough visits behind the scenes. The authors share how the research unfolded and how longitudinal collaborations and relationships with participants and advisors were evolving. They also discuss the personal interactions in the field and local notions about sharing (or not) painful experiences in public and the downplaying of conflicts and negative feelings.

*Third*, explaining the complicated process of choosing specific parts of the fieldwork and footage and arranging them in particular ways and timelines. The authors elaborate on their emotional, cognitive, and narrative considerations and the “voice” of the narrator and how they incorporated additional materials like archival contents, art, imagery, and music. They also discuss how possible responses shape the editorial process and the role of participants' considerations about their real-life and their

exposed images (and their impacts) as portrayed in the film, and how they tried to encourage participants' agency in making the film.

*Fourth*, outlining epistemological and ethical deliberations that determine the cinematic outcomes—reflecting on cultural gaps in emotional expression and how to bridge such gaps or indicate them. In particular, the authors reflect on moral concerns in filming human suffering in Indonesia from a privileged subject position of Western actors. *Informed consent*, they argue, should be rethought and recalibrated when exposing individuals and trying to eliminate harm to participants, families and communities throughout the entire process of creating the films and distributing them.

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## Preface

This book is one outcome of long-term fieldwork engagements with psychological and visual anthropology, Indonesia, and with making psychologically oriented ethnographic films. The three films discussed in the book were all shot over the course of many years. The methodology used to make them was decades in development, spanning back over a previous film series and prior monograph. The collaborative relationships with colleagues and film participants reach back just as long, and continue through the present day. These all are united in a career-long endeavor to promote the power of visual methods to investigate, illuminate, and communicate central areas of inquiry in the field of psychological anthropology.

The book is written to complement three ethnographic films. *40 Years of Silence* is scaffolded around the long-term effects of childhood political trauma for four Indonesian families during and in the decades after the mass killings of 1965. *Bitter Honey* addresses cultural frameworks for gendered violence as experienced in three Balinese polygamous marriages. *Standing on the Edge of a Thorn* considers the intersectional vulnerabilities and processes of stigmatization that render one rural

Javanese girl vulnerable to sex trafficking. While discussing the content of these films, the volume intends to “widen the frame” for them in three significant ways.

We do this first by exploring the broader ethnography involved in research, fieldwork, and filmmaking not included in the films proper. What ends up in a film is a tiny fraction of fieldwork done and footage recorded. Given the longitudinal nature of our work, we also have maintained relationships with film participants long after the films are released, following the course of their lives. This book gives a fuller account of the range of fieldwork material—observations, interviews, et cetera—that exceeds what was eventually incorporated into the final films.

The book widens the frame again by mining the connections between the films. Despite the disparate topics they cover and distinct themes they explore, we see these projects as theoretically and ethnographically linked. We delve into the issues in psychological anthropology relevant to all and examine how they are interconnected within Indonesian history, society, and culture—and further, how all of these permeate participant subjectivity.

Thirdly and finally, we widen the frame to account for what goes on outside the limits of the camera lens. Just as most film footage ends up on the proverbial cutting room floor, any footage recorded is still just a sliver of the encounter and the overarching project, which encompasses evolving social relationships, production strategies, ethical considerations, and more. Exploring filmmaking *as process* allows us to reflect on the experience and its impact on our participants. It also allows us to discuss the unique ways in which visual and psychological anthropology are united in our methodology.

This methodology, which we call “visual psychological anthropology” (VPA) adapts person-centered ethnography for film and integrates it with visual anthropology and other cinematic elements of more mainstream film genres. We first outlined VPA in our monograph, *Afflictions: Steps Towards a Visual Psychological Anthropology*. That book was based on the six case-study films of our *Afflictions* series, which addressed interconnections between culture, mental illness, and neuropsychiatric disorder in Bali and Java via various significant aspects of the illness experience.

This volume is fundamentally connected to that book and can to a certain extent be considered an extension of it in terms of concept, structure, theory, and method, audience and goal. It is similarly designed to supplement a group of ethnographic films shot according to VPA tenets. It equally champions VPA as a way to go beyond given etic categories to reach a holistic understanding of an issue via a subjectivity-oriented, person-centered approach. Furthermore, the roots of the film projects discussed in this book can be traced back to ethnographic research for *Afflictions*, and the work and thought behind them overlap with *Afflictions* and with each other. This is evident as all the films circle around similar issues at stake, most notably stigmatization and trauma, but also family dynamics, village life, presentation of self, life course development, and more.

In VPA, longitudinality is central in determining how the psychological experiences of participants come to be understood and represented. It depends, then, on the long-term engagement of authors and research collaborators. The origins of my interest in the variable contexts and long-term outcomes of trauma, violence, and stigmatization date back to my undergraduate thesis at Hampshire College for which I conducted fieldwork with the newly-arrived Cambodian refugee community in Seattle. Their stories of trauma and survival brought home to me, as a young scholar, the importance of understanding the multiple contexts for trauma, violence, and oppression. After graduation, while pursuing a degree in clinical psychology, I worked as a clinician in a variety of mental health settings. Here I found the hegemonic clinical approach to mental health issues meant the structural origins or contexts of familial and individual suffering and “dysfunction”, such as poverty, anomie and alienation, racism, and economic devolution, were rarely discussed or included in treatment provider’s theoretical or clinical formulations. But it also gave me experience in long term, compassionate interviewing, albeit in a clinical setting with a focus on alleviating suffering, rather than an ethnographic one focused on understanding individual experience in a cultural context. My desire to find alternate ways of understanding these challenges of linking these disparate domains brought me back to anthropology to pursue graduate study at UCLA.

Given my long-term interest in the relationship of culture to mental illness, after taking a seminar with esteemed psychological anthropologist Robert Edgerton on schizophrenia and culture, for my dissertation I settled on the “outcome paradox” in cultural psychiatry. This research, highlighted in our *Afflictions* monograph, explored the question of differential, and better, outcome for people living with psychotic illness in the developing world. After several exploratory field visits to Indonesia in the early 1990, I received a 1996–1997 Fulbright grant to study this issue in Bali, and while doing fieldwork there, also received a WHO grant to investigate the Pediatric Autoimmune Neuropsychiatric Disorders associated with Streptococcus Infections (or PANDAS) hypothesis. During this research I did case findings for individuals with neuropsychiatric disorders, such as Tourette Syndrome and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and explored their lives in a clinical ethnography. It was during this extended fieldwork that I began, in collaboration with an ethnographic filmmaker colleague, filming some of my research. When I returned to Los Angeles and began teaching at UCLA, I began to edit this footage; I became captivated by the process and founded an ethnographic film production company, Elemental Productions. Elemental has now made over 15 films on a range of topics. Many of these films address concerns that have endured throughout my career, including trauma, mental illness, personal experience, and the sociocultural and structural contexts of suffering.

This work was only made possible by deep collaborations with Indonesian colleagues. An early and central collaboration was with the cartoonist and essayist Wayan Sadha. As a Balinese man with a deep understanding of local village life, he was a central informant about the multiple domains that impacted the lives of my participants, and a dear friend. When he became increasingly ill after about 2012, I began working with his daughter, Ni Luh Gede Sri Pratiwi, and have continued to collaborate with her after Sadha’s death in 2015.

I was introduced to psychiatrist Mahar Agusno and his wife psychologist Ninik Supartini by a mutual acquaintance. Both joined my WHO project on neuropsychiatric disorders in Indonesia, collecting clinical, ethnographic, and visual data on individuals living with OCD and related neuropsychiatric conditions. This initial project began a 20-year

collaboration that spans the length and breadth of almost all of my subsequent visual psychological anthropology projects in Indonesia. They have found and evaluated potential cases, organized and produced aspects of ethnographic film shoots, transcribed and translated interviews, maintained positive and productive relationships with participants, and have been full and equal collaborators.

I first met Degung Santikarma when I invited him to speak at a conference on culture, the brain, and posttraumatic stress disorder, held at UCLA in 2002. Degung is an anthropologist and writer, who was a research assistant for Hildred Geertz at Princeton. He is married to an American anthropologist and lives much of the time in the USA but was born in Bali and maintains deep and extensive connections there. Both he and several members of his extended family were key collaborators in a number of projects, most importantly *40 Years of Silence*, where he is also one of the four main participants. In addition, he was a collaborating consultant on *Bitter Honey*, for which he also served as an expert in the film itself commenting on different aspects of polygamy, culture, and personal experience.

I met psychologist Livia Iskandar in 2005 when I organized a conference on trauma and social violence in Yogyakarta. Livia established the first gender-based violence treatment program in Jakarta, Pulih (meaning recovery). We have worked together on several projects, including *Bitter Honey*. Livia has extensive experience evaluating and treating women who have endured a range of violent and abusive life circumstances, and so she was the most fitting collaborator to explore aspects of this difficult domain.

Finally, I met Annie Tucker when she was in the early years of her doctoral program in culture and performance at UCLA and she worked as a research assistant for the *40 Years of Silence* project. She had completed an undergraduate capstone ethnography on *ludruk waria*, transgender performers in the East Javanese comedic theater genre at Barnard and was beginning her thesis research. This culminated in a dissertation on the interpretation and treatment of autism in Java. These projects familiarized her with Javanese habitus and dynamics of stigmatization and resilience in Javanese contexts, which she has applied for over a decade working as researcher and writer for Elemental Productions.

While she has contributed from Los Angeles rather than joining me in the field, our collaboration in research and writing, and our friendship, has made this work possible.

Given these fertile collaborations, the book alternates between the use of “I” and “we” throughout. Here, “I” refers to my own personal thoughts, ideas, and experiences, as founder of Elemental, anthropologist, and film director. “We” refers to processes undertaken, decisions made, experiences had, and insights reached by the team as a collective, which includes the collaborators mentioned here and others, as I have also worked with a fluctuating team of film professionals from Los Angeles and Indonesia.

The book advocates for the value of ethnographic film for psychological anthropology. As such, it is primarily oriented to those who have a specialty or interest in the fields of visual and/or psychological anthropology and are curious about how a VPA approach might complement or extend their research. Many anthropologists already incorporate some filmic elements into their ethnographic research, perhaps as an addendum or insert, to provide local color or context, as a mnemonic, or a way to gather data for later analysis. Others may be approaching their footage with a plan to edit it into an ethnographic film; this is a common but rarely actualized interest among psychological anthropologists, but it is precisely what we espouse and aim to encourage.

An edited film can be a powerful tool in translational realms. Much of the thought in psychological anthropology has importance for a wide swathe of contemporary concerns and current events, and yet anthropologists are often just talking to each other. Our discipline, like many others, uses dense, specialized, and even obscure written discourse which creates numerous barriers to access and understanding; this means we miss the opportunity to reach a larger public, both here in the United States and in our field sites, and demonstrate the relevance of our theory and methods. We believe the emergent synthesis of psychological and visual anthropology modeled in this project has the promise to extend the reach of anthropological research to a wider range of audiences than is typical.

We have discovered through our own work that often, the most responsive audience to a film is one we hadn’t anticipated. The three

films in this book have been used in concert with human rights advocacy, included in training for psychologists and psychiatrists, and shared widely on Indonesian media platforms. This has been affirming but has also come with some unanticipated outcomes, which we will discuss.

At the same time visual psychological anthropology is an approach to educate and engage more typical student and scholarly audiences who are suddenly in great need of remote and asynchronous learning options. As I sit here writing this, in January 2021, the coronavirus pandemic is a wildfire ravaging the world. Even before learning was forced to go mostly, if not entirely online, some educators were increasingly positioning film as equivalent to texts to generate critical discussion. Now the era of “Zoom classrooms” has introduced many more faculty to the valuable instructional use of visual and multimodal materials. During this time, I have received numerous requests for assistance in recommending and incorporating visual materials and approaches to teaching virtually. This pandemic has thus offered an unexpected assist to the status and relevance a range of visual approaches that, before the pandemic, were often seen as secondary to the teaching of anthropology. Now instructors are hungry for visual materials that go beyond the standard university classroom fare of straight lecture and PowerPoint slides to keep their students engaged. Why not take this opportunity to branch out creatively, to build our skills as filmmakers, anthropologists, and educators, and to try new and diverse forms of presentation and explanation?

Once discovered, this use of visual materials is likely to endure. Now more than ever, visual and translational models point the way to a future of psychological anthropology that extends its reach and brings its illuminating and productive findings into a new era of learning—that “widens the frame” for the field. There is a need for pedagogical materials that integrate the theory and practice of anthropology with visual, multimodal, and other novel approaches to research, teaching, and presentation. Ultimately, we hope this book can contribute to the development of a shared knowledge and practice that has the capacity to extend the reach and impact of psychological anthropology for both new and familiar audiences.

We assume that readers will be selecting this book or certain book chapters because they have watched one or more of these films. While

watching the three films is not a firm prerequisite, many of the references and discussions throughout the book will make the most sense to the degree a reader can mentally reference particular scenes and or people described. To this end we have released all three films on YouTube to make them accessible to our readers (<https://tinyurl.com/wideningtheframevpa>).

Pacific Palisades, USA

Robert Lemelson

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# Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
BH	<i>Bitter Honey</i>
CAVR	Timor-Leste's Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation
CIPDH	International Center for the Promotion of Human Rights
DER	Documentary Educational Resources
DSM	<i>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders</i>
G30S	30 September Movement
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
HIV/AIDS	Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ITN	Independent Television News
LBH Apik	Lemba Bantuan Hukum Asosiasi Perempuan Indonesia untuk Keadilan (trans. Indonesian Women's Association Legal Aid Institute for Justice)—Balinese NGO working in the area of women's empowerment and protection
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer or Questioning
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCD	Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
PANDAS	Pediatric Autoimmune Neuropsychiatric Disorders Associated with Streptococcal Infections

PCE	Person-Centered Ethnography
PKI	Partai Komunis Indonesia—Indonesian Communist Party
PNI	Indonesian Nationalist Party
PTSD	Posttraumatic Stress Disorder
STDs	Sexually Transmitted Diseases
TGBVS	Trauma, Gender-Based Violence, and Stigma
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VPA	Visual Psychological Anthropology
WHO	World Health Organization

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