

# Theory and bodies out of bounds:

## A reflection on identity politics and thanatocracy

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HUMAN  
REMAINS  
& VIOLENCE

## Forensic identification and identity politics in 2004 post-tsunami Thailand: Negotiating dissolving boundaries

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### Abstract

This article considers the contexts and processes of forensic identification in 2004 post-tsunami Thailand as examples of identity politics. The presence of international forensic teams as carriers of diverse technical expertise overlapped with bureaucratic procedures put in place by the Thai government. The negotiation of unified forensic protocols and the production of estimates of identified nationals straddle biopolitics and 'thanatocracy'. The immense identification task testified on the one hand to an effort to bring individual bodies back to mourning families and national soils, and on the other hand to determining collective ethnic and national bodies, making sense out of an inexorable and disordered dissolution of corporeal as well as political boundaries. Individual as well as national identities were the subject of competing efforts to bring order to the chaos, reaffirming the cogency of the body politic by mapping national boundaries abroad. The overwhelming forensic effort required by the exceptional circumstances also brought forward the socio-economic and ethnic disparities of the victims, whose post-mortem treatment and identification traced an indelible divide between 'us' and 'them'.

**Key words:** tsunami, Thailand, forensic, identity politics, biopolitics

### Introduction

On the early morning of 26 December 2004 a megathrust earthquake of magnitude 9.0<sup>1</sup> occurred off the west coast of Northern Sumatra in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. Located 30 km under the seabed, the quake originated a series of tsunami waves and heralded one of the greatest disasters triggered by natural hazards, and concomitant humanitarian aid efforts, in contemporary history. Although exact figures of the number of victims are difficult to determine, at least 250,000 people are considered to have lost their lives or are presumed dead and 1.7 million people were displaced in fourteen countries. The most affected region surrounding the Indian Ocean comprised Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand. Among the dead were a large number of European visitors holidaying for the Christmas New Year vacations, mainly in Thailand and Sri Lanka. While countries hit by disasters usually

# Outline

- 26 December 2004: Indian Ocean Tsunami
- Redefinition of local and global contexts
- Humanitarian and forensic crisis
- 'Death specialists'
- From biopolitics to 'thanatocracy' in 4 steps
- A conclusive question

# 26 December 2004: Indian Ocean Tsunami

- Earthquake 9.0 magnitude in Banda Aceh
- ~250,000 people died or are presumed dead
  - ✓ Indonesia ~160,000
  - ✓ Sri Lanka ~35,000
  - ✓ India ~16,000
  - ✓ Thailand ~6,000 (but greatest international DVI effort)
- ~1.7 million people displaced in 14 countries




# Redefinition of local and global contexts

- Deaths out of place, spatially and conceptually
- Overlapping or disconnection between populations and places (E. Cohen 2009)
  - Definition of population as 'natural', genetic, or social category (M'charek 2000)
    - Population as 'subjects of the nation-state' (M'charek 2000:148)
  - Definition of place as 'natural' (E. Cohen 2009) and of 'nature' as natured nature vs naturing nature (Massumi 2015:37-39)
- Redefinition of nations and national boundaries
  - Identity politics
  - Ontopower and redefinition of 'subject' (Massumi 2015)
    - 'The body must be reconceptualized as the crucible of potentiating action-perception' (Massumi 2015:235)


# Humanitarian and forensic crisis

- International and local aid interventions (NGOs)
- Bureaucratic complexity in managing the flow of financial aid down to local contexts
- Police, army, paramilitary (especially Indonesia and Sri Lanka). Controlled access.
- Technical problems

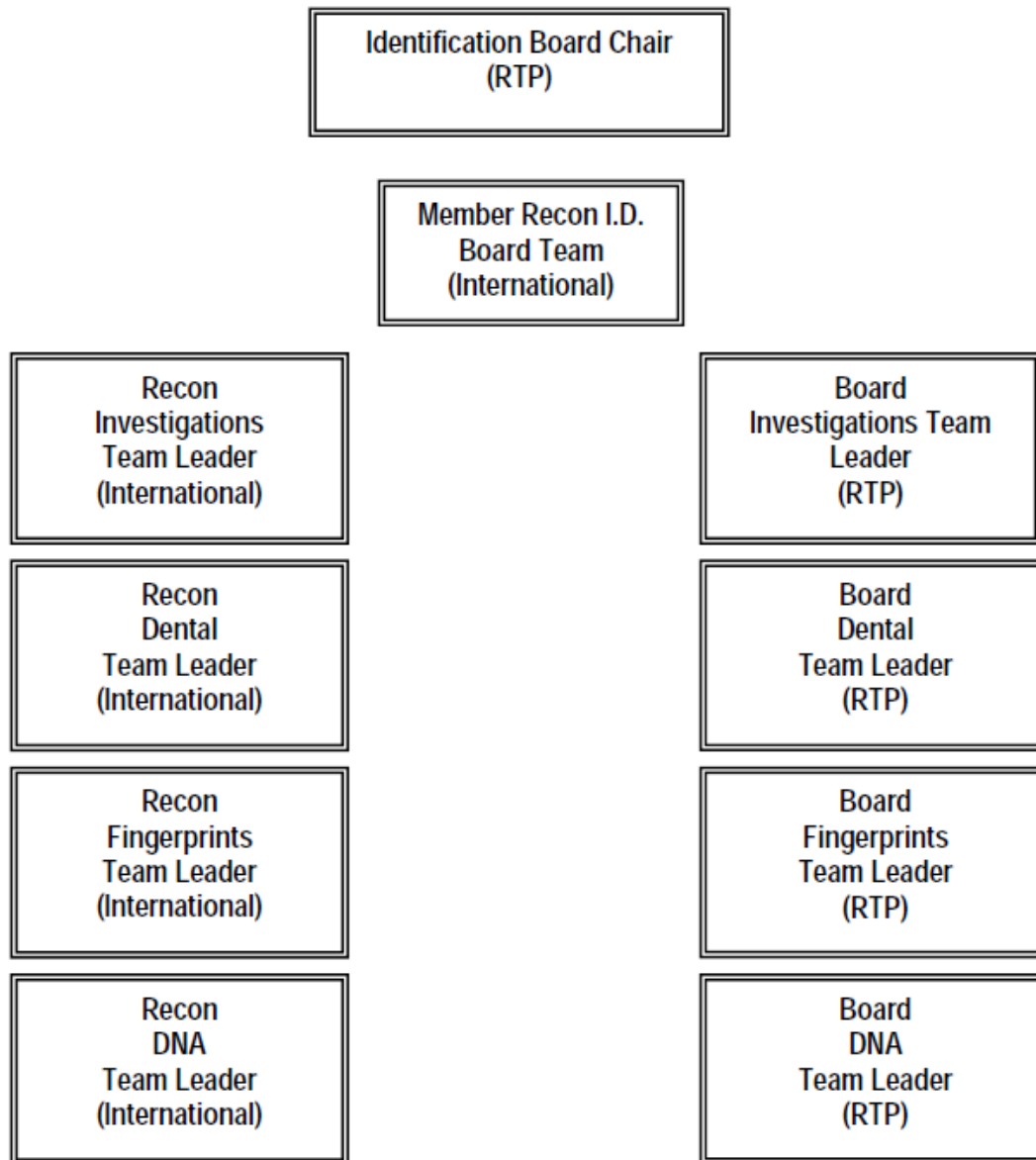
# 'Death specialists'

- Rescue and recovery teams (locals and surviving tourists)
- Volunteers (in different capacities, whether administrative, technical or medical)
- Forensic experts (in Thailand specifically)
  - ✓ Dr. Khunying Pornthip Rojanasunan (Central Institute of Forensic Science, Thai Ministry of Justice) aka 'Dr. Death' (Wat Yanyao, Phangnga)
    - Global morgue and 'death world'
  - ✓ Royal Thai Police Force forensic team (460)  TTVI (Phuket)
  - ✓ 30 International DVI teams (including ZAKA from Israel)

# From biopolitics to 'thanatocracy' 1/4

- Technical problems (lack of refrigeration/storage)
  - Makeshift awnings
  - Dry ice
  - Temporary burial in mass graves
  - Temporary numerical ordering (changed at later stage)  
International forensic teams working to identify foreigners
- ✓ Different protocols. Confusing ante-mortem collection  
 INTERPOL protocol eventually prevailing
- ✓ Ante-mortem (yellow) and post-mortem (pink) forms
- ✓ Commander TTVIC authorises identification reports
- ✓ Reconciliation Board TTVI Commission
- ✓ Chair of Identification Commission (a Thai official)

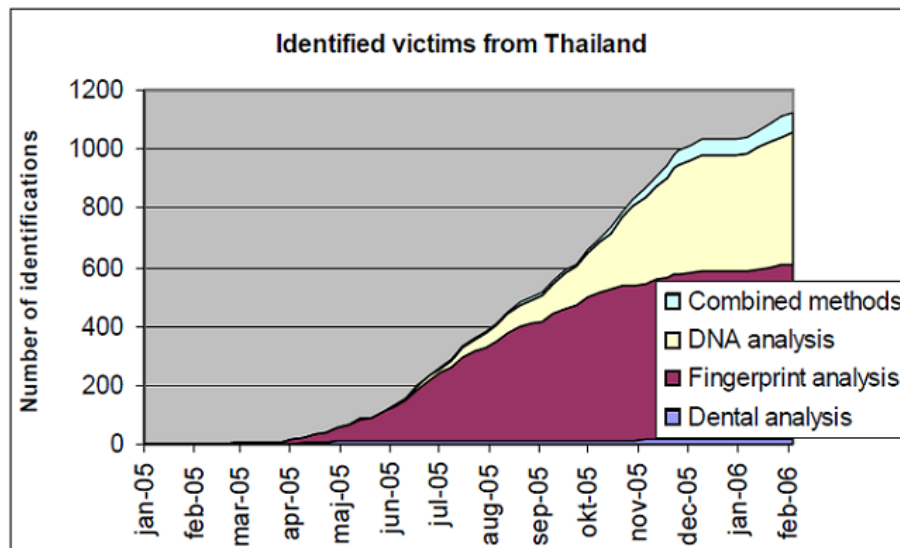
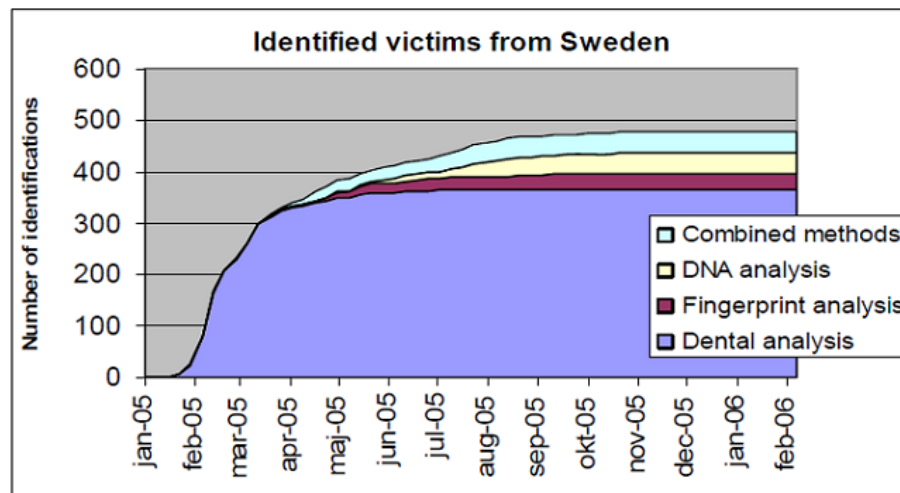
## IDENTIFICATION BOARD STRUCTURE



# From biopolitics to 'thanatocracy' 2/4

- Standardisation of conducts (of forensic experts and bodies)
  - ✓ Management of truth claims (DNA, fingerprints, dental records)
  - ✓ DNA 'false' claims
  - ✓ Autopsies as truth adjudication (Klinenberg 2001)
- Separation between 'Asian' and 'Western' bodies = tracing macro-ethnic boundaries?
  - ✓ Assumed universal vulnerability 'us' = 'them'
  - ✓ Actual inequalities of information and treatment 'us' ≠ 'them' most Swedes identified by dental analysis, Thais by fingerprints
  - ✓ Necroeconomy

# Identification Methods



*Identified victims from Sweden and Thailand identified by different methods or combination of methods.*



# From biopolitics to 'thanatocracy' 3/4

- Lost distinct identities and new homogeneous death population
- Visual homogeneity/disfigurement hindered photographic identification → erasure of body politic
- Bodies of Burmese migrants amid diplomatic confrontations
- Geo-politics and trans-nationalities recreated locally and globally
  - ✓ Identification of 'one's own'
  - ✓ DNA dispatched to international labs (ICMP Sarajevo and China)
  - ✓ Reversal of bioavailability (Cohen 2004)

# From biopolitics to 'thanatocracy': (re)definitions 4/4

- Necropolitics = material destruction of populations (Mbembé 2003)
- Necropolitics = management of dead populations vs 'cadaveric counterconduct' (Merli and Buck 2015).
- Biocracy = authority of verification through bureaucratic actions and production of procedures (Esposito 2008[2004])
- Thanatocracy = association of military, scientists, and businessmen (Serres 2013[1974])
- Politico-military role of biologists on immunity transferred to forensics? (pace Latour in E. Cohen 2009)
- Thanatocracy = mass death reframed as eminently bureaucratic phenomenon (Merli and Buck 2015:14–16)
  - ✓ Management of circulation of fragmented multiplicities
  - ✓ Reconstitution of national body politics
  - ✓ Creation of a coherent decomposing body

# A conclusive question on political theory

‘The process traversing the body politic is here different from the medical analogy proposed in political philosophy of the sovereign as healer. If ‘healing, then, bears some essential relation to governing’, what kind of essential relation is born by forensic identification?’ (Merli and Buck 2015:14)

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