



Remembering terror and activism in the city

Vannessa Hearman

Above: Motael Church, the oldest Roman Catholic Church in Timor-Leste. In 1991 a group of young independence activists demonstrating against the Indonesian occupation took sanctuary in the church. The Indonesians stormed the church and shot activist Sebastião Gomes, which would eventually lead to the Santa Cruz massacre. Photo: Vannessa Hearman.

In October 2017, Timor-Leste's National Centre of Memory (Centro Nacional Chega!, CNC) designated sites of historical memory in Dili, the country's capital, as part of a project titled 'Dili City of History' [*Sidade Istoriku*]. The CNC was formed in 2017 to deal with the legacies of past violence and human rights abuses, mostly committed during Indonesian rule from 1975 to 1999, that were documented by the country's truth commissions. Many of the sites are former military and police headquarters where the Indonesian security forces detained and tortured East Timorese accused of supporting independence.

The Indonesian invasion of 7 December 1975 transformed Dili from the then Portuguese Timor, formerly described in travel accounts as being a sleepy backwater of some 14,000 people, into a military operations centre.¹ Portuguese statistical reports showed the territory's population in 1974 to be around 635,000.² The Indonesian army assumed control over many former Portuguese installations, continuing to use some in much the same way as the Portuguese had, such as the Balide Comarca (the city's prison) and the Lahane hospital. Other buildings, however, were repurposed into

becoming killing and interrogation sites of East Timorese civilians, and soldiers fighting in the Falintil forces (Forças Armadas de Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste, Armed Forces for the Liberation of East Timor). In July 1976, East Timor was 'integrated' into Indonesia as its 27th province, but remained closed to visitors until 1989, as Indonesia fought to defeat the pro-independence forces. As well as operating detention and torture sites, the army introduced new security and surveillance systems, including the prevalent use of spies and informants.

The displacement of an estimated 108,000 East Timorese over the course of the Indonesian occupation,³ contributed to inward migration into Dili. Suburbs such as Kuluhun, Becora, Bemori and Santa Cruz swelled with migrants from districts such as Baucau, Los Palos, Bobonaro and Viqueque, escaping military persecution in the rural areas. Some youths who migrated to these suburbs were drawn into the clandestine movement in opposition to Indonesian rule. The guerrilla movement active in the rural areas of East Timor, so symbolic of the struggle against Indonesian rule, relied on the communication and supply links maintained by the clandestine network. Memoirs by East Timorese activists Constancio Pinto and

Naldo Rei recount aspects of this work, such as in the couriering of letters, cassette tapes and photographs between the armed resistance and the outside world, and the protection of Resistance leaders such as Xanana Gusmão in Dili's safe houses.⁴ There is much still to be documented of how the clandestine youth lived in and used this city as a site of activism.

My research project on the sea voyage in 1995 of the only asylum seeker boat to have reached Australia from East Timor, has led me into discussing with my interviewees their experiences of living in Dili in the 1980s and 90s. The passengers of the boat, the *Tasi Diak* [Good Sea], were young people who were born and had grown up during the Indonesian occupation – some whom had survived the 1991 Santa Cruz Cemetery massacre in Dili when the army killed 271 people at a funeral march. The interviews I have carried out in the past two years with them suggest that life in the city was not only about being in the grip of terror. The city's residents chafed against the authority of the Indonesian army and a network of informants, and expressed their dissatisfaction through low-level civil disobedience such as stone throwing and harassment of Indonesian settlers and public servants. Despite the threat of repeated detention, youths threw stones at Indonesian security forces and kept a close eye on the *mau'hu*, a term used locally to refer to pro-Indonesian East Timorese spies. The research is still currently underway, but these life stories seem to suggest that, in their activism, youths involved in the clandestine movement took advantage of certain characteristics of the city. High population density and mobility in particular suburbs enabled them to pass by unnoticed, and they monitored the security situation by hanging out in public places.

After Dili's near destruction at the hands of the Indonesian army and East Timorese militias in 1999, the East Timorese government and private sector have refurbished many former Indonesian administration buildings. Dili is a rapidly changing city. Historical sites are under threat of disappearing due to redevelopment and changing land use. The Hotel Turismo, a historic hotel built in the 1960s where pro-independence youths had protested for independence was included in the CNC's list. But it was demolished in 2010, rebuilt without preserving any original features and renamed.⁵ The Indonesian Embassy's new Cultural Centre has erased traces of the old Dili regency police headquarters (Polres) where East Timorese were routinely detained.⁶

In some instances, buildings have been repurposed, rather than destroyed, as were Indonesian era monuments. In 2009, the Indonesian Integration Monument and its surrounds were turned into the 5 May Park, commemorating the historic 1999 agreement between Indonesia, Portugal and the UN to hold the independence ballot. The CNC has printed a coloured map showing its historical sites and conducts tours for students, such as to Gusmão's former hideout in Cacauidu. The East Timorese non-government organisation, Youth for National Development (JDN) runs historical walking tours for visitors to Dili. The CNC's Historical Sites project strives to preserve the historical memory embodied in the city's physical structures, as did the National Directorate of Cultural Heritage (DPNC)'s recording of Portuguese era architectural legacy some years earlier.⁷ In a time of rapid change and high population mobility, interviews with the city's residents, past and present, deepens our understanding of how the urban setting provided opportunities for youth to come together and become politically active.

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Notes

- 1 Briere, E. 2004. *East Timor: Testimony*. Toronto: Between the Lines, p.84.
- 2 Joliffe, J. 2001. *Cover Up: The Inside Story of the Balibo Five*. Melbourne: Scribe Publications, p.46.
- 3 CAVR. 2013. *Chega!: The Final Report of the Timor-Leste Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR)*. Jakarta: KPG in cooperation with STP-CAVR, p.502.
- 4 Pinto, C. & Jardine, M. 1996. *East Timor's Unfinished Struggle: Inside the Timorese Resistance*. Boston: South End Press; Rei, N. 2007. *Resistance: A Childhood Fighting for East Timor*. St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press.
- 5 Murdoch, L. 13 March 2010. 'Heartbreak goes on at the hotel that has had more than its share', *Sydney Morning Herald*; <https://tinyurl.com/SMHDiliHotel>
- 6 Centro Nacional Chega! 2017. *Dili Sidade Istoriku: Da Memoria a Esperanca map*. Dili: Centro Nacional Chega!. See also Chega! Final Report, p.2204.
- 7 Miranda, F. & Boavida, I. (eds) 2015. *Património Arquitectónico de Origem Portuguesa Dili*. Dili: Direcção Nacional Património Cultural.

The changing nature of resistance: East Timor on the international stage

Hannah Loney

On 7 December 1975, Indonesia launched a full-scale land, sea and air invasion of the former Portuguese colony of East Timor. It took several years, and the loss of hundreds of thousands of civilian lives, before Indonesian forces gained control over the territory. On 26 March 1979, the Indonesian Government declared East Timor 'pacified' and established the militarized state structure that would administer the territory until 1999. There were a number of shifts in the policies governing the administration of East Timor, but Indonesian rule largely relied upon the constant and pervasive presence of the military, and the government's ability to minimize international awareness of the situation there.¹ Even with these features, many East Timorese remained committed to the idea of national self-determination, yet the shape and form of their opposition changed across the twenty-four-year period. My book—*In Women's Words: Violence and Everyday Life during the Indonesian Occupation of East Timor*—explores women's experiences of, and participation in, the development of a culture of resistance in East Timor.²

In 1989, the Indonesian President Suharto visited East Timor and declared the territory to have 'equal status' with other provinces. Despite this declaration, the Indonesian military's presence remained high, and security forces responded heavily-handedly to growing public expressions of discontent. At the same time, links were being fostered between East Timorese students studying in Indonesia and Indonesian pro-democracy activists around a broader movement for democratisation and political change. The common enemy was Suharto's regime and the common rhetoric was the developing language of universal human rights. The nature of the East Timorese resistance changed too, as a new generation of East Timorese who had grown up under Indonesian rule began to express publicly their opposition to the occupying regime. From a leftist inspired national liberation movement, the East Timorese resistance began to appeal more directly to the international community and became increasingly adept at utilising the language of human rights to frame their concerns.³ These developments were particularly important for the way

in which East Timorese women engaged with, and contributed to, a broader politics of resistance.

Several events within East Timor signalled a shift in the nature of opposition towards peaceful yet more public expressions of defiance that were increasingly aimed at an international audience. The violent repression of these protests by Indonesian forces, paradoxically, had the effect of accentuating their visibility and potency in international networks. The visits to the territory of Pope John Paul II on 12 October 1989, and US Ambassador to Indonesia, John Monjo, on 17 January 1990 precipitated large, peaceful public demonstrations, which were followed by violent crackdowns by Indonesian forces.⁴

The most well-known of these protests was the Santa Cruz demonstration, which took place in Dili on 12 November 1991 after a funeral procession for a young student, Sebastião Gomes.⁵ Indonesian security forces lined the streets while demonstrators – including many women – marched from the Motael Church to the Santa Cruz cemetery. Along the way, banners were unfurled calling for the United Nations to intervene in East Timor, pledging support for the resistance leader Xanana Gusmão, and advocating for East Timor's right to national self-determination. Once the protestors reached the cemetery Indonesian forces opened fire, killing an estimated 270 young people. Many hundreds of others were detained or disappeared in the military crackdown that followed. The massacre was captured on film by a foreign journalist, who was present for the planned visit of a Portuguese

parliamentary delegation. The footage was smuggled out of the territory in the days following, and subsequently broadcast on television stations around the world. These events marked a watershed moment in East Timor's modern history, and permanently changed the way that the international community perceived the Indonesian occupation.

The clandestine resistance continued to grow throughout the 1990s, with many young East Timorese taking great risks to deliver information to international solidarity networks and to hold demonstrations when foreign delegations were present in the territory. These changes to the nature of the East Timorese resistance were also impacted by mounting tensions in the Indonesian political landscape. The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997–98 produced high rates of unemployment, and rising food prices exposed the corruption and economic mismanagement of the Suharto regime, leading to mass protests across the country. The popular *Reformasi* movement, which used as its rallying cry the condemnation of Corruption, Collusion and Nepotism (*Korupsi, Kolusi dan Nepotisme*, KKN), triggered the resignation of President Suharto on 21 May 1998 and the subsequent collapse of the New Order regime.⁶ The new Indonesian President B. J. Habibie introduced far-reaching reforms that dismantled many of the foundations of the former regime. These measures provided the space for civil society to organise in Indonesia and, although to a lesser extent, opportunities for public discussion also became available in East Timor.

Human value, human rights and gender equality in Timor-Leste

Sara Niner

Gender equality and its feminist rationale are based on individual human rights while in customary or communal societies everyone's status and rights are relational to others in their community. Communities are made up of 'partible' persons or 'dividuals' without individual interests or rights. Women or men cannot have equal rights and their privileges depend upon their social status. While the idea of the partible person in customary societies has been challenged by the long-term influences of colonialism, Christianity and capitalism, it does go some way to explaining the lack of traction for gender equality in customary societies.¹

The island of Timor is a bridge between the Malay and Melanesian worlds, meaning the original languages and cultures in Timor reflect both forms of sociality. This diversity and the mixing of matrilineal and patrilineal ethnolinguistic groups makes understanding gender relations in Timor-Leste more complex. External influences make this more so. Centuries of Portuguese colonialism and Catholic proselytising was abruptly replaced by a brutal 24-year military occupation by neighbouring Indonesia (1975-1999), which was immediately followed by the interventions of UN peacekeepers and the international aid sector. Each regime imposed gender values and relations with little recognition of what previously existed because of an assumption of cultural superiority.

In my research, I have sought to discover how the gender relations of the indigenous societies of Timor shifted and adapted to foreign influences over the centuries, and how they resist or absorb the more recently introduced imperative of gender equality. 'Traditional' or customary societies are perceived as incompatible with introduced, modern ideas of citizenship, democracy and equality, yet, "the complex entanglement of social relations based in precolonial systems with those of colonialism, Western

education, new economic forms and Christian adherence belies this simplistic division into intrinsic and introduced".²

Violence against women or sanctioned relational behaviour?

A Melanesian woman is imagined as acting in terms of the interests of others rather than her own individual ones.³ Strathern explains that Melanesian women were willing and even connive "to go against their own interests" because of their outlook as a partible person embodying "the interests of others".⁴ This provides insight into women all around the world tolerating domestic violence; limiting their individual welfare for the sake of keeping families together and not creating further discord in extended families or clan groups. There are other reasons too, but this is a central concern. Domestic or gendered violence can be explained in this complex way everywhere in the world, but particularly in customary societies where individual rights cannot be assumed, such as in Timor-Leste.

Indigenous gift exchange or trading in women?

In customary Timorese society marriage exchange and relations between the families or clans of the bride and groom are regulated by practices referred to as *barlake*, which today feature in an estimated half of all marriages.⁵ A series of gift exchanges which signify the formal transfer of a bride spiritually to the clan house of her husband's family, often defined in western terms as dowry and bride price, are described by feminists as dehumanizing to the level of a purchased object or a commodity manifesting in the control and abuse of women.⁶ Today, *barlake* is often blamed for the high levels

of domestic violence in Timor-Leste. In pre-1975 Portuguese Timor condemnation of *barlake* was not from feminists, but the Catholic Church. Using a similar rationale, they preached that the human soul transcended the material world and that a soul and a gift could never be equal or exchanged.⁷ One of the major issues in the debate over *barlake* is the nature of the gifts exchanged and whether they can be considered a payment for the bride.

Writing about Melanesian society in Papua New Guinea, Strathern describes similar exchange practices that mediate gender relations where gifts embody the labour and personhood of the maker. Exchange gifts are not mere material, like a commodity, but the embodiment of those offering it. Keane explores the ontological assumptions that underpin the conflicting understandings of ritual gift exchanges in nearby Eastern Indonesia.⁸ He argues that westerners see exchanges as immoral, akin to slavery, because they assume that the people and 'things' exchanged in these practices are equal, based on their own culture of capitalism and "the alienating effects of commodity exchange". Yet gifts should never be construed as a payment, but are a symbol of the person offering it.

Writing about Timor-Leste, Silva takes this one step further, arguing that those unable to provide the gifts cannot achieve full personhood and therefore can be treated much like slaves. Husbands unable to provide the required gifts to their bride's family are expected to reside with their wife's family and labour for them in perpetuity.⁹ This explains why women in customary societies support *barlake* as their only claim to personhood or human value, with rights to recourse if they are treated unfairly or abused in husband's household.¹⁰ This can be construed as a local customary version of a regime of human rights based on 'citizenship' of a clan society, although status remains relational. The dark side of this is the treatment of those unable to gain status as slaves, which has a long history in Timor. The informal adoption of poor children among extended families who are treated like indentured servants has resulted in contemporary cases of the physical abuse of children.¹¹

The local Timorese women's movement members are the only ones fully equipped to work in this 'gap' between cultures

because they are the only ones who know how to navigate between the modern and customary. These are the women who oversaw the inclusion of the gender equality clause in the constitution and the introduction of the domestic violence law with the collaboration of international feminists. These acts of solidarity are the foundation on which to build gender equality.

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Notes

- 1 Macintyre, M. 2017. 'Introduction: Flux and change in Melanesian gender relations', in Macintyre, M. & Spark, C. (eds) *Transformations of Gender in Melanesia*. Canberra: ANU Press, pp.1-21.
- 2 Ibid., p.5.
- 3 Ibid., p.6.
- 4 Strathern, M. 1988. *The gender of the gift. Problems with women and problems with society in Melanesia*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- 5 Niner, S. 2012. 'Barlake: an exploration of marriage practices and issues of women's status in Timor-Leste', *Local-Global: Identity, Security, Community* 11:138-153. Globalism Research Centre, RMIT: Melbourne
- 6 Rubin, G. 1975. 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex', in Linda Nicholson (ed.) 1997. *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*. Routledge, pp.27-62.
- 7 Silva, K. 2018. 'Marriage Prestations, Gift Making and Identity in Urban East Timor', *Oceania* 88(1):127-147.
- 8 Keane, W. 2007. *Christian Moderns: Freedom and fetish in the mission encounter*. University of California, pp.197-222.
- 9 Hicks, D. 2012. 'Barlake: Compatibility, resilience and adaptation: The Barlake of Timor-Leste', *Local-Global: Identity, Security, Community* 11:124-137. Globalism Research Centre, RMIT: Melbourne.
- 10 Ibid., Niner 2012.
- 11 Niner, S. 2017. 'Reflection on the special gender stream: 2017 Timor-Leste Studies Association Conference', *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 10(2):275-279.

Within this changing political climate, several women's organisations were established in East Timor. Drawing upon the opportunities provided by political developments in Indonesia and the associated capacity for civil action, these organisations facilitated a number of public forums for East Timorese women to come together to share their experiences of violence and suffering. As my interviewees described, these gatherings were a source of inspiration for many of the participants, and proved critical in both affirming and deepening their commitment to independence. They were also demonstrative of a pronounced shift in the nature of opposition to Indonesian military occupation. Combined with a spirit of shared survival and resistance, international attention to the brutality of Indonesian rule after the Santa Cruz massacre and the changing political climate in Indonesia, paved the way for East Timor's transition to independence. My examination of women's experiences of the changing, and increasingly international, dimensions of the East Timorese resistance sheds new light upon the intersections between the local and the global in East Timor's independence struggle, as well as the gendered dynamics of agency, violence and resistance.

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Notes

- 1 Fernandes, C. 2011. *The Independence of East Timor: Multi-Dimensional Perspectives: Occupation, Resistance, and International Political Activism*. Sussex Academic Press.
- 2 Loney, H. 2018. *In Women's Words: Violence and Everyday Life during the Indonesian Occupation of East Timor, 1975-1999*. Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press.
- 3 Webster, D. 2013. 'Languages of Human Rights in Timor-Leste', *Asia Pacific Perspectives* 11(1):5-21.
- 4 See CAVR. 2013. 'Part 3: History of the Conflict', *Chega! The Final Report of the Timor-Leste Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR)*, Vol. 1. Jakarta: KPG in cooperation with STP-CAVR. <http://chegareport.net/Chega%20All%20Volumes.pdf>
- 5 See '11: The Santa Cruz Massacre', in Pinto, C. & Jardine, M. 1997. *East Timor's Unfinished Struggle: Inside the East Timorese Resistance*. Toronto: Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data, pp.188-99; and 'Chapter 7: The Santa Cruz Massacre', in Rei, N. 2007. *Resistance: A Childhood Fighting for East Timor*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, pp.48-53.
- 6 See Aspinall, E. & Fealy, G. (eds) 2010. *Soeharto's New Order and its Legacy: Essays in Honour of Harold Crouch*. Acton: ANU E Press.

Right: The grave and memorial of Sebastião Gomes. Photo: Vanessa Hearman.

