

## Negotiating a corporeal history: Women's embodied memories of the Indonesian Occupation

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The Indonesian invasion of East Timor in December 1975 resulted in a significant upheaval to daily life within the territory. Over the course of the subsequent occupation, many hundreds of thousands of individuals, families and communities were forcibly displaced, suffered from hunger, detention, torture and ill-treatment, were sexually, politically and economically violated (CAVR 2005, Part 6). As Indonesia consolidated its occupation, the profound alterations inflicted upon material reality engendered particular experiences within and upon the lives and bodies of East Timorese people. This paper will explore East Timorese women's reactions, experiences and recollections *as women* to the physical and emotional circumstances of the Indonesian occupation. It will focus specifically on the female body as one particular site for experiencing, narrating and representing the intimacy of colonial encounters (Canning 1999, 510). This approach is intended to shed light upon broader questions about the role of gender within the interpretation and representation of the occupation, whether women experienced the occupation differently, and whether women remember and narrate their stories in ways that are different to men.

The first section of the paper will look at women's memories of the Indonesian occupation and the role of the bodily form and function within these narratives, including: images of the body, such as injured and dead bodies; the burying of bodies; the reproductive capacity of the female body; and violated female bodies. The second section of the paper will situate these memory trends within broader scholarship on memories through the body as indicative of a uniquely feminine form of expression, drawing particularly on the revelations of French feminist literary theorists from the 1970s. Finally, the paper will provide a suggestion as to the potential of sharing these intimate experiences of conflict as a means for women to come together, in an attempt to come to terms with and to move forward from past experiences of mass violence.

The research draws primarily on oral narratives as sources for historical analysis: both my own interviews with East Timorese women, as well as several published collections of women's oral narratives (Abrantes and Sequeira 2012; Conway 2010; Alves, Abrantes and Reis 2001; Winters 1999a, 1999b; Turner 1992). These interviews were conducted as part of a broader PhD project, which explores East Timorese women's experiences, memories and perceptions of life under Indonesian rule. The material was analysed using a combination of oral history methodologies, including narrative analysis. Such analysis revealed that one of the ways in which the women recalled their life under Indonesian rule was through the medium of memories, images and experiences of and through the body. This paper will explore these articulations and will suggest ways in which the female body can provide additional knowledge of historical experience and, subsequently, lead to a richer and more nuanced understandings of the Indonesian occupation. Whilst the paper refers specifically to the experiences of East Timorese women under Indonesian rule, its use of the body as a source for historical narration, memory and agency can be situated alongside the work of other scholars such as Fatma Kassem, who examines the experiences and historical narratives of Palestinian women who lived on in the State of Israel after 1948 (Kassem 2011).

Images of the body, particularly descriptions of dead and injured bodies, feature in many women's memories of the Indonesian occupation. Such techniques of memorialisation are particularly evident for the period of conventional war, when a large portion of the East Timorese population retreated to the mountainous areas of the territory from December 1975, and ended on 26 March 1979 when the Indonesian military declared the territory to be officially pacified. The immense physical displacement and increasingly

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difficult conditions of life in the mountains resulted in a large number of civilian deaths.<sup>2</sup> The most prominent observations within this context include the loss of family members and relatives, the elderly and children, who could not survive the difficult physical conditions, and the physical manifestations of hunger, thirst and illness. In my interview with Luisa, who was born in Tutuala (Lautém district) in 1959, she spoke about walking from Tutuala all the way to the resistance stronghold of Mount Matebian (Baucau district). On the way, she said, people just died as they were walking and the others had to step over and around their dead bodies. ‘Even if it was your mother or father, your husband or your children’, she said, ‘you just had to keep going because the enemy was coming’.<sup>3</sup>

That people were often continually on the move in an attempt to escape the impending Indonesian forces also meant that these bodies often could not be buried properly. As such, appropriate rituals that dispatch the soul of the dead to the sacred world and facilitate its transformation into an ancestor could not be conducted (Robins 2010, 10). One of my interviewees, Ana, told me that in the mountains above Maubara (Liquiçá district) in 1977, ‘People died everyday’. She said, ‘people were buried inappropriately. They were wrapped in a cloth ... and put on a hadak [a table or platform made from bamboo], then they were buried’.<sup>4</sup> Kassian, whose story was published in Laura Abrantes and Beba Sequeira’s collection, *Secrecy: The Key to Independence*, remembered that sometimes bodies could not be buried at all, and instead just had to be left behind: ‘what could we do?’, she said, ‘We had to leave them behind’ (Abrantes and Sequeira 2010, 56). These accounts draw attention to the physicality and visibility of dead bodies, their very public and confronting presence, and the negotiation of cultural practices associated with death that arose from the enforced mobility brought about by the impending Indonesian forces.

The visibility of dead bodies and the lack of sufficient time or resources to conduct bury them correlates with the failure of later attempts to locate the bodies of loved ones that had died in conflict. Although funeral practices vary across the territory, most involve the burial of the body and the construction of a grave site (Robins 2010, 10). After being separated from their families during the significant displacements of the late 1970s and early 1980s, as well as during the violence of 1999 around the Popular Consultation, many people went missing and families to this day are unable to locate their bodies.<sup>5</sup> In my interview with Zelia, who was born in Watulari (Viqueque district) 1979, she recalled her family telling her about the problem of locating bodies in the context of her uncle’s death in combat in Same, a member of the *Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste* [FALINTIL – The Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor]. She mentioned that some skeletons had been located at the site of the battle, but that their identity had not yet been confirmed.<sup>6</sup> Bernadete, who was born in Liquiçá (Liquiçá district) in 1986, told me about her uncle who was kidnapped in April 1999 from Liquiçá. She said, ‘We never found his dead body until now.’ He had been living in the mountains before deciding to come back to the town, and was straight away taken by the *Besi Merah Putih*.<sup>7</sup> ‘After that’, Bernadete said, ‘he just disappeared.’<sup>8</sup> Many men went missing from Liquiçá during the 1999 violence and are suspected dead, but the fact that their families have no bodies nor physical place of burial is an issue of concern for many. The presence or absence of the body within these narratives highlights the body as a physical and thematic continuity within these narratives.

The motif of birth was also raised within women’s narratives of life in the mountains. The physical experience of a life on the move impacted upon both the bodily experience of being pregnant and on

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste (CAVR) Report at minimum, during the period 1975-1999 84,200 people died due to hunger and illness, although the figure could be as high as 183,000 (Díli: CAVR 2005, 73).

<sup>3</sup> Interview with the author, 24 June 2012, Dili, Timor-Leste.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with the author, 14 July 2012, Liquiçá, Timor-Leste.

<sup>5</sup> The CAVR Report estimated that 18,600 unlawful killings and disappearances occurred from 1974-1999, in Part 7.2, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with the author, 7 June 2012, Dili, Timor-Leste.

<sup>7</sup> *Besi Merah Putih* (BPM), which means ‘red and white iron’ in Bahasa Indonesia, was a pro-Indonesian militia that operated in Liquiçá district.

<sup>8</sup> Personal communication with the author, 3 July 2013.

birthing practices. Fatma Kassem writes of the way in which Palestinian women whom she interviewed memorized historical events by linking them to ‘body time’, such as pregnancy and childbirth, – feminine patterns of memory that are directly related to the female body and its various functions (Kassem 2011, 186) – and similar trends were evident in East Timorese women’s narratives. Edhina who is interviewed in Michele Turner’s collection, *Telling: East Timor, Personal Testimonies*, remembered that during the encirclement campaigns (1977-79), ‘Pregnant women were running too, terrified they’d fall and have their babies too early ... I saw pregnant women give birth to a baby in the day and if it rains at night [sic] and there is no protection they sit in the mud, the night is cold, and by morning the baby is dead’ (Turner 1992, 117). Maria, an East Timorese woman who trained as a midwife in Bali during the occupation, explained to me that in traditional birthing practices, women give birth in private, at home.<sup>9</sup> Edhina’s account indicates that during this time, some of the most intimate, personal experiences were removed from the spaces in and routines with which they were traditionally conducted. In my interview with Luisa, she told me about her sister-in-law giving birth under a coconut tree in Lore (Lautem district). She explained that because they didn’t have any boiling water, which was usually used to wash the baby and the mother, they had to use cold, unsterilized seawater instead.<sup>10</sup> These embodied experiences reveal some of the practical ramifications of enforced dislocation, shedding light on the everyday nature and impact of the violence inflicted by the invasion – the destructive reality of displacement, death, and the loss of loved ones (Banerjee 2004, 128).

As Indonesia consolidated its physical control over the territory, instances of direct, indirect and structural forms of violence were a constant feature of women’s daily lives. Many women suffered horrifically at the hands of the Indonesian forces, and their bodies often constituted the locus for acts of military violence. Women were often targeted because they were perceived by the Indonesian armed forces to have a connection to the resistance movement, they were deemed to be non-compliant with military demands, or they were the targets of proxy violence (CAVR 2005, Part 7.7; Carey 2001, 256). There was also a broader dimension to such violence that extended beyond individual torture, punishment, proxy violence and the sexual gratification of the perpetrator. It often contained a specifically political function: that being, to destroy the spirit of the East Timorese people by reinforcing the reality of Indonesian sovereignty over the physical territory, lives and bodies of the East Timorese.

This interpretation draws upon the work of the feminist scholar, Anne McClintock, who writes that modern nation states are profoundly gendered in the sense that the nation is symbolically represented as a woman, conflating political control of a territory with the control of the female body (McClintock 1993, 65). When a territory is occupied, Susan Brownmiller adds, a woman’s body often becomes a target for violent penetration and abuse (Brownmiller 1993, 37). The difficulties that Indonesia experienced in attempting to gain control of the ‘hearts and minds’ of the East Timorese people sheds light upon why the battle for military control implicated the bodies of women so intensely. In *Secrecy: The Key to Independence*, Luciana recalls being questioned by the military. She was told by a Timorese man who worked for the Indonesian military, ‘My child, you have to give your body to the military in order to survive. If you don’t give your body, you will have to [pay with] your life’ (Abrantes and Sequeira 2010, 80). The nature of this incident is for Luciana to exchange her body for that of her own survival, suggesting that her female bodily form can be corrupted, exchanged and conquered as an act of political dominance.

The physical presence of the Indonesian military and their control over the territory was demarcated on the bodies of female victims of torture and sexual violence. This demarcation was sometimes displayed publicly, such as through photographs and graffiti,<sup>11</sup> as was evident in a case of violence that occurred at an unknown location in December 1996 that was reported in a 1998 publication of the Portuguese NGO, *A paz é possível em Timor-Leste* [Peace is possible in East Timor]. The publication described the existence of a photo sequence, taken by the military and smuggled out of the territory, which told of an incident where seven young women were ‘raped, tortured and probably executed’ (1998, 31). The

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with the author, 3 December 2012, Dili, Timor-Leste.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with the author, 24 June 2012, Dili, Timor-Leste.

<sup>11</sup> See Michael Leach’s discussion of the graffiti on the walls of the *Comarca Balide* [Comarca Prison] in Dili (Leach 2009, 150-51).

publication described that “*Stupid heroes*” and “*This is what happens to the enemies of the RI*” [Republic of Indonesia] had been scrawled on the body of one of the victims (*A paz é possível em Timor-Leste* 1998, 31). Such acts reveal the perpetrators’ intention as being one of humiliation and torture, but such acts of documentation also suggest that there was a sense of spectacle and display attached.

Descriptions of a teenage girl, Maria Gorete, who was imprisoned, tortured and eventually killed by the military, present another example of the way in which women’s bodies were implicated in Indonesian attempts to solidify, extend and physically demarcate their control over the territory. In an interview with the Australian journalist Jill Jolliffe in Lisbon Maria’s sister, Betty Sarmento, explained what happened to her sister: ‘Maria Gorete ... had cigarette [sic] burns on her arms and chest and had had electric shocks applied to her neck, ear and arms’ (Jolliffe 1998). These examples contain very obvious violent acts that marked the bodies of women. One of my interviewees, Luisa, who had been violated by the Indonesians while in prison in Dili, talked about the bad things that happened to both men and women under occupation, but that rape was a violation that was specific to women.<sup>12</sup> Whilst the CAVR Report talks about a few isolated incidents where men were sexually violated (CAVR 2005, Chapter 7.7, 16), Luisa suggests that in the social context of the Indonesian occupation, it was understood as a violation that only affected women.<sup>13</sup> There is something specific, therefore, about the way in which the female body features within East Timorese women’s memories of life under Indonesian rule. Bodily forms feature within their narratives, but the body is also a site for remembering experiences of life under Indonesian rule. The female body can also be seen as a specific site for understanding the way in which power was generated, practiced and reinforced during the Indonesian occupation.

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The discourse of feminist literary theory, in particular the generation of French feminist critics of the 1970s, such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, proposed a feminine form of expression that flows from and through the body: *écriture féminine*. Cixous’ 1975 essay, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, is one of the most influential texts within this field because it proposes the idea that, in order to make her herself heard, women must transform the way that femininity is represented in language, by writing the ‘un-heard of songs’ of her body (Cixous 1976, 876). I suggest that this emphasis on a feminine form of expression, of writing through the body, can be similarly applied to the notion of telling, of remembering and narrating through bodily experiences. In relation to the trauma and physical violence inflicted upon many East Timorese women living under Indonesian rule, the violence can become internalised as a site of memory within the body itself. One of my interviewees, Fatima, who had been violated by Indonesian soldiers near Tasitolu (Dili district), explained the way in which her experience of rape was an enduring part of her sense of self. She said: ‘This is the worst thing that happened to me. I will never forget this, even if I have passed away. I hate this... I really, really hate this... Although I have had children I still kept my revenge and hate inside my heart.’<sup>14</sup> This physical experience, experienced through her body, became inextricably connected to her soul. The literary critic Kathryn Robson writes that ‘trauma cannot simply be consigned to the past: it is relived endlessly in the present’, and this has enduring effects upon the survivor’s identity (Robson 2003, 11). She writes that according to most discourses on trauma, ‘it is only when the seemingly unspeakable traumatic experience can be transformed into a narrative that the traumatic event can be put in the past’ and the survivor can begin to recreate their identity by incorporating the traumatic event into the frame of their life-story (Robson 2003, 11). It is here that this notion of a feminine form of expression, of telling stories *through* the body, can be instructive and empowering.

Speaking to an Australian activist, Rebecca Winters, in Dili in November 1998, a young East Timorese woman called Maria articulated the significance of speaking about trauma in the context of women’s experiences of Indonesian rule. She spoke of the way in which East Timorese women ‘live amongst violence’; the violence, the trauma, is a part of their everyday lives. Therefore, Maria said, ‘it is

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with the author, 24 June 2012, Dili, Timor-Leste.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Fatima, 23 May 2012, Dili, Timor-Leste.

difficult to get out of the trauma enough to talk about what has happened to them, their feelings, what they went through' (Winters 1999a, 14-15). Although this comment is rooted in the very historical context of the occupation, it reveals the inescapable and often uncommunicable nature of traumatic experience (Herman 1997, 1). Maria stressed talking together as a particular site of expression, to share experiences of conflict, as a means of moving forward. She said: 'I believe we have to start by inviting these women to talk, exchange ideas, encourage them and motivate them ... We know that a lot of women continue to live inside their pain. So to talk is good for the spirit' (Winters 1999a, 14-15). Facilitated by the increased freedom that came about as a result of *Reformasi* in 1998, a number of conferences and forums took place in the last few years of Indonesian rule in which East Timorese women came together to share their experiences of trauma and suffering, to provide support and comfort to one another in the face of ongoing violence.

One such example is the inaugural women's conference, *Conferencia Loron Rua Kona Ba Laloek Feto Timor Loro Sae* [Two Day Conference on the Image of East Timorese Women], which was held in Dili on 9-10 November 1998. The conference was organised by *Grupo Feto Foinsa'e Timor Lorosa'e* [GFFTL – East Timor Young Women's Association], with support from the Communication Forum for Women in the East [*Forum Komunikasi Untuk Perempuan Loro Sa'e* – FOKUPERS] and the Organisation of Timorese Women [*Organização da Mulher Timorese* – OMT].<sup>15</sup> It was intended as a forum to discuss what had happened to women under Indonesian rule. For the first time, many women spoke about the abuse that they had suffered. An Australian woman who attended the conference, Jude Conway, recalled hearing, '[s]tories of rape by the military. Stories of women having children to soldiers who never helped with the raising of the children and left to return to their wives in Indonesia. Stories of the widows in Craras village near Viqueque where there are no men left' (Conway 1998). Later, Jude spoke to one participant, Olandina, who 'thought it was important because it was the first time that many women from all over East Timor were able to unite and ... to speak out courageously of their experiences' (Conway 1998). One of my interviewees, Zelia, was a young participant in the conference. She reflected on hearing other women talk. She said, 'it was a fantastic experience for us, because as a member of the young generation we learnt a lot from ... those women, who were really enthusiastic, [they were] very strong women, very dedicated women'.<sup>16</sup> In the context of these shared experiences, of listening to a traumatic event being transformed into a narrative, another of my interviewees, Mena, explained the importance of being a good listener. She said:

It is hard for them because we cannot trust each other, and you are still ashamed to share your experience. So you have to learn how to become a good listener and empathize with them. Even if ... you are almost crying, but you have to hold [back] your tears to make them strong. Even if your heart is really breaking. When you listen to all these things ... you have to show them that you are strong to give support – this is the hardest thing that you have to give.<sup>17</sup>

In this powerful statement, Mena sheds light upon both the importance of sharing stories and building trust, but also on the invaluable role of the listener within this process of narrating, recollecting and communicating past experiences of trauma and violence.

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A common feature within some women's recollections of the Indonesian occupation is the prevalence of memories, experiences and images of the body. Observations of dead and injured bodies were common during the period immediately after Indonesia invaded, when a large portion of the population lived in the mountains, and many were constantly on the move in an attempt to escape the impending Indonesian forces. As a result of these conditions, dead bodies often could not be buried properly, which meant that practices that surrounded everyday life – the burying of bodies – were disrupted. Within this paper, I

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<sup>15</sup> OMT was formed out of OPMT in 1998 to mirror the bipartisan nature of the new umbrella resistance body, CNRT. It was a bipartisan organisation, though with similar aims to OPMT.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with the author, 6 June 2012, Dili, Timor-Leste.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with the author, 30 June 2012, Dili, Timor-Leste.

situated this idea of renegotiated practices alongside later attempts – many unsuccessful – to locate the bodies of loved ones who went missing, particularly during the tumultuous events of 1999. These particular embodied memories are not unique to women; however, the experience of birth, motherhood and sexual violence are ones that are quite specific to women in occupied Timor; thus, the feminine functions of their bodies are, in part, what make these particular corporeal narratives distinctly feminine. In focusing on the way in which the body is implicated within colonial encounters, a more intimate account of historical experience is provided; one that, I argue, is more conducive and responsive to the lived experiences and memories of women. I have also situated these notions of ‘memories through the body’ within the context of pushes for a feminist form of expression. I have argued that there are instances where women’s memories related specifically to their gendered, corporeal bodies – initially to embodied experiences and images of the body – but that women’s bodies are also implicated within military occupations and conflict zones as specific sites of highly politicised violence. I suggest that the practices of sharing and listening to one another’s stories have been used as a *sphere of agency* by some women within East Timorese society. Embodied experiences and images of the body constitute a useful approach to exploring women’s lived experiences because they facilitate an exploration of war, conflict, and military occupation not only as a series of events, but as a presence, as embodied human experiences that are inevitably gendered.

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