

Liberating the people: young adults, political reconciliation and constitution in Timor-Leste

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Our focus, for this generation, for young people...is how to liberate, how to *really* liberate the Maubere people, by the Maubere sons, not by other people (Francisco, 30 years old, student and NGO worker, Dili).¹

While researching active young adult's² perspectives on reconciliation in Timor-Leste in 2012, the conversations with my research participants often turned to the necessity of 'liberating the people'. What it meant to liberate the people mostly covered issues like combating corruption, achieving social justice and socio-economic equality, upholding and fostering national pride, and developing citizenship. Discourse about liberating the people was always accompanied by the statement that the generations which resisted against the Indonesian occupation managed to liberate the land but had failed to liberate the people. In this paper I explore how the idea of liberating the people is related to reconciliation, and what it can tell us about inter-generational reconciliation, by focusing on what I have called the in-between-generation in Timor-Leste (ten Brinke 2013).

Young adults often sketched out the contours of four generations in Timorese society: the Portuguese, the Indonesian, the independence, and the new generation. Considering the emic use of the term in Timor-Leste, I follow Mannheim's (1952) socio-historical approach to generation. Hence, what defines a generation is the way people are shaped by specific historical and social events, rather than by demographics. I found the two main parameters for belonging to a generation in Timor-Leste to be: participation in the independence struggle and formal education. Consequently, the Portuguese generation refers mostly to elites who were educated by the Portuguese (before 1975) and who contested the Indonesian occupation either as leaders of the armed resistance or in exile. The Indonesian generation refers to the people born and raised under Indonesian occupation, between 1975 and the early 1990s. With its members generally regarded as resistance heroes or Indonesian collaborators, the passive majority often remains outside discussion. The 'new' generation refers to youth and children born and growing up after independence in 2002 who receive their education mostly in the two official languages, Portuguese and Tetun. The independence generation, which constituted my research population (young adults roughly 17 to 30 years old) were born under Indonesian occupation and their school careers were interrupted by the transition to independence and by a shuffling of languages and curricula. They were often referred to as neither belonging to the Indonesian nor to the new generation, which led me to consider them an *in-between generation* (ten Brinke 2013). While, as my research participants put it, their parents and grandparents hold on to 'traditional' culture and their younger siblings navigate the realm of 'alien' globalized culture, young adults see themselves as mediators between cultural worlds and guardians of Timorese national identity. In terms of political participation, young adults are often hailed as 'the future of the nation'. However, they are mostly excluded from politics because they lack the most important political legitimizer in Timor-Leste: having struggled for independence. The same in-between-ness counts for the process of reconciliation. Young adults have a memory of the struggle, but did not actively participate in it. Consequently, they were excluded from the official reconciliation process of the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation (mostly known by its Portuguese acronym CAVR and thus henceforth referred to as such).

The CAVR mandate ran between 2002 and 2005. Its task was to establish the truth about human rights violations between 1974 and 1999, formulate recommendations based on these findings, and run Community Reconciliation Processes (CRPs) (CAVR 2005, 2). These CRPs were considered by many as the most successful part of the CAVR. They were designed to reintegrate (East Timorese)

¹ Quotes in this paper have been translated from the original Tetun into English by the author. In order to guarantee the privacy of my research participants, all names in this thesis are pseudonyms.

² Research participants were mostly students from the Universidade Nacional de Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL).

perpetrators of minor crimes (e.g. theft, killing of livestock) perpetrated as acts of political violence, into their communities (CAVR 2005, 11). For these processes, the commission made use of a traditional ceremony called *Nahe Biti Bo'ot* (Trindade and Castro 2007, 37). In this ceremony, victims and perpetrators face each other on a ceremonial mat, mediated by elders and local leaders. The ceremony's goal is confession, eventual forgiveness and/or compensation and reintegration (Burgess 2004, 150; see also Babo-Soares 2004). The prominence and reasonable success of the CRPs might explain why they became regarded as a watershed for reconciliation in Timor-Leste. Young adults, although they were rarely personally present at a CAVR *Nahe Biti Bo'ot* ceremony, grew up with the ceremony being referred to as *the* process of reconciliation, and thus were socialized into equating reconciliation with this individual and (literally) face-to-face form of conflict resolution. Hence, 'I did not see it with my own eyes' often accompanied young adults' discourse about reconciliation. When I asked in a Focus Group what the participants' personal relationship to reconciliation was, Daniel, a student of Social Communication, answered:

At the time of the process of reconciliation we were still small and sometimes we were still hiding in the mountains. We know who killed who, but we did not see it with our own eyes and also inside the process of reconciliation, it was not us doing the talking, it was the victims who did the talking...but as Timorese we still feel hurt (*laran moras*).

This answer delineates a few important aspects of young adults' relationship to reconciliation. Firstly, the word reconciliation is immediately related to the official CAVR process. Secondly, young adults feel they have no personal relationship to reconciliation because they were too young to participate in the official process. Hence, Daniel does not self-characterize as a victim, because he was not officially a victim in the CAVR process. Finally, young adults, despite not self-identifying as victims, know 'who killed who' and 'still feel hurt'. Consequently, when I asked them whether reconciliation was achieved in Timor-Leste, they often told me it wasn't. However, when I asked them what their role in reconciliation was, they answered they did not have one.

This leads us to a fundamental problem in the concept of reconciliation both in theory and in practice: what can reconciliation be to generations who suffer the consequences of conflict but who were neither classified as victims nor as perpetrators? Also in academia, reconciliation is often analysed as a process between individuals, or at most groups, divided into the categories of victim and perpetrator, who were involved in direct conflict (Daly and Sarkin 2007). Through this victim/perpetrator approach, reconciliation becomes equated to issues of justice (Harper 2005), truth and amnesty (Christodoulidis 2000). Furthermore, it connotes 'a return to or recreation of the status quo ante, whether real or imagined' (Daly and Sarkin 2007, 5). Nordquist (2006) is one of the few scholars who addresses the question of reconciliation for post-conflict generations'. He distinguishes between *intra*-generational reconciliation, which takes place between perpetrators and victims, and *inter*-generational reconciliation, which concerns 'those individuals and groups who have to come to grips with prejudices, memories, and who have had to grow up in divided communities, due to past grievances and divisions' (Nordquist 2006, 13). Regrettably (and paradoxically), he fails to address the relation *between* generations directly involved in the conflict and generations growing up in its wake. In this paper therefore, I include the specifically *inter*-generational relationships at play in this form of *inter*-generational reconciliation. How does the post-conflict generation relate to reconciliation, but also, how does the post-conflict generation relate to the conflict-generation and vice-versa? What are the dynamics at play in *inter*-generational reconciliation?

In order to analyse this inter-generational aspect it will be helpful to dwell shortly on the concept of political reconciliation as developed by Schaap (2004, 2007; see also Christodoulidis and Veitch 2007 and Murphy 2010). Political reconciliation, here, does not concern forgiveness or individual overcoming of hatred (Murphy 2007, 854). In this sense, what is political about it, is that it is more about the reconciliation between members of a society, than about the *restoration* of personal relationships (Murphy 2007, 854). Schaap (2007, 9) states that to understand reconciliation politically we should regard it not as a *restoration* of previous relationships but rather as a *revolution*. In Schaap's understanding, reconciliation is not a '*recollection* of a prior state of harmony' but rather and '*invocation* of a 'we' as the basis of a new political order' (Schaap 2007, 9, emphasis in original). To see reconciliation as the creation of a new political order, Schaap, strongly influenced by Hannah

Arendt, relates political reconciliation to the concept of *constitution*. This is not so much a juridical constitution, but rather ‘the performative constitution of a ‘we’ through collective action and the constitution of a space for a reconciliatory politics in which the appearance of this ‘we’ is an ever-present possibility’ (Schaap 2007, 10). The concept of political reconciliation thus allows to accommodate generations who did not directly participate in conflict but who still suffer its consequences. However, young people’s focus on liberating the people in Timor Leste shows that even this process is potentially exclusive.

As I have shown, and as my research participants underscored, in an understanding of reconciliation as a process of return to the *status quo ante*, there is no place for post-conflict generations. Still, young adults did spell out to me what was necessary to avoid the relapse into conflict. And they also presented themselves as the actors who would achieve that. Only, they did not call this reconciliation. They called it ‘liberating the people’. When analysing the 2006 crisis with young adults, they often explained to me that what the crisis had shown, was that the people of Timor-Leste were not yet liberated. This meant that people were not educated about democracy yet and very easily influenced by leaders who used them for their personal and political gains, it meant that people were still poor while the divide between rich and poor grew and while the politicians were enriching themselves through corruption, and finally it meant that there was no spirit of Timorese nationalism and identification between the Timorese. Most of all, the present leaders had forgotten those who had fought alongside them, they had forgotten that their task in the country was not yet over and had become corrupted by power. According to my research participants, all these elements of a not-yet-liberated people taken together caused the predisposition for renewed conflict and the inflammatory potential which worried so many during the crisis of 2006.

But what would it exactly mean then, to *really* liberate the people? António, a student of Public Administration, stated that to liberate the people would mean to combat the growing corruption, to stop the creation of different economic classes, to divide the wealth of the country evenly, and to make it possible for the whole population to enjoy the benefits of being an independent nation-state. For Tiago, a student active in the Student Front, to liberate the people meant to fight against discrimination, to fight for a fair and sustainable economic system, and to teach people to valorise being Timorese. Liberating the people thus meant to set things straight which older generations had let go astray. However, the reason for wanting this was always described as the wish to go forward, to move away from conflict and, most of all, to avoid the relapse into conflict. This is why I regard young adult’s proposed ‘liberation of the people’ as a form of political reconciliation.

However, there was one peculiarity that always accompanied talk of liberating the people: it was always projected into the future, to the moment where they would be in power. The question what youth could do now, in the present, often remained unanswered or covered things like learning to become good leaders, preparing themselves for the task. The idea was very clear: we the youth, the future of the nation, will liberate the people and finish the struggle...just not quite *yet*. At the present moment the political arena did not yet belong to them and no-one listened to them because they had not participated in the resistance. Hence, the struggle of the past was about territory, and about political independence, while the struggle of the future is about economic equality, development, and valorisation of a Timorese identity. The struggle of the past belonged to the Portuguese and the Indonesian generations, while the struggle of the future would belong to the in-between-generation. Remarkable here, is that young adults coat their task for the future in a discourse of struggle and resistance. I argue that the profound link, in Timor-Leste, between (political) legitimacy and the participation in the independence struggle continues affecting how young adults interpret and construct their future responsibilities. In order to receive recognition, they have to frame their participation in a discourse of struggle. In fact, young adults have to formulate their actions as a *continuation* of the past struggle.

Hence, the liberation of the people would be youth’s contribution to the moving away from conflict and towards sustainable national unity (in other words reconciliation). However, this contribution is projected into a hypothetical future and coated in a language of resistance in order to create a legitimate space for the in-between-generation in the history of Timor-Leste that is still to be made. We could thus say that the in-between-generation is being excluded from the process of political reconciliation by the Portuguese and the Indonesian generations for the same reasons they were excluded from the CAVR reconciliation: they did not actively participate in the struggle for

independence. They are made by older generations into spectators, rather than actors, in the act of constitution – in the creation of a space where a new ‘we’ can emerge. Youth, as many leaders like to repeat at every possible occasion, are the future of the nation. They are, however, not given the chance to be its present. And so, as I started this paper with a quote from a young Timorese man, I end it with a quote, an outcry, from a young Timorese woman:

We need a space in which people from the Indonesian generation, the Portuguese generation and the youth can meet to discuss. After the land was liberated we now need a common vision about how to proceed to liberate the people. Because they say that the future of the nation is in the hands of the youth. But the youth have problems, and they cannot solve the problems because the roots of history still hold them tight. We need a space to sit together and share our experiences in order to develop one common vision, a vision about how to liberate the people (Ana, 26 years old, student and NGO worker, Dili).

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