

Violence and spatiality in the context of hybridity

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Introduction

Since independence, the extent and impact of violence against women in Timor-Leste has been a continuous theme in both policy debates and advocacy. According to the *Timor-Leste Demographic and Health Survey* published in 2010, 38 per cent of women in Timor-Leste aged 15 to 49 have experienced physical violence (National Statistics Directorate 2010, 229.) While these figures are now dated, and despite concerted efforts to change social behaviour, there is little clear sense yet that violence is abating. Further, given the destruction of institutions at the end of the Indonesian occupation, as well as the longer-term impacts of Portuguese colonialism and the focus of development since independence, the infrastructure to support women who experience violence remains extraordinarily sparse. This is reflected, at least to some degree, in the same survey that found that only four per cent of women who experienced violence sought help from the police, and only one per cent sought help from service providers (National Statistics Directorate 2010, 245).

This article draws from recent fieldwork and policy analysis to make arguments relating to the experience of domestic violence by married women in Timor-Leste, with a particular focus on understanding the intersection between spatiality and violence in the context of a hybrid societal order.² The first section provides a discussion of hybridity and how it intersects with different conceptions of spatiality. The second section then considers three different ways that spatiality informs both the conditions in which violence occurs as well as the ways in which preventative interventions are undertaken within the context of a hybrid order. While the ideas in this article are drawn from a range of research engagements, it is particularly influenced by the recent *Economic Dimensions of Domestic Violence* project, a study undertaken across three districts (two local communities/*suku* in each of Baucau, Cova Lima and Dili) across 2014-15. This project utilized a combination of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory rural appraisal techniques. Drawing from this, the purpose here is to extend on that initial work by considering why it is important to consider the different ways spatiality informs the exercise of violence by men against women on a large scale, and in turn, inform possibilities for change and intervention.

Hybridity and spatiality

Hybridity as an analytical device has become prominent in the social sciences and humanities as it has allowed for a greater identification of sources of power and identity that exist outside of modern political social structures and normative frameworks (see Boege et al 2009; Mac Ginty 2011; Mallet 2010; Richmond 2010). In this paper, hybridity is taken as a way of explaining contexts where multiple societal forms—or ‘life-worlds’ as I will refer to them in shorthand—are in evidence to the extent that it is difficult to claim that one has a clear dominance within a society.

A life-world speaks to the embedded assumptions within subjective views of the world, and which reoccur through patterns of practice. Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato describe a ‘life-world’ as ‘the reservoir of implicitly known traditions, the background of assumptions that are embedded in language and culture and drawn upon by individuals in everyday life’ (Cohen and Arato 1992, 427). This article follows in a similar sense, though the emphasis is more on the relationships between people as manifest in patterns of everyday practice. In terms of embedded assumptions, these include conceptions of spatiality, temporality, and epistemology, with this article concentrating on the former.

Used through this article are two heuristic devices, notably ‘customary’ and ‘modern’ life-worlds. As analytical categories they both cut across one another, are pronounced at different moments, with

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each drawing one into the other in different ways. Both are of such significance in Timor-Leste that it is difficult to claim one as having a particular dominance, and hence there is a ‘hybrid order’—where different practices of governance, societal regulation, authority, ritual, labour and forms of exchange each give rise to a sense of a different life-world (often cast discursively as traditional, custom, indigenous, local, or even ‘culture’ on the one hand and modern on the other). As analytical categories, there is nothing essential about these life-worlds. As I have argued elsewhere (Damian Grenfell 2015a, 2015b), there may be other possible categories of life-worlds that could be spoken of, and each change and evolve in relation to the other.

Various research has shown the importance of customary sociality in Timor-Leste. In turn, the need to find accommodation between customary and modern practices and norms surface in different ways, including with regards to violence against women. The following quote refers to the implementation of the Law Against Domestic Violence (LADV) passed by parliament in 2010, and the need for it to account for different life-worlds.

The current law prohibits customary justice processes from supplanting state justice in resolving domestic violence cases; however, given its prominence in Timorese society, it is a necessary component of a strategy to combat domestic violence. Thus, it is crucial to establish and regulate links between state justice and customary justice systems. While customary justice has weaknesses in the area of domestic violence, it has a role to play if appropriate mechanisms are put into place. A clear and legally established link between the customary justice and formal justice systems would serve to reduce confusion and increase the legitimacy of formal decisions while respecting and reflecting important elements of the Timorese cultural identity (Kovar and Harrington 2013, viii)

Here the customary and the modern (as state justice) are being called on to intersect in a way that sustains a process larger than either, though not as equal parts. Each is essential to and yet differentiated from the overall whole, and it is noteworthy in this instance that there is a sense of precedence given to the modern as the customary practices are being regulated via a ‘legally established link’. Before I turn to a discussion of violence, it is important to briefly spell out the concept of spatiality in the context of a hybrid order. Following Doreen Massey (2005), spatiality is understood as constituted in the relationship between social relations (or integration) and space.

First, that we recognise space as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny. ... Second, that we understand space as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity. Without space, no multiplicity; without multiplicity, no space. If space is indeed the product of interrelations, then it must be predicated upon the existence of plurality. Multiplicity and space as co-constitutive. Third, that we recognise space as always under construction. Precisely because space on this reading is a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed (Massey 2005, 9).

Following Massey, any society has a multitude of spaces. One way of thinking on a hybrid order is of a multitude of spatialities and—following the above discussion—these could include what we could speak of (at a generalised level) as customary and modern forms of space.

From this perspective, customary space in an East Timorese context could be characterised by inter-relationships in two ways; the genealogical and kinship connections between living people, and in turn their relationship with the ancestral domain. Space in this context may not be contiguous, will tend to incorporate sacred sites that are exclusive to a specific group, and is often bound into cosmological views of the world that are bound to origin. Modern space, in the alternative, is treated as secular, empty, transferrable, and homogenous. ‘Territory’ is a form of modern space, with rigidly articulated boundaries at its edges. These forms of space manifest in a range of ways, as for instance the debates and controversies surrounding different conceptions of land in Timor-Leste (Cryan 2015). If we apply this sense of heterogeneity of spatiality within the context of a hybrid order in Timor-Leste, we might speak of the dominance of the customary in certain areas (what may often be meant when people use

the term ‘rural’), but this does not mean that a modernity has no traction, and visa-versa for urban centres (typically aligned with a sense of the modern).

Spatiality and violence

By drawing on the concept of a hybrid order three arguments are made across this second half of this article. The first thinks through the effect of categorizing Timor-Leste as a patriarchal society. For the second, the concept of ‘double sovereignty,’ is introduced to show how patriarchy and customary sociality inform the control of space. The third point of discussion identifies how patriarchy continues—and in some senses becomes compounded—when women migrate internally within Timor-Leste. Each point demonstrates the dynamics between spatiality and violence, and how these are affected in contexts of a hybrid order.

Timor-Leste is frequently described as a ‘patriarchal society’, where a clear power imbalance between women and men mean, for instance, the latter dominate the allocation of social resources. While the participation of women is regulated on local governing councils (*konsellu suku*), and Timor-Leste leads the way in terms of participation of women in Parliament, this has not translated into addressing power imbalances in society more generally (Marx 2012; Cummins 2011). These are just the most obvious manifestations of power, however situated within a system of governance, and do not speak to the ways in which patriarchy plays out on a daily basis to form a generalised condition where there is acute inequality between women and men.

The issue here then is that while it is possible to classify Timor-Leste as patriarchal, it is incorrect to do so if it is done as a point to differentiate it from other societies.³ For instance, a recent article states in its opening sentence ‘Patriarchal traditions and a history of armed conflict in Timor-Leste provide a context that facilitates violence against women’ (Meiksin et al 2014, 1338). It sounds straightforward enough, but isn’t gender inequity, manifest through patriarchy, a key to understanding violence against women in any society? If it is considered that virtually all societies reflect significant patterns of patriarchy, perpetuated in different forms, then differentiating on these grounds appears to establish points of separation rather than opportunities for connection. To speak instead of ‘patriarchy in an East Timorese context’ may appear too subtle to be of significance, but it is argued otherwise here.

In the first instance, assertions of Timor-Leste as patriarchal per se and as an all encompassing categorisation risks missing the agency of those who struggle against it (and the subsequent counter spaces), and opening pathways to build spaces for solidarities (including mutual learning) across societies. But more importantly here, rendering Timor-Leste as patriarchal is used as a legitimising device for a particular form of intervention into spaces that would otherwise be largely inaccessible; to enter communities, to speak about sex and sexuality, violence, crime, household finances, and to bring forth questions of spirituality, faith, the regulation of the intimate body, procreation and so forth.

To come back to the hybrid order schematic above, such a form of intervention occurs on two levels. In one way, the modernity that underpins the intervention often correlates to the way that practice is matched to conceptions of space. That is, interventions are designed to occur within a modern space; so activities are geared to a public sphere, into a civil society, through the state, localised public spaces and so on. There are adverts on TV for ‘*Feto Fantastiku*’ for instance, and posters in the offices of local leaders (*sede suku*). And yet after more than a decade, there is little compelling evidence that these efforts have positive effects as they effect discourse within that modern spatiality. But in addition to this, such a rendering allows for interventions to cut into other forms of spatiality, including the customary. This is, in many respects, where the intervention is at its most powerful, and helps us understand why discussions of violence in Timor-Leste often orient towards ‘culture’. The customary in this sense is both a differentiator as well as being a site that the outsider is otherwise excluded from. Debates endlessly gravitate towards local culture as being the cause for violence (the exchange process at the time of marriage, commonly termed *barlake* in Tetun, being an excellent example). Yet the question is not asked of whether and how modernity has sought to genuinely mitigate patriarchal structures—let alone both direct and structural violence against women—in societies that are deemed as modern (the US, Portugal, UK, Australia and so on).

³ What I refer to as a ‘rendering’, a use of discursive power that distinguishes the intervened from the intervener.

The argument in summary here is that by rendering a society patriarchal, and grounding that patriarchy significantly in culture (by which people actually mean customary practices), interventions into spaces where access may be otherwise prohibited become legitimised. Spatially, Timor-Leste becomes a site for treatment, but which demands a very low level of reflexivity from the intervener. Power flows one way, intersects with local populations at particular moments, and then has an effect of challenging the most ‘inside’ norms. In turn, resistance to ‘gender’ can be a response (as a foreign/*malae* idea) and can increase barriers to change rather than assist them.

The second argument pertaining to spatiality and violence in a hybrid order relates to what I will refer to as a ‘double sovereignty’. By this term I mean the establishment of a patriarchal ‘domestic sphere’ in tandem with a customary spatiality that makes it very difficult for outside interventions by service providers, police, even family, to provide assistance to a woman who is experiencing violence.

The first part of this ‘double sovereignty’ relates to how land and households, and control thereof, reflect patriarchal structures in different ways. The recently published *Economic Dimensions of Domestic Violence* (2015) report suggested that women were often bound to a ‘domestic sphere’ that made it difficult in cases of domestic violence for them to leave, or seek assistance, as economic structures constrained mobility and established sets of power relations. This can be seen in various ways, one being the very significant tendency for women to care for smaller animals that remain close to the household, with men typically caring for animals located further from the home (horses, cows and goats) (Grenfell et al 2015, 47). Such a division of labour might be defended in terms of not wanting to put women at risk, or the difference between physical strength required by different forms of labour. The suggestion here, however, is that the naturalisation of such a division is central to controlling the mobility of women, and that such assertions perpetuate structures of patriarchy.

The second aspect of the ‘double sovereignty’ is the way in which immediate sovereignty—of land and household—is defended from external intervention. This does not just mean foreigners or external agencies, but from people external to a specific family or household. There is constant reference to matters being kept ‘within the household’, generally meaning either an immediate familial domain (*familia rasik*) or a more extended familial unit bound by genealogy and affinal relations, and ordered through association to sacred houses (*uma luliks*). This argument can be extended out to take account of an ancestral domain that is seen to exist in coterminous relation with the living, but the key aspect here is the way in which customary conventions (*lisan* or *adat*) are seen to regulate households in ways that separate one extended familial unit from another. ‘According to our *adat*’ is a common preface to sentences, with the ‘our’ denoting differentiation. Hence, familial units are bound into different forms of sovereignty that are exclusive from one another and resistant to outside intervention.

The effect of this form of ‘double sovereignty’ in terms of violence against women is profound, in that it both limits the ability of women to engage in terms of seeking help, and that it is difficult for outsiders to intervene. In the reverse, other family members can be very hesitant to draw the outside world in. A range of other factors may contribute to this (for instance, views on violence), and it is this dynamic that the LADV seeks to counter by making domestic violence a public crime. In other words, the modern system of law is used in an attempt to change the relationship between the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ world, giving legal legitimacy to draw the former into the latter.

The third example to discuss here in relation to spatiality and violence in the context of a hybrid political community relates to internal migration. In Timor-Leste, there are high levels of migration from rural areas to the capital, Dili. This *may* mean a woman shifts from one site of customary spatiality to one where modern forms are in dominance. Coming back again to the *Economic Dimensions of Domestic Violence* report, it is the shift to such spaces that can compound, rather than alleviate, the experience of violence. In terms of economic independence—an important consideration in leaving an abusive relationship—the report found that women in Dili had far fewer opportunities for economic activity, and moreover, frequently re-cast themselves as having responsibility for the domestic sphere.

The significantly lower number of income-generating activities carried out by women in Dili, alongside the shift in perceptions that women’s role is solely that of ‘housewife’ rather than ‘farmer,’ could suggest an increase in women’s dependency as urbanisation increases. During participatory rural appraisals and focus group discussions in Dili, women tended to emphasise women’s role as primary caregiver and were more likely to state that the woman’s role was in the home whereas the man’s role was to generate income. This type of statement was rarely heard in the more rural settings (Grenfell et al. 2015, 54)

Compounding this further is the possibility of migration to Dili through marriage, and the way this can distance women from familial networks and forms of spiritual support. Here then, the urban space offers a higher propensity for violence despite the fact that police services, courts, and support organisations (Alfela, Pradet, Fokupers) tend to be far more concentrated in the capital and have better reach into other urban centres. If we understand urban space as being modern in dominance, we return to where we finished with regards to the first point above; that modernity requires far more interrogation in terms of ensuring an alleviation of violence against women.

Conclusion

In summary, this article has sought to identify how a hybrid political order, and an analysis of different life-worlds within it, can work in different ways to exacerbate the experience of violence by women. The complexity of the hybrid order may allow for moments of navigation away from violence, though here the argument has been that—at least in terms of spatiality—that the intersection of different life-worlds and shifts across them can also, and at times inadvertently, compound patriarchy and violence, not least in a society such as Timor-Leste that is undergoing acute social transformation.

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