Out of the Ashes: Destruction and Reconstruction of East Timor

Abstract for chapter 13

Author: Fiona Crockford

'Reconciling worlds: the cultural repositioning of East Timorese youth in the diaspora' focuses on the personal and political dilemmas of young Timorese outside of East Timor. The focus is particularly on diasporic Sydney, where young East Timorese face the possibility of an imminent return home.

The East Timorese have to deal with the difficulties of reconciling the different worlds of 'home' and 'away' with the pressures and responsibilities involved in negotiating the expectations of Timorese families and communities, both at home and in exile. These are expressed by the notion that they will, indeed that they should, return and help rebuild an independent East Timor.

Keywords

'nineties', 'seventies', asylum-seekers, diaspora, exile, hierarchy of suffering, the struggle, youth

Reconciling worlds: the cultural repositioning of East Timorese youth in the diaspora

Fiona Crockford

It is Saturday 13 November 1999, a world away from Dili, as East Timorese in Sydney gather to commemorate the eighth anniversary of the Dili massacre. As usual, St Mary's Cathedral in the city's centre provides the focal point for the public mourning of the scores of young Timorese who were massacred at Santa Cruz cemetery on 12 November 1991. For Sydney's East Timorese community, St Mary's has become a familiar landmark, part of a diasporic landscape upon which they have faithfully reinscribed their collective trauma and memory over their years in exile. And yet, this year's commemoration of martyred youth has a remarkably different feel. For the first time in twenty-four years, Timorese here join their compatriots at home to celebrate a fragile peace and an unfamiliar freedom. Inside the cathedral, the congregation even looks different. Many familiar faces are missing. As East Timor transforms from a context of war to one of 'reconstruction' and 'reconciliation', some long-term exiles have already returned, as they always said they would, to help rebuild their shattered country. In their place are a large number of Timor's most recent refugees, airlifted out of the post-referendum tumult and chaos by Australian Interfet troops. They look bewildered, still in shock, as if they have not quite grasped the suddenness of their uprooting.

Outside, on the cathedral's forecourt, the atmosphere is convivial. Everywhere, the talk is of return – who's gone, who's going, confessions of nervousness and apprehension. And then, a moment of irony as young Timorese asylum-seekers are presented with a mock 'Certificate of Citizenship'

on behalf of Australia's Aboriginal community. The gesture of solidarity aimed at unsettling the authority of the Australian state, also anticipated the Australian government's withdrawal, on 19 November, of an appeal against the earlier Federal Court decision in favour of the asylum-seekers. Far from signifying a victory for the asylum-seekers, the withdrawal may be seen as a stalling strategy while the government secures legislative changes to immigration. The new legislation – primarily aimed at stemming the flow of 'boat people' to Australia – will impact upon Timorese applications for refugee status, some of which have been pending for almost ten years. Most of the applicants are young. They are concerned that their applications will be rejected given that East Timor is now free and they no longer have grounds for claiming refugee status. In the meantime, they must continue to wait, living their lives in a permanent state of temporariness.

This chapter focuses on the personal and political dilemmas of young Timorese, particularly in diasporic Sydney, now faced with the very real possibility of an imminent return home; with the difficulties of having to reconcile the different worlds of 'home' and 'away'; with the pressures and responsibilities involved in negotiating the expectations of Timorese families and communities, both at home and in exile, that they will, indeed that they should, return and help rebuild an independent East Timor. For young Timorese asylum-seekers in Australia,¹ who currently await the outcome of convoluted political and legal judgments that will determine their fate, these issues are especially potent, but they are provocative issues, too, for Timorese youth who have lived here longer and who feel more established in their identities as 'Australian-Timorese'.

The identities young Timorese have constructed in exile, underscored as they are by mythologies of home and return, are profoundly unsettled in this current period of uncertainty and instability within East Timor itself. Bereft of the very thing that has given Timorese exile its meaning and coherence – the struggle for independence – notions of home and belonging are in flux, as complex and conflicting emotional attachments and ambivalences now emerge to destabilise pre-ordained itineraries that insist on 'return'.

¹ I am referring specifically here to East Timorese who have sought political asylum in Australia during the 1990s and not to the most recent refugees who arrived following the referendum in August 1999.

The struggle for independence gave Timorese lives, however they might have been lived, definition. That struggle was one thing. The struggle for 'survival' as a new nation now suddenly looms as a different reality altogether. Young Timorese in Australia privately express anguish at the difficult question of shared responsibility for it; at the prospect of 'starting over'. *Now we can go home, but do we really want to? Now we can return, but to what? Normality?* In the madness of post-independent East Timor, as aid agencies and carpetbaggers scramble for opportunity and scarce resources, what place will there be for latecomers, even those that are supposed to belong?

As young Timorese ponder these questions, there is, for some, a sense of resignation, but even this may mask a deeper trepidation since the questions themselves may be too confronting, almost unspeakable in their contravention of parental and communal expectations. Refusing the rhetoric of 'return' may be interpreted within the wider Timorese community as unpatriotic, the ultimate betrayal, and may in fact confirm the corruption of Timorese youth by an impoverished and self-centred Australian culture. Outside East Timor, in diasporic Sydney at least, older generation Timorese lament the 'loss of culture' among the young.² Here, young Timorese are criticised for being too 'Australianised', for 'forgetting' the struggle, for being apathetic, apolitical, undisciplined, too materialistic. It is, indeed, their very adaptation to the cosmopolitan contexts in which they find themselves which is perceived as problematic.

Yet the experience of exile can also provide a space of creativity and critique which can lead to a critical self-awareness. Arguing against the revival of Portuguese language in East Timor,³ Ivete de Oliveira,

² Indeed, the 'loss of culture' among the young is a recurrent theme among older Timorese, both within and outside of East Timor. On a visit to Timor in 1998, older people I spoke with frequently expressed their deep dismay at the declining moral order and loss of public 'etiquette' since 1975, contrasting their own childhood experiences with what they saw as a culturally and morally impoverished upbringing under the Indonesian system.

³ This issue has caused deep resentment among Timorese youth both inside and outside of East Timor. For young Timorese educated within Indonesian schools and universities, the Timorese leadership's cultural preference and nostalgia for things Portuguese appears deeply suspect. In Baucau and Los Palos, Timorese youth have refused to attend Portuguese language classes, apparently rejecting the imposition of alien cultural values they perceive as meaningless to their current needs (Ceú Brites, pers. comm.).

a young Timorese anthropology graduate educated in diasporic Java, is quoted in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (5/11/99) as saying:

We think it is more useful for us to use Indonesian ... I think the older leaders have a strategy of keeping the young people down ... Maybe they are scared we want to join the leadership. We're very angry about this.

Her comments echo the concerns of a young, Canada-based, Timorese activist, Bella Galhos. Speaking at a conference in Sydney in April 1998,⁴ she had argued that the range of political identifications then available to Timorese youth were too limiting given the changed, and changing, contexts in which they lived. In particular, she argued for the need to educate young women politically, in order to equip them for effective participation in formal political processes. She suggested that young women's reluctance to engage publicly in the political domain was partly due to cultural constraints that placed strict limits on their roles and behaviours. Thus, she had called for Timorese leadership to adopt a more flexible and democratic approach that would encourage the active inclusion of all young Timorese in decision-making processes.

Her criticisms caused considerable tension among Timorese participants at the conference. In keeping with the general tone of the conference, which took 'struggle' and 'solidarity' as its twin themes, others had kept the discussion within the frame of the nationalist struggle – in terms of a conflict between a Timorese 'us' and an Indonesian 'them'. Galhos, on the other hand, had interpreted the conference brief more broadly, raising questions concerning basic human rights and the democratic management of difference 'within' the Timorese community. For a community still engaged in unrelenting political struggle, Galhos's probing critique may almost have broken a taboo. Yet, as Timorese now begin to unravel and dismantle their colonised (Indonesian/Portuguese) selves and resituate themselves as citizens of a new nation, the democratic management of difference will become ever more pressing. Such important internal cultural debates, however, are too starkly framed in terms of inter-generational schisms. Cultural tensions do not solely exist along generational

⁴ Bella Galhos was speaking as the co-ordinator of the Canada-based East Timor Alert Network (ETAN) at the Asia Pacific Solidarity Conference hosted by the Democratic Socialist Party, in a workshop entitled *Solidarity and Strategies for Victory in East Timor: Youth Perspectives*. She is now the Executive Director of the East Timor NGO Forum in Dili.

lines. Indeed, the focus on inter-generational conflict within the wider East Timorese community tends to obscure the complexity of social dynamics and overlooks the diversity of experience among Timorese youth itself.

Of the more than 1500 Timorese asylum-seekers currently in Australia, the majority are young people who have arrived since the 1991 Dili massacre. Indeed, many are survivors of the massacre. Their own socialisation as Indonesian-speaking Asians marks them off, not only from older generation Timorese socialised in a Portuguese colonial context, but from other Timorese youth born and/or educated in diaspora. As such, newer arrivals tend to draw a distinction between themselves as 'nineties' Timorese and young 'seventies' Timorese who have lived in Australia since 1975. Indeed, this difference is remarked upon by 'nineties' Timorese living elsewhere in diaspora. For example, young Timorese interviewed in the United Kingdom (who mostly sought asylum at foreign embassies in Jakarta in the mid-1990s) referred to their difference from Lisbon-based 'seventies' arrivals.

Conversely, 'seventies' Timorese youth have their own perspectives on and acknowledge their difference from 'nineties' Timorese who have been socialised in a completely different cultural, historical and, therefore political, context. While some defer to the 'authenticity' of 'nineties' Timorese experience and acquiesce to a perception of themselves as privileged, even spoilt, others are more defensive, sensitive to criticisms or judgments that may place their own Timoresehood, and experience, in question. And yet, these two groups are not, in reality, distinctly bound off from each other. In the Australian context, 'seventies' Timorese may include 'eighties' arrivals who may have translocated via Portugal, for example. More critically, other social relations may cut across these demarcation lines to reveal common experiences, according to gender, class, ethnicity and so on.

It is true that young 'nineties' arrivals articulate a sense of being closer to the struggle than 'seventies' Timorese youth and that, as such, they not only provide a vital link between home and diaspora but that they actively embody it. Recalling traumatic events, for example, scars on the body may be used to endorse testimonies. The physical body itself then becomes a site of remembrance whose authority cannot be denied: I am the evidence of the brutality of the Indonesian military regime. Among 'nineties' Timorese youth who have been active in the resistance and who continue to be involved in campaign work, there is

also a sense of frustration with other Timorese youth in diaspora who are not active in, or who may have chosen to distance themselves from, the struggle, that they do not know real suffering and hardship. Many of these young people refer to their own lives in the diaspora in terms of 'struggle' and 'sacrifice';

I do not feel psychologically free ... I realise life is a struggle that we must face and fight for our lives wherever we are. We must be courageous and suppress our feelings in order to keep going (*Doli*, Sydney, July 1999).

At the same time, they characteristically subordinate their own personal suffering and sacrifice to the trauma experienced by those 'at home';

Psychologically it's awful because we're a long way from our families ... but it's not as bad for us as for those in Timor. Sometimes we feel guilty living [in diaspora]; we can go to movies, we are free ... (*Dino*, Dublin, September 1999).

Young Timorese have to think about [the struggle] in general, not personal terms. If we compare our plight [in diaspora] with Timorese in Timor, especially Falintil, we have a different situation. They face the enemy. For us it's psychological pressure. It's different for exiles since⁷⁵. They have become more assimilated (*Kupa*, London, September 1999).

There is a discernible 'hierarchy of suffering' here which would seem to be integral to the construction of 'Timorese-ness'. Prior to the Indonesian invasion of East Timor in 1975, there was little sense of a collective East Timorese identity. If it is true that the invasion served as a defining moment in the development of an East Timorese self-consciousness, when the people of East Timor began to recognise themselves as a true collectivity, united by the shared experience of their traumatic confrontation with Indonesia, then being a 'real' Timorese must partly be predicated on 'suffering'. This suffering is not just hierarchised, but spatialised in such a way that it must be continually re-inscribed in diaspora as a necessary condition of exile, with the notion of 'home' as an abiding destiny. Resident in Australia, but 'not-here' to stay,⁵ the East Timorese community has routinely engaged in processes of 'remembering' and 'reliving' the past, most notably in their marking of evocative dates in their recent history and by re-enacting traumatic events (such as the Santa Cruz massacre).

⁵ I borrow the expression from James Clifford's discussion of diaspora discourses and the condition of simultaneous 'separation and entanglement' (1994:311) diasporic experience implies.

For young Timorese who have grown up here there is often a deep sense of responsibility for these unexperienced events:

[my family have] continuously reminded me of the suffering of my people, reminded me of my identity, and to take full advantage of the opportunities offered here in Australia, so that one day I can return and help build East Timor (Santos 1996:25).

For some young Timorese, then, the 'weight' of responsibility has served to create a link to a home they barely remember or have never seen. Notions of 'home' and return may now appear less simple than they once did but, as permanent residents in Australia, they will have some measure of choice about how and when they return. For young Timorese asylum-seekers, however, as 'return' looms more imminently on the horizon, 'home' is no less simple as a concept and as a reality and choices are far more circumscribed. While many speak of their longing to be reunited with family and with the land, there is much to reconcile. There is the disjuncture between the physical homes they remember and those they will return to. There is the estrangement of the experiences of home and diaspora; the disentangling of lives lived in exile and the reassembling of lives as 'returnees'.

It is one of the tragedies of their specific displacement that young asylum-seekers have sacrificed their education, both in East Timor and in universities across Indonesia, only to be excluded from tertiary education within Australia. The Australian government's refusal to grant asylum-seekers permanent residency means that they have been classified as 'international students' and therefore expected to pay substantial fees for tertiary education. It also means that they have been unable to fulfil the specific task ascribed them by the leadership, namely, *to educate ourselves in order to empower ourselves with knowledge* (Exposto 1996:34). Their unresolved status here means that many continue to rely on Red Cross funding, or find employment where they can. Their options are limited. Some have undertaken TAFE vocational and English language courses, assisted by Catholic church organisations. Some currently work in unskilled and unstable jobs in factories, or as cleaners, or gardeners, as carers in nursing homes. As such, there is a general feeling of ambivalence and lack of preparedness for the 'return home'.

When asked how they feel about returning most will say that of course they *want* to go home but talk of deferral in order to finish, or to get, an education. Indeed, among 'nineties' Timorese youth, this is repeated

like a mantra throughout the diaspora, from Dublin to London, to Lisbon, to Sydney:

There is no doubt ... that [we] have the commitment to go back. There's a reason that some of us stay longer because [we] want to study and [we] want to get experience ... We're all concerned to return. The main concern is what we bring to East Timor. The people there need help. What kind of help are we going to give them? I can go there and build houses – this is the easy answer. But, in ten years' time, people [will] need people who have skills to transfer, to develop East Timor ... There's nothing to avoid – you have to go back (*Arsenio*, London, October 1999).

We want to go back, but we want to go back *with* something (*Ligia*, Sydney, November 1999).

I have to finish my diploma ... I want to bring something to my mother's grave [at Santa Cruz cemetery] (*Doli*, Sydney, November 1999).

I haven't got any specific skills at the moment. I'm concerned about what is my profession. Because people will say 'you left the country for six years and what have you done there?' And I'm not going to say that I have been campaigning, because everybody's fighting for their country, not only me ... I would say most people who want to go back to Timor are people who left after 1990, or late 1980s. But from 1975 ... I think the youngers [sic], they will go to Timor to visit, not to stay. They can say 'I'm Timorese' but they don't have to go back ... I think that this will also be the work of the independent government of East Timor, how to convince these people to go back. You have to create possibilities. It is also the problem of reconciliation. The problem of re-encountering people again, Timorese in Portugal, in Australia, with Timorese who are in East Timor ... (*Boaventura*, London, October 1999).

As the last respondent suggests, after years of learning to survive as Timorese inside and outside of East Timor, and of coping with the different kinds of suffering those experiences entail, there is the additional problem of reconciling the different experiences – and perhaps 'cultures' – of home and exile; of war and peace. To fully grasp the realities of young Timorese lives, it seems necessary to develop an understanding that brings into focus, not only the complex relations of power that may operate to marginalise youth, but also the social relations that cut across those relations, to reveal commonalities. Underpinning the tensions and contradictions of their experiential diversity are fundamental

'Biar Hanggus Asalkan Merdeka' – 'Let them burn us out, just as long as we are free'; graffiti on an East Timorese house destroyed during the mayhem of September

Above: Refugee camp in Oecussi, marked with CNRT posters

Left: Reconstruction - young men carry away burnt timber as they begin to rebuild

Right: *Xanana Gusmão*
speaking to a gathering
in Baucau

Below: 'People's
Citizenship for East
Timorese' – East
Timorese at a gathering
in Sydney

questions of identity. The challenge for a truly democratic leadership will be how to affirm and encourage a collective sense of East Timorese identity, while acknowledging the validity of the multiple dimensions of 'Timorese-ness'.

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