

‘This is Me’: Exploring Narrative and Trauma within Women’s Memories of the Indonesian Occupation of Timor-Leste (1975-1999)

Hannah Loney, Hannah Loney, PhD candidate, School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, the University of Melbourne, Australia

This is the worst thing that has 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 keep my revenge and hate inside my heart. This is the worst thing for me. At the time I did not care about death at all, whatever was going to happen to me could just happen ... I also told my husband: if you want me, ok... if you don’t want me, it’s ok... This is me.¹

In late May 2012, in the reflective garden of the *Comarca Balide* (Balide Prison) in Dili, Timor-Leste – an ex-prison that is now a heritage site and home of the *Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação de Timor-Leste* (the Timor-Leste Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation – CAVR)² – Maria, a fifty-two year old East Timorese woman, told me her story.

Maria was in her first year at the Technical School in Dili when the Portuguese commenced decolonisation processes in Portuguese Timor in April 1974. Like many young East Timorese, she was swept up in the revolutionary climate and began to participate in student associations, eventually joining the women’s arm of the nationalist party, FRETILIN (*Frente Revolucionária de Timor Leste Independente* – the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor). However, not long after FRETILIN unilaterally declared independence in November 1975, Indonesia invaded and occupied the territory for the next twenty-four years.

Maria had fond memories of the years that she spent living in the mountains with the resistance movement after the invasion, until she was shot and captured in January 1979. As a result of her and her family’s involvement with FRETILIN, Maria was subjected to ongoing interrogation and harassment by the Indonesian armed forces in the subsequent period. It was during the course of one of these interrogation sessions that Maria was sexually violated by an Indonesian military commander. While the East Timorese voted

¹ Interview with Maria, 23 May 2012, Dili, Timor-Leste.

² For a brief history of this ‘sacred building’, see Emma Coupland, *The Comarca Balide Prison: A ‘Sacred Building’* (Dili: Post-CAVR Technical Secretariat, 2008).

overwhelmingly in favour of independence in a United Nations supervised referendum in August 1999, the violence of the occupation and the brutality of Indonesian rule is still in living memory for many East Timorese women today. Now that independence has been achieved, Maria says that she feels lighter, and that she can sleep better. But her experience of being sexually violated is something that she will never forget.

Throughout the period of Indonesian rule (1975-1999), the East Timorese people lived under a militarised regime, in which the direct application and the threat of violence was commonplace. The Indonesian military used violence not only to punish those who opposed the regime, but as a strategy of control to terrorize the population into submission, and to demonstrate the overarching power and will of the Indonesian state. Mass human rights violations were perpetrated by the Indonesian military and their auxiliaries in the form of civilian killings and disappearances, forced displacement and famine, detention, torture and ill-treatment, and sexual violence.³ Individuals, families and communities were targeted because of their perceived relationship with the resistance movement, but the Indonesian military regime also implemented structural forms of violence, constructing and maintaining informal systems of surveillance and social control that implicated the entire population. For East Timorese women, these structures of violence involved a specifically sexual dimension: the threat of rape, sexual slavery, sexual torture, and harassment.

One day, Maria was taken from her home in Lahane, Dili, to be interrogated at the Intelligence Task Force (*Satuan Tugas Intelijen* – SGI) office in Colmera. Maria described and showed me how, after the interrogation session, she was tied up by her arms and legs in the back of a jeep and driven out to Tasi Tolu, on the outskirts of Dili. On the way there, the military commander violated her. There is a cultural stigma attached to victims of rape in East Timorese society that is revealed in Maria's story which, combined with the disturbing memories that the event evokes, made it very difficult for her to narrate.⁵ Maria was unusually direct in her telling of the event, suggesting perhaps that she had told it before. Other East Timorese women use different strategies to speak about experiences of rape, such as skipping over the event and leaving a noticeable gap in their story,

³ Part 6: The Profile of Human Rights Violations in Timor-Leste, 1974 to 1999, in Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste (CAVR), *Chega! The Report of the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste* (Dili: CAVR, 2005).

⁵ The following conclusions are based on my own interviews with approximately fifty-five East Timorese women as part of a broader PhD project that explores women's experiences, memories and perceptions of life under Indonesian rule. However, similar strategies can also be seen within Rebecca Winters' collections of twenty East Timorese women's stories. See Rebecca Winters (ed.), *Buibere: The Voice of East Timorese Women* (Darwin, East Timorese Support Centre, 1999).

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commenting on the widespread nature of the practice but insisting that it never happened to them, or using deflection by speaking about another woman's experience in great detail. There is also an assumption of implied meaning within East Timorese discourse when describing situations where women are often raped – such as when returning from the mountains, during interrogation sessions, or while in prison – and hints such as revealing that one's clothes were taken away, or being left alone in a room with interrogators. Others may construct a scenario from which they escaped at the very last minute due to luck or their own determination, often commenting that it was better to die than to be raped.⁶

Partly because of these discursive strategies and the cultural stigma, it is difficult to obtain accurate and reliable data regarding sexual violence that was perpetrated against East Timorese women during the Indonesian occupation. The most wide-ranging and thorough investigation conducted into this form of violence, the 2005 CAVR Report, documents 853 instances of sexual violence ranging from 1974-1999, the most common of these being rape.⁷ However, due to under-reporting, the Commission suspects that the total number is likely to be several times higher, “in the thousands, rather than hundreds.”⁸ Women were targeted because they were thought to have a connection to the resistance movement, were the targets of proxy violence, or were deemed to be non-compliant with military demands. For Maria, it was a combination of these factors. These crimes were not committed purely as forms of individual punishment, nor for the personal gratification of the perpetrators. Instead, the practice of rape within occupied Timor was perpetrated with the aim of demoralising and dehumanising the East Timorese people, terrorising the population, and cultivating an atmosphere of pervasive political and social control.

For Maria, the recounting of her experience of sexual violence was not presented within the flow of her life story. Instead, it was not until we had begun discussing Timor-Leste's independence and the interview was coming to a close that she dipped back into the past and told me about her more intimate encounters with the Indonesian military. The majority of her narrative, details of events and experiences of life under Indonesian rule, were in the register of the everyday. She spoke of her family's difficulties, the daily

⁶ For a relevant comparative study, see Annie Pohlman's comments regarding Indonesian women talking about rape and sexual assault in the context of the violence that followed the 1965 coup in Indonesia. See Chapter Seven: Sexual Violence against Women during the Killings and in Detention, in Annie Pohlman, “Ashes in My Mouth: Women, Testimony and Violence During the Indonesian Massacres of 1965-1966,” PhD thesis, The University of Queensland, 2011.

⁷ Chapter 7.7: Sexual Violence, Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste (CAVR), *Chega! The Report of the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste* (Dili: CAVR, 2005), 108

⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

struggle of trying to maintain relationships and provide nurturance for her children in the context of ongoing conflict and turmoil, as well as the physical and emotional experience of living under a militarised regime.⁹ Maria articulated the way in which violence was folded into everyday relations between the Indonesian state and the East Timorese people. It was through this type of narrativisation that Maria's experience was given shape. In turn, Maria's life narrative sheds some light on the rape culture that was implemented by the Indonesian armed forces.¹⁰

Perhaps as a result of the context of the telling, cultural and emotional sensitivities, or the continuing difficulty of voicing such a traumatic event, Maria's experience of sexual violence was presented as somewhat outside her narrative: it was portrayed as an exceptional experience. Recent human rights scholarship attests to the widespread and systematic nature of sexual violence under the Indonesian occupying regime.¹¹ Yet within the personal narratives of individual women, these violations are almost *unspeakable*: "too terrible to utter aloud", yet they "refuse to be buried."¹² When she did narrate this experience, Maria was very clear on her own subject position, using both her voice and her body to show the harm that was done to her.¹³ She needed to

⁹ There are strong parallels here with other women's narratives during times of conflict, such as Fiona C. Ross' comments about South African women's testimony during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1995. See Fiona C. Ross, "Speech and Silence: Women's Testimony in the First Five Weeks of Public Hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission," in *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering, and Recovery*, ed. Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Margaret Lock, Mamphela Ramphele and Pamela Reynolds (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2001), 250-79.

¹⁰ Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith have written about life narratives as 'one of the most potent vehicles for advancing human rights claims'. In Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 1.

¹¹ Amnesty International, *Women in East Timor and Indonesia: Standing against Repression*, AI Index ASA 21/51/1995, 13 December 1995; Torben Retbøll, "The Women of East Timor," in *East Timor: Nationbuilding in the 21st Century*, ed. G. Jonsson (Stockholm: Center for Pacific Asia Studies, Stockholm University, 2003), 11-31; Miranda E. Sissons, "From One Day to Another: Violations of Women's Reproductive and Sexual Rights in East Timor", Melbourne: East Timor Human Rights Centre, 1997; George Junus Aditjondro, "Violence by the State against Women in East Timor: A Report to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Including Its Causes and Consequences", (Fitzroy, East Timor Human Rights Centre, 1997); George Junus Aditjondro, "The Silent Suffering of Our Timorese Sisters," in *Free East Timor: Australia's Culpability in East Timor's Genocide*, ed. Jim Aubrey (Milsons Point, : Random House Australia, 1998), pp. 243-65; and Kiyoki Furusawa, and Jean Inglis, "Violence against Women in East Timor Under Indonesian Occupation", in *Common Grounds: Violence against Women in War and armed Conflict Situations*, ed. Indai Lourdes Sajor (Philippines: Asian Centre for Women's Human Rights, 1998), 293-300.

¹² Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (London: Pandora, 1997 (2nd ed.)), 1.

¹³ Veena Das' discussion of the complex relationship between body and language in voicing violence with regard to Indian women's experiences of the Partition of India in 1947 and the

assert her lack of shame associated with the experience. “This is me,” she said, and insisted upon the credibility of her story: “I swear ... I tell it clearly.”¹⁴ Sexual violence was a *supplement* to Maria’s narrative at this particular telling.¹⁵ Her traumatic experience can be seen as simultaneously an inseparable and inescapable part of Maria’s identity and sense of self, yet also something that is outside of and in addition to it. The traumatic experience cannot simply be consigned to the past, but is relived endlessly in Maria’s present.

Maria’s recounting of this experience and her positioning of it as both within and external to her life story reveals one of the ways in which East Timorese women understand and memorialise past traumatic experiences in the present. The voicing of this event also sheds light upon the potential of the oral history interview, through its acts of listening and bearing witness to experiences of violence, to incorporate these memories within a more public historical narrative of experiences of daily life under military occupation.

massacre of the Sikhs in 1984 has been helpful here. See Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁴ Interview with Maria, 23 May 2012, Dili, Timor-Leste.

¹⁵ I have found it useful here to employ Derrida’s notion of the ‘supplement’. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976).

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