'Filling wounds with salt': the pathologisation of trauma in Timor-Leste

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Following dinner with some East Timorese friends in Dili mid-2011, one of the younger women started to tell her story of 1999 and of the violence and destruction inflicted against her village in the mountains along the East-West Timor border. Aged just ten years old, she was forced to flee with her family to avoid the attacks of pro-Indonesian militia while her family's house was looted and burned. Following her re-telling of these events, the conversation turned to the return of East Timorese who had sided with the Indonesians, and she was asked how she would feel about reconciling with those who had burned down her family's houses, or tortured or killed her relatives. 'If I saw those people who did that', she replied, 'I would tie them down with ropes and cut them up, but I would keep them alive. I would take a stick and poke holes in them, in their arms and legs and body, and pour turpentine and salt in their wounds'.

Given the failure of many peace-building operations to ensure a durable peace, it is perhaps not surprising that the prospect of retaliatory violence in post-conflict societies is identified as a security and development concern.[1] The kind of sentiment expressed by the young East Timorese woman above can be taken as just one example to justify the idea that those who were on the receiving end of violence may pose as much of a threat to long-term peace as do former perpetrators of human rights abuses. In this article I however want to critique what is in effect the securitisation of trauma and contest how suffering has commonly been approached in such circumstances. Writers such as Vanessa Pupavac and Michael Humphrey refer to a 'therapeutic security paradigm', namely the logic that depicts (post)conflict societies as 'traumatised' by their experiences of war and hence prone to partaking in irrational and self-perpetuating cycles of violence.[2] Drawing on their critique of such an approach, it will be argued here that such a framing is highly problematic in that it lends itself to a pathologisation of conflict-afflicted societies, effectively undermining people's entitlement to autonomy in favour of the therapeutic intervention of outsiders. Like Pupavac, in making this argument I do not wish to diminish the impact of war or the suffering associated with emotional ill-being, but instead agree with her contention that the therapeutic security paradigm pathologises emotions of unhappiness, anger and frustration, which might better be seen as legitimate and understandable responses to given circumstances.[3]

Implicated in the therapeutic model is an understanding of war as necessarily causing psychological trauma, which if left unresolved poses a threat not only to individual wellbeing but also to societal security and long-term peace-building.[4] Thus we see commentators refer to the East Timorese as suffering the problematic effects of 'trauma' at either the level of the individual[5], or as a society as a whole[6], with the traumatisation posited to be a risk factor for 'explosive violence'.[7] In turn, it has been said that trauma has caused aversion to electoral competition[8], and has been implicated as a cause of the socio-political crisis of 2006.[9] Fear of people's potential desire to execute violent revenge is seen to legitimise claims that the East Timorese need to 'work through' the trauma of decades of war[10], and in particular the violence of 1999.[11]

However, critics of the therapeutic model caution against the medicalised discourse of 'trauma', disputing the allegation that distressful events will inevitability provoke what Western psychology has defined as a 'trauma response', and the supposed implication that this will necessarily cause dysfunction. In positing that trauma is both a consequence and a risk factor for the perpetration of violence, the therapeutic model is reductive as it 'tends to demean the human psyche to a reflex mechanism'.[12] A person's motives are reduced to the level of pathological psychology and individual retaliation, a simplified equation: was traumatised, will traumatise. The implication is that individual or community resilience that may mitigate adverse responses to violent events become undervalued, and alternative motivations for actions are deflated of their political content. However war and conflict are experienced socially, not only in the psyche, and this may be even truer in predominantly customary societies such as in Timor-Leste where to a significant level the communal weaves the fabric and meaning of life. To diminish the social and political in favour of the internal and individual is at once disempowering and disingenuous, working against the very strength of tightly knit communities.

It is not just that the effects of pathologising trauma can undermine the potential for local recovery, but there are also broader problems in this framing of analysis which can make such disempowering prescriptions more likely. For instance, Humphrey believes that the therapeutic model of security and governance arises from a more general understanding that 'new wars' occurring in the periphery are politically meaningless 'expressions of culturally embedded behavioral irrationality' that are not amenable to mediation or resolution.[13] One common way of distinguishing between 'old wars' and 'new wars' is to suggest that the former were driven by forward looking projects of ideology aimed at societal improvement, while the latter occurring in the increasingly globalised post-Cold War period, are regressive and based in exclusivist identity politics.[14] However as Duffield asserts, in contemporary conflicts (of which he includes Timor-Leste) 'the situation on the ground invariably proves to be more complex and ambivalent than the images of regression suggest'.[15] Indeed the fight for East Timorese independence might better be understood as the culmination

of a long-overdue decolonisation struggle, more relevant to old wars than new. And yet some commentators continue to express their surprise to see Indonesian statues still standing in Timor-Leste[16], or Indonesians living within communities treated with friendliness[17], suggesting that a stereotype of ethnic forms of identity such as that found in the construct of 'new wars' inaccurately frames their interpretation of the conflict.

The dichotomisation of new versus old wars suggests a difference in the legitimacy and rationality of conflict, a point that can in turn serve to justify the intervention and governance by outsiders, supposedly bearing prescriptions for local malady. Thus in 1999 the widespread destruction and removal of most of Indonesia's overarching structures of governance in Timor-Leste led to a perception of the nation as a dysfunctional 'blank slate' or 'empty shell', a perception that legitimised the international intervention as fulfilling the role of a functional and remedial rescuer.[18] This is in accord with Humphrey's caution that within the therapeutic model 'Peace becomes the achievement of experts rather than the achievement of negotiations and agreements by a political community'.[19] That the East Timorese resistance held political aims and that indigenous social structures stood strong despite the occupation and preceding colonisation was seen by the early United Nations intervention as of little relevance to the state- and security-building project.[20] Sidelining the political aims of groups and individuals, or painting those aims as the product of 'trauma', serves to empower the outsider and undermine local autonomy, raising issues of ownership and legitimacy of peace- and nation-building projects.

The sidelining of local lifeworlds is a theme discussed elsewhere in this publication, but here it is useful to question the validity of the therapeutic model and its projection of one psychological lens through which all people in all places supposedly experience their suffering. Critics deny the universality of the Western bio-psychological model of suffering and trauma and draw attention to alternative ways of understanding health and wellbeing.[21] This is certainly of relevance to customary life-worlds in Timor-Leste, whereby as Andrew McWilliam observes of Fataluku culture, health is conceived of as socially embedded and relational, rather than biological and individual, and that these reciprocal relations extend to the embodied, spiritual and ancestral realms.[22] Accordingly, it should be unsurprising that locals are reportedly less inclined to seek assistance from health care professionals for emotional ill-being than they are to turn to customary healers who are able to assist with the restoration of balance.[23] Indeed as McWilliam notes, 'biomedicine for the most part can only alleviate symptoms of disease, not its cultural causes which so often lie in the moral dimensions of social transgression'.[24] While they may serve a need for some, counselling programs according to Western psychological models of trauma are likely to be less important to locals than are the autonomous efforts currently being undertaken to rebuild *uma lulik* (sacred houses), lay the dead to rest and pay tribute to ancestors who died in the civil war and resistance.[25]

This is not to say that the East Timorese are in unified opposition to modern medicine and Western approaches to psychology, or that in some cases these models wouldn't be relevant and responsive. Nor is it to say that East Timorese desire solely customary solutions for the conflict that beset their nation or more localised challenges. Indeed the complex layering of customary, traditional and modern ways of being in the world is evident in the perceived complimentarity of customary practices of reconciliation with modern practices of formal justice. As Kent found in her evaluation of the Community Reconciliation Program as run by the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR), while the reintegration and reconciliation of low level perpetrators through largely customary local practices was for the most part well received, prosecution through the formal justice system was reported by nearly all respondents as being the appropriate and necessary process for perpetrators of serious crimes.[26]

However, instead of formal justice what has been pursued in Timor-Leste to date has been predominantly an attempt at pacification through reconciliation. As Pupavac observes, truth commissions and war tribunals have been promoted in post-conflict interventions as contributing to social catharsis, instruments of 'mass psychotherapy'.[27] In the absence of a local judiciary, the establishment of the CAVR in Timor-Leste was seen to have a role in transitional justice, clarifying past events and justified by the potential for stopping retaliatory cycles of violence.[28] The cathartic role of truth and reconciliation commissions is contestable, with some locals feeling that the processes of testifying and reintegrating low level perpetrators were serving to re-open wounds, particularly in the absence of formal justice and material reconciliation.[29] Again questions can be raised about the cultural appropriateness of psychological models that encourage revisiting and re-working through trauma rather than alternative coping mechanisms.

At the societal rather than individual level, the critique of therapeutic governance problematises the way in which truth and reconciliation commissions, such as CAVR, are used to legitimise the rule of new governments through their recognition of past abuses, claiming to bring closure to the old regime and the effects of violence.[30] Jose Ramos-Horta and Xanana Gusmaõ in particular have promoted reconciliation over prosecution for both crimes committed during and prior to 1999, and more recently the crisis of 2006 and the assassination attempts of 2008.[31] As Kingston has commented, Timor-Leste is in a difficult geopolitical situation, lacking the resources or international backing to push for the extradition, trial and punishment of Indonesian perpetrators of abuses under the former regime.[32] However the pursuit of reconciliation, no matter how pragmatic, is problematic when it comes at the expense of local desires for justice.

In such circumstances reluctance to let go of the past does not necessarily indicate a psychological blockage impeding rationality and functionality. The frustration and anger expressed in response to perceptions of impunity need

not be read as signifiers of pathological maladjustment. Rather, if indifference to local demands continues and perceptions of impunity grow it is likely that feelings of anger will be fostered, irrespective of previous experiences of violence or 'trauma'. What's more, it is troubling that as Grenfell notes pushing 'reconciliation without justice' has the effect of 'put[ting] the onus almost exclusively onto a community that has already suffered enormously'.[33] In effect, pressure is exerted downwards onto local communities who are expected to open their wounds to reveal their trauma or confess their sins, to appreciate the soothing salve of therapeutic reconciliation, and to passively accept the failure of the state and international community to deliver on their expectations for justice, enhanced material security, and greater self-sovereignty in their new nation.

In light of the importance of the social and political, it is important to revisit the vignette at the opening of this piece. As Humphrey and Pupavac contest, a danger of the therapeutic security paradigm is that it seeks to 'manage conflict therapeutically by adapting the individual to fit in with their war altered environment rather than change the environment to match individual expectations'.[34] In the narrative at the opening of this article then, rather than expressing her individual traumatisation, it could well be that the East Timorese friend was through her storytelling making her claim on the social territory, on what's right and wrong in how people live together. Accordingly, the expression of her own pain and desires to inflict pain back is not necessarily proof of her damaged psychology, but instead is a social demand that the world be set right. Instead of trying to adapt her—and others like her—to fit into prescriptions designated from above, perhaps it is the system which needs adaptation and challenging, with greater attention to the social and political than the individual.

Endnotes

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