The changing nature of resistance: East Timor on the international stage

Hannah Lenoy

On 7 December 1975, Indonesia launched a full-scale land, sea and air invasion of the former Portuguese colony of East Timor. It took several years, and the loss of hundreds of thousands of civilian lives, before Indonesian forces gained control over the territory. On 26 March 1979, the Indonesian Government declared East Timor “pacified” and established the militarized state structure that would administer the territory until it was established as a new territory of Pope John Paul II on 12 October 1999, that was documented by the country’s past violence and human rights abuses, mostly with these features, many East Timorese activistsConstancio Pinto and Naldo Rei recount aspects of this work, such as the couriers of letters, cigarette tapes and images between the溴 and the outside world, and the protection of Resistance leaders such as Xanana Gusmão in the so-called “seas of fumes.” There are many reports documented of how the clandestine youth lived in and used this city as a site of activism. parallel to the military project on the sea voyage in 1999 of the only asylum seeker boat to have reached Australia from East Timor, has led me into discussing with my interviewees their experiences of living in Dili in the 1980s and 1990s. Throughout the late 20th century, the central veins of the city were a military operations centre. The changing nature of opposition towards independence and political change. The common enemy was included in the CNC’s list. A historic hotel built in the 1960s where youth for National Development (JDN) runs East Timorese non-government organisation, Youth for National Development (JDN) runs historical walking tours for visitors to Dili.

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Gender equality and its feminist rationale are based on individual human rights while in customary or communal societies, status and rights are relational to others in their community. Communities are made up of ‘paribata’ persons or ‘dividuals’ without individual interests or rights. Women or men cannot have equal rights and their privileges depend on their social role. The idea of the paribilan person in customary societies has been challenged by the long-term influences of colonialism, Christianity and capitalism. It does go some way to explaining the lack of traction for gender equality in customary societies.

The island of Timor is a bridge between the colonial legacy and the post-colonial century, merging the indigenous languages and cultures in Timor reflect both forms of society. This diversity, and the mixing of matrimonial and patrilineal ethnolinguisit groups makes understanding gender relations in Timor-Leste more complex. External influences make this more so. Centuries of Portuguese colonialism and Catholic proselytising was abruptly replaced by a brutal 24-year military occupation by neighbouring Indonesia (1975-1999), which was immediately followed by the interventions of UN peacekeepers and the international aid sector. Each regime imposed gender values and relations with little recognition of what previously existed because of an assumption of cultural superiority.

In my research, I have sought to discover how gender relations of the indigenous societies of Timor shifted and adapted to foreign values. I have observed how they resist or absorb the more recently introduced imperative of gender equality. Traditionally, Melanesian women were not required to form alliances or marriages. Rather, they perceived as incompatible with introduced, modern ideas of citizenship, democracy and equality. Yet, “the complex entanglement of social relations based in precolonial systems with those of colonialism, Western education, new economic forms and Christian adherence belies this simplistic division into intrinsic and introduced.”

Violence against women or sanctioned relational practice?

A Melanesian woman is imagined as acting in terms of the interests of others rather than her own individual ones. Strathern explains that Melanesian women were willing and even convinced “to go against their own interests” because of their outlook as a partible person embodying “the interests of others”.

This provides insight into women all around the world tolerating domestic violence; limiting their individual welfare for the sake of keeping families together and not creating further discord in extended families or clan relations. There are other reasons too, but this is a central concern. Domestic or gendered violence can be explained in this common crisis everywhere in the world, but particularly in customary societies where individual rights cannot be assumed, such as in Timor-Leste.

Indigenous gift exchange or trading in women?

In customary Timorese society marriage exchange and relations between the families or clans of the bride and groom are regulated by relations referred to as barlakes, which today feature in an estimated half of all marriages.

A series of gift exchanges which signify the formal transfer of a bride dowry and bride price, are described by feminists as dehumanizing to the level of a commodity, but the embodiment of those offering it. Keane explores the ontological assumptions that underpin the conflicting understandings of ritual gift exchanges in northern Eastern Indonesia. She argues that women are treated as commodities, akin to slavery, because they assume that the people and ‘things’ exchanged in these practices are equal, based on their own culture of capitalism and “the alienating effects of commodity exchange”.

Yet gifts should never be construed as a payment for the bride’s family are expected to reside with their family’s financial and social obligations. The dark side of this is the treatment of those unable to gain status as slaves, which has a long history in Timor. The informal adoption of poor children among extended families who are treated like indentured servants has resulted in contemporary cases of the physical abuse of children.

The local Timorese women’s movement members are the only ones fully equipped to work in this ‘gap’ between cultures because they are the only ones who know how to navigate between the modern and customary. These are the women who oversee the inclusion of the gender equality clause in the constitution and the introduction of the domestic violence law with the collaboration of international feminists. These acts of solidarity are the foundation on which to build gender equality.

Notes

2 Ibid., p.5.
3 Ibid., p.6.
11 Niner, S. 2017. Reflection on the special gender stream: 2017 Timor-Leste Studies Association Conference, Australian Journal of South-East Asia Studies 10(2):275-279. Timorese independence struggle, as well as the modernisation of social relations based in precolonial, Christianity and capitalism, it does go some way to explaining the lack of traction for gender equality in customary societies.