Victoria Kumala Sakti[1]

"It's like a Big Family Feud!" Researching Social Trauma and Repair through the Lens of Emotion and Culture

Introduction

It was the Summer of 2013, and I was in the thick of data analysis for my doctoral research on how individuals and communities were rebuilding their lives after the Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste. The "messiness" of in-depth ethnographic data was daunting, so I sought guidance from my dissertation supervisor, Professor Birgitt Röttger-Rössler. Over the next couple of hours that afternoon, we sat in her tastefully decorated office and discussed my findings, questions, and dilemmas. The process felt somewhat like an initiation ritual; the senior anthropologist welcoming their junior to the art of making sense of the world.

My doctoral project aimed to understand how people remember and deal with collective experiences of violence and how they express, manifest, and perform the accompanying emotions (Sakti 2018). In Timor-Leste (also known as East Timor), communities were still grappling with the long-term effects of violence. When I conducted fieldwork, over a decade had passed since the territory voted for independence in 1999, leading to massive violence and displacement. The transitional justice mechanisms implemented in the country, such as truth and reconciliation commissions and tribunals, had already completed their mandates. These mechanisms produced truth-finding reports documenting the harrowing extent of the occupation and successfully facilitated public hearings and community reconciliation meetings for less-serious crimes. However, survivors and the families of victims of grave human rights abuses, such as extrajudicial killings, torture, and rape, were left feeling a deep sense of injustice. These mechanisms failed to bring perpetrators of serious crimes, namely members of the Indonesian security forces and their East Timorese militias, to court and punish them accordingly. The indictments they issued, although still active, are today largely ignored by both high-level planners and local perpetrators by deliberately opting to remain on the Indonesian side of the border. It was against this background of impunity that my research was situated.

The perpetrators' continued refusal to take accountability to this day has left behind enduring consequences to people's psychological, social and cultural worlds, rupturing the social fabric holding societies together. Local perpetrators often knew the people they harmed through social or close kinship ties. Despite the assumption that experiences of war, collective and political violence evoke emotions such as anger, fear, grief, guilt, and shame among the actors

1 Victoria Kumala Sakti is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the 'Ageing in a Time of Mobility' Research Group, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Germany. Contact: sakti@mmg.mpg.de

involved, the people I encountered during fieldwork rarely articulated these through words. Instead, they were preoccupied with fulfilling their everyday needs or those of their ancestors. The dead's needs were at times equally pressing, and families would mobilise various resources to fulfil them through ancestral rituals. What puzzled me at the time was that these rituals would also be attended by East Timorese people who, in 1999, fled to Indonesian West Timor but never returned and were living among alleged perpetrators of the past violence. I observed the spouses of alleged local perpetrators crossing state borders to participate in these rituals. Would there be no bad feelings or rejection, I thought to myself. I described this observation to Birgitt. Specifically, I spoke about how this unfolded within a Meto-speaking community dealing with the aftermath of a village massacre. The massacre had created massive 'bad deaths', a notion prevalent in Southeast Asia referring to an untimely and violent death that must be ritually treated. Birgitt asked me:

> "These bad deaths would have cultural consequences to the family members and community if not dealt with, is that right?"
> "Yes, a bad death is harmful in that it can cause illnesses, hardships and even deaths in the family. That is why the dead's family [lineage house] must get together and resolve any pending mortuary obligations," I responded, and added,
> "But families face difficulties fulfilling these delayed obligations because the perpetrators have refused to take accountability and compensate for the deaths."
> Birgitt nodded and carefully gathered her thoughts, "If one bad death creates difficulties for one family, imagine the scale of massive deaths and the resulting family conflicts across the country. It's like a big family feud!"

Among the many insights I have gained through my collaboration with Birgitt, her observation about the web of conflicts across familial ties remains key to my research endeavour. It resonated not only with my interest in the relatedness, belonging, and intergenerational memory, but also made it clearer to me how examining emotional exchanges, silences, and boundary-making practices within these kinship ties could help me understand how people actively remember past violence.

This chapter contributes to a volume that celebrates Birgitt's long and productive career in Social and Cultural Anthropology. Specifically, it recognises her pioneering work in contemporary emotion research within and beyond Germany. In what follows, I provide a brief context of the study and the implications of unresolved conflict among Meto-speaking communities living in Timor-Leste and Indonesia. I then discuss the usefulness of an anthropological approach to emotion in researching social trauma and repair, and illustrate this by discussing local responses to unresolved dispute, and how these may include ongoing practices of inclusion and exclusion. The chapter closes with some concluding remarks.

An East Timorese Story: Disruptions to the 'Flow of Life'

As one of the youngest countries in the world, Timor-Leste has prevailed prolonged and violent transfers of power. The Portuguese colonisation lasted for 450 years until 1975, the Japanese briefly invaded the colony during the Second World War, and Indonesia, which directly neighbours the territory, invaded and illegally annexed it between 1975 and 1999. Official truth-finding documents reveal that this dark period resulted in a death toll of 102,800–183,000 civilians (CAVR Executive Summary 2005).

Timor-Leste's path to independence began with the resignation of the Indonesian authoritarian president, Suharto, in 1998. His successor, B. J. Habibie, offered a referendum for the East Timorese people, which the United Nations (UN) facilitated the following year. The two options offered were: (1) greater autonomy within Indonesia, or (2) independence from Indonesia. However, during the period leading up to the vote, Indonesian security forces and their East Timorese militia groups terrorized local populations. When the referendum result was announced in favour of independence (78.5 per cent), they retaliated with widespread violence and mass killings across the territory (Tanter, Ball, and van Klinken 2006). They also forcibly displaced around 250,000 people into Indonesian West Timor.

Today, former militia group members and their immediate families live in displacement camps and relocation sites in West Timor. Along with tens of thousands of other East Timorese people who choose to stay in Indonesia, they make up the diaspora group across the border (Damaledo 2018).

One of the main case studies of my doctoral project examined the aftermath of a massacre that occurred in Bobometo village, located in the highlands of the East Timorese district of Oecussi. This district is an enclave belonging to Timor-Leste, located entirely in West Timor, Indonesia. The Bobometo massacre was one of the most heinous scenes of human atrocities during the extreme violence in 1999. At least 80 primarily young men were killed by local militias for having voted for independence. The perpetrators were militiamen who mainly originated from neighbouring villages, and who shared social or kinship ties with their victims.

East Timorese kinship and political relations are structured through marriage-created alliances. Marriages place the unifying families in lifelong and asymmetrical relations of power with one another. These alliances are categorically divided into house groups, in which one 'gives the gift life' (progenitor) through their female members marrying into the house group that 'receives the gift of life' (progeny).[2] The progenitor group is socially superior to the progeny. A person's membership in a house group ends only after death and when their house members complete mortuary obligations (also called debt) to their progenitor group. In the case of the massacre, the deaths were left unresolved while the perpetrators remain living with impunity across the border. Delayed mortuary obligations and the nature of the victims' violent deaths ruptured what was most at stake for the Meto, namely the balance and maintenance of what anthropologists have described as the 'flow of life'. While an open path between alliances is signi-

2 Anthropological literature on Meto classification for marriage alliances adopts the male centric terms, namely 'wife-givers' (*atoin amomet*—male people) and 'wife-takers' (*atoin amafet*—female people) to convey the way the Meto prominently use them. This is not to suggest, however, that women are passive agents in marriage (McWilliam 2002, p. 168).

fied by the flow of words, gifts, and services between the two parties, bad relations are signified by blockages. These blockages, caused by unresolved bad deaths, caused tensions between and within house groups, grief, fear of ancestral punishment, and victims' families' tireless efforts in demanding compensation from the Timor-Leste government.

Approaching Social Trauma and Repair

One of the challenges I encountered early in my research on emotion, violence and memory was the observation that people rarely articulated their feelings or inner experiences related to past sufferings unless prompted. At the same time, existing studies on mental health in Timor-Leste reported a high prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression among survivors of violence (Silove et al. 2009; Rodger and Steel 2016). These studies, conducted primarily by Western-trained psychologists and mental health researchers, relied on a predominantly discursive approach to individual suffering. While these studies are important and helpful insofar as they also attend to local constructions of psychosocial responses (Le Touze, Silove, and Zwi 2005; Palmer, Barnes, and Kakuma 2017; Sakti 2013), I argue that the privileging of discourse or narrativization of individual suffering, and the tendency to draw causal linkages between the traumatic event and the psychological responses, misses the broader significance that is being communicated through these local constructs, especially the collective and social relational effects of violence.

Birgitt makes a similar assertion in her *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* article on emotion and culture, where she points out the cognitive bias of approaches that classify emotions as exclusively cognized processes of somatic experiences. She argues that the bodily dimension of emotion is also the product of cultural modelling (Röttger-Rössler 2002: 152). It would be insufficient, then, when considering the case above to rely on the mind/feeling dimension of people's emotional responses to unresolved disputes and 'bad deaths' (while conflating these with Western-derived notions of trauma) without anthropological scrutiny. Her article outlines a significant theoretical framework of emotion as an anthropological subfield, calling anthropologists interested in this theme to go beyond the argument of 'relativism' and to reveal the cultural and social components of emotions and their meanings and local logics (Röttger-Rössler 2002: 159).

In my work on social trauma, I understand emotion as biocultural processes, which connects cultural meanings and bodily feelings. Emotions are shared intentionally and with volition, and the effect of this sharing of emotions strengthens the bonds within groups (Röttger-Rössler and Stodulka 2014; Markowitsch and Röttger-Rössler 2009). This understanding directed me to attend to the ways conflict-divided communities continue to repair their relationships with one another, their ancestors, and the land long after the violence has ended. My findings show that the process of social repair after mass violence is not a linear one; it can often be emotionally taxing and fragile as conflicted parties continue to assert their multiply-located senses of belonging. The section below illustrates this point through a discussion of how Meto-speaking communities dealt with the aftermath of violence through rituals targeted at removing blockages to 'the flow of life' and the boundary-making practices that impacts on people's (im)mobilities across borders.

Resolving Disrupted Paths through Ritual Practice and (Im)Mobilities across Space

Blockages in mortuary rituals put at stake the core values underpinning Meto societies, namely the kinship alliances and the flow of exchanges between them. According to local logic, these blockages must be removed, in order to ameliorate the emotional distress and the perceived cultural consequences for persons, kinship ties, and communities. Unless the source of blockage is removed, the spiritual threats arising from the bad deaths remain to exist for the deceased's families and future generations. At times, these threats—particularly those associated with ancestral punishment—include inimical consequences to the body (prolonged and mysterious illnesses) and even death. Importantly, blockages need to be removed before any form of life-giving rituals can take place. In the case of the Bobometo massacre, social trauma manifests in the breakdown of existing kinship alliances and the 'closing of doors' for potential future marriages between the two villages mentioned above.

Christina, a good friend from Bobometo explained that since the massacre, marriages between individuals coming from their village and those from the perpetrators' origin place must first remove the barrier set by the unresolved dispute in 1999. In addition, the marrying parties must request permission from the dead victims through ritual speech. The reopening of disrupted paths is called *mnenut lalan* and involves paying a fine, exchanging sacrificial animals, and carrying out ancestral rituals. Christina describes the process:

> "In Tumin, if someone wants to marry someone from the village of Passabe, they have to first consult with the dead victims (*vitima* in the local language). They burn candles for the dead and the dead will let them know if it's okay or not to marry,"
> "How do the dead victims tell them it's OK or not?" I asked curiously.
> "They tell us through dreams. It could be that the dead visits the couple who wishes to marry, or their relatives. For instance, my cousin wanted to marry a woman from Passabe (where most perpetrators originated). After they burned candles to talk to the (dead) victims, one aunt dreamt that the victims did not give their blessings because the woman from Passabe was closely related to one of the killers. The couple ended up not marrying. In cases where victims are OK with the marriage to proceed, they demand one *inu* strand (ritual beads) to open the path. The person marrying in from Passabe, either male or female, must pay this fine to the marrying party from Bobometo. If not, the dead victims won't allow them to marry."
> "But what happens if they marry anyway?"
> "They shouldn't ignore the [dead] victims. If they do, *ooouuu…* they will get punished by their ancestors. This could mean if they marry, they may never have children. If they do [have children], that child will often fall ill or even die [from unnatural causes]. The couple that married might also get ill, or their family members will", she said while shaking her head.

Christina's explanation was similar to what I have learned from my key informants, which includes the local king (*Usif*) of Bobometo who resides in Oesilo. He told me that the closing of future paths between the two villages indeed stems from the 1999 massacre, but the practice of setting up barriers is a normative customary response toward violent and unresolved disputes.

In Meto oral tradition, the genre used to facilitate conflicting parties in overcoming a problem is called *lasi bata*, which Neonbasu (2011) elaborates as such:

> [This genre's] moral force is so strong that all the opponents should obey the decision made in this problem-solving process. In local discourse, the process of *lasi bata* can be called "problem resolution" (*tafèkan lasi*), or referred to as *laès piot*. However, *lasi bata* needs more attention to make a thorough decision—based on many witnesses—to understand the core of the problem (p. 88).

The possibility of reopening disrupted paths and reconciling suggests that social ruptures among Meto villagers resulting in lasting transformations are not new. Communities have had their own ways of responding to disruptions in the flow of life, and although the scale of bad deaths and perpetrators' refusal to take accountability overwhelmed local ways of dealing with rupture, some conciliatory mechanisms remain in place. However, the necessity and urgency of death-related rituals, however, created emotional distress for the massacre victims' families. They diverted their claims for compensation to the East Timorese government but the slow bureaucracy and lack of transparency of the process created further distress. These families dealt with desires to fulfil long-delayed mortuary debts to the dead loved ones and ongoing pressure from their progenitor group. During fieldwork, my interlocutors used the term "thinking too much" to describe the emotional responses to their situation (Sakti 2013). In response, they mobilised the house group members to raise resources and come together for rituals aimed at appeasing and seeking guidance from their ancestors. As mentioned above, these family members included those who now lived among local perpetrators in West Timor.

As my research brought me to displacement camps and relocation sites in West Timor to interview East Timorese interlocutors whom I met at these rituals, I became interested in the role of cross-border visits to the bettering of relationships in this context. I found that while the legacies of the occupation have divided families geographically and through differing political ideologies, their lives continue in conjunction with one another. East Timorese families living in displacement in West Timor actively sought to maintain connection with extended families and their places of origin. Those who travelled to Timor-Leste for a return visit did so by either crossing the border illegally or with an Indonesian passport. Their travels depend on financial capacity, which for many of my interlocutors was a major hindrance, and regulations, timing, and quality of control at the border. Importantly, cross-border travels were only possible for people who were not involved in past violence. Those who were involved or suspected of having been involved in past crimes feared arrest at the border and social punishment. These men avoid returning but send goods and money for family rituals through their wives. My host mother in West Timor described her illegal border crossings as necessary as she did not have the money to pay for a passport and visa. She said, "I would go there whatever the risk because our family needs our help. If we show up, they know that we didn't forget them and the ancestors, and that we still care."

These return visits gave those living in West Timor the chance to show that they care and, thus, be included in familial rituals that (aside from the organisation stress) brings joy and feelings of acceptance. Others who choose not to return engage in diasporic practices that maintain their sense of identity. Some light candles for their ancestors at local cemeteries or communicate with relatives over time via telephone and messaging services. Others return to their places of origin through memories. My findings illuminate these translocal practices as a

form of local resilience, and that ongoing connections (be they real or imagined) between East Timorese societies of these two regions in general, and conflict-divided families in particular, after the re-establishing of national boundaries play an important role in processes of repairing social relations. This is an open-ended process that can continue to shift or solidify, as I am now learning through my post-doctoral research project, as people grow older in displacement (Sakti 2020, 2022).

Concluding remarks

Allow me to return to the scene that opened this chapter. Birgitt's keen observation at the time when I felt lost in reading my data helped in assuring me that I was on the right path, which was to follow the conflict and peace in people's relationship with one another, their ancestors, and origin places. Importantly, it helped me reflect on the meanings behind what people do not always articulate through words when they respond to memories of violence.

The aftereffects of massive violence endure not only in the body and psyche of the individual but also in the larger social body and cultural frame. Thus, when researching social trauma and repair, it is pertinent to identify what the societies under exploration understand as constituting the fabric of their society and what is at stake in dealing with memories of violence. Social trauma threatens collective identity and, as result, arouses strong negative emotions, such as shame, disgust, anger and guilt. Ethnographic research on the subject of emotion and conflict or war-related experiences can be directed at revealing the social and cultural components of emotions and how they are understood, shared and negotiated at the personal, interpersonal and group levels (including the nation-state). Exploring emotional exchanges at the level of social bonds further points to how behaviour and narrative are shaped to maintain or strengthen the quality of relationships. Birgitt's contribution to the anthropology of emotions has positively shaped my scholarly trajectory, as it continues to do for the many colleagues who, like me, were lucky enough to meet her.

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