Culture, Gender and Post-colonial Nation Building

Women in the Narrative of East Timor

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INTRODUCTION: GENDER, INTERSECTIONS AND HISTORY

With this essay I would like to discuss a few selected readings of political and theoretical texts on gender condition in Southeast Asia in general, and in East Timor in particular, trying to establish their main concerns and guidelines. I intend to examine some values related to traditional female roles, as well as the strategies used to recognise women in political and social fields, that are conventionally characterised by male dominance. However, the empowerment of women—both at the individual level and, on a broader scale, in society and the nation—results in different ways, at different periods of history, as a consequence of cultural, economic, political, religious, social, and also individual circumstances. In this essay I argue that localisation and globalisation—with its associated discursive productions—do not form a dichotomy: localisation is a significant dimension of globalisation, in which local knowledge provides a dynamic tension with global knowledge. The critical readings conducted in the course of this study led me to conclude that the search for local concepts ultimately generates new concepts, which encourage the challenge of epistemological and phenomenological adaptation when doing gender studies under a genuinely interdisciplinary and intercultural perspective.

The construction of gender is a fluid and contingent process, characterised by challenges, ambivalence and changes, so that any approach must be located within the network of ideological and material contexts of a nation, which is by definition a dynamic spatial-mental territory. In a post-colonial world and specifically in the post-colonial space of East Timor, the intersections of past and present, of the global and the local, of war and peace, define the guidelines to explore the negotiation and evolution of gender concepts. On the one hand, studies on the experience, understanding, representation and daily renewal of gender issues examine the relationship of these factors with the different types of social hierarchy acting in a given region. On the other hand, those studies reveal how different forms of consciousness and power elect bodies and sexualities as instances of validation and accomplishment of political, economic and cultural transformations. The study of emergent gender issues has, therefore, to consider the existing connections between processes of gender construction, ways of negotiating everyday life, diverse forms of power and their related discourses, and the material forces that influence individuals, communities,

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nations, and transnational arenas (see: Sarmento, 2007, 2010).

Contemporary reality emphasises the contrast between different colonial formations in Southeast Asia, particularly in the way religion, ethnicity, and nationality-related ideologies have influenced the experience and notions of gender in the post-colonial territory. Post-colonialism is understood here as synonymous with the current situation of former Western colonies, now located somewhere between the colonial legacy, the attempt to reach a national consciousness, and the politics of both armed and cultural conflict, in which different groups are trying simultaneously to set their own identities, always under the strong influence of global hegemonies. Post-colonial societies, according to Achille Mbembe, are composed of a plurality of spheres and arenas, each with its own logic, and yet likely to be interwoven with other logics, in a continuous improvisation and negotiation (Mbembe, 1992, p. 5). This constant need to negotiate and construct identity underlies life in post-colonial Southeast Asian countries, self-defined as developing, multi-racial and multicultural societies. Under these conditions of mutability, political and cultural conflicts subsist within ideological contexts associated with religious orthodoxies, invasive forms of capitalism, and post-colonial nationalism, which communities express in a polyphony of narratives (Chatterjee, 1993). This network of post-colonial ideologies influences the conditions, characteristics and possibilities of negotiation and redefinition of gender related issues.

Western obsession with taxonomy and static controllable categories has described colonial and post-colonial third world women as a whole, with a set of unifying and explanatory characteristics. But in reality, this epistemological conception is simultaneously disqualifying, sexist and racist, and produces archetypes that fail to explain the material and immaterial diversity of the biography and social experience of most human beings. It is therefore essential to proceed with methodological precaution against universal categories, in order to reveal the existential diversity of women. Women, as human beings, live in history and culture and are themselves producers of self-conditioning facts and artefacts. Therefore, history has to be reassessed, not as a static product of memories of domination, but as a dynamic process where different women, through self-determination, with different methods, understandings and rhythms, act and react, while resisting being objects (Mohanty, 1997, p. XVI). Listening actively to the narratives of women from Southeast Asian transitional territories—like East Timor—requires translation, equivalence, dialogue and negotiation resources, in order to find points of convergence and divergence with dominant knowledge, and thus build and implement concrete and specific strategies. But it is not enough to announce that dialogue is necessary; it is absolutely mandatory that dialogue actually happens and includes everybody, without discrimination, with justice and responsibility. One has to imagine other times and other spaces and be available to exercise the hermeneutics of suspicion on the alleged universality of Western thought (Cunha, 2006, p. 179).

THE NARRATIVE OF EVERYDAY PRACTICE

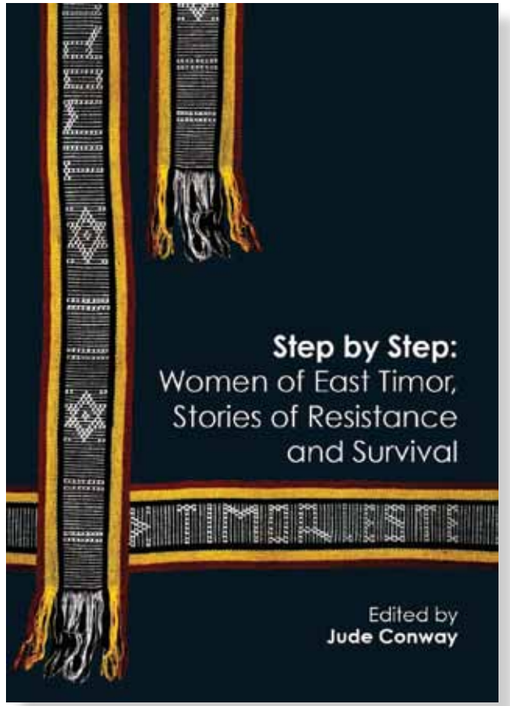
What does an account of everyday life have to contribute to the current discourse of gender studies in Southeast Asia and particularly in East Timor? Is everyday life similarly or differently manifested at the peripheries and semi-peripheries of the capitalist world-system? How are the possibilities for emancipation inscribed in everyday practices, relationships and events of specific individuals and groups, which may take the form of new potential for autonomy, dissent or accommodation? What implications do recent transformations and old continuities in the nature of everyday life hold for the analyses of subjectivity, gender, ethnicity, identity and sexuality?

André Lefevere developed a theory of cultural grids, based on the works of Pierre Bourdieu and his concept of cultural capital. In Lefevere's schema, a kind of grid system can be mapped out that shows the role and place of texts and discourses within a culture and the role they might play in another culture. Such a system would clearly show that texts undergo all kinds of variations in status both inter-temporally and inter-culturally, and would help us to explain some of the contingencies of those changes (Bassnett; Lefevere, 1998). Along these lines, while discussing gender in translation, Sherry Simon points out that those spaces that were once identified as universal (such as the great humanist tradition, the canon of great books, the public space associated with democratic communication or the model of culture which sustained the ideal of citizenship) have now been exposed as being essentially

expressive of the values of the white, European, middle-class male (Simon, 1996).

This is why life stories, case studies and interviews with women of every age, education and background must be considered as seriously valuable materials for an 'inside' study of gender in Southeast Asia, capable of generating encompassing theories. The previously silenced voices of these women (non-white, non-European, non-middle-class and non-male), and the narratives they produce, have to be given a new role and status, in a modern transnational, interdisciplinary cultural grid: small voices instead of great books, the space of home instead of the public space, that is to say, the narratives of everyday common life, read and deciphered in their own context. Moreover, by listening to women's voices and their life stories, we learn about their experiences, real needs, doubts, fears and requests. Because narratives of actual lives produced by human beings with a voice, a face and a name, create spaces of empathy, consequently projects of action and research will be conducted in order to obtain actual and useful results.

The first reading whose impressions I would like to share refers to *Step by Step: Women of East Timor, Stories of Resistance and Survival*, by Jude Conway, published in Australia and East Timor in 2010. This work collects thirteen oral narratives by East-Timorese women who played major roles in the struggle for independence, either as guerrilla fighters, undercover agents, diplomats or student leaders, both in the island and overseas. These women describe the reasons why they became involved in the struggle for East Timor's independence, in most cases due to direct experiences of repression and violence over their own lives and bodies or those of their families and compatriots. The stories of these *Women of East Timor* demonstrate how it was within homes and families that courage, adaptability, resistance and resilience grew and spread through generations, from the clandestine movement inside the country to the international solidarity movement (Niner; Hughes, 2012). Therefore, a new methodological perspective should use more appropriate terms to conceptualise the intra and extra family dynamics built around these women, and include approaches that will sustain in-depth researches—the 'thick descriptions' of Clifford Geertz (1973)—on those interactions and their associate meanings, practices and local concepts.



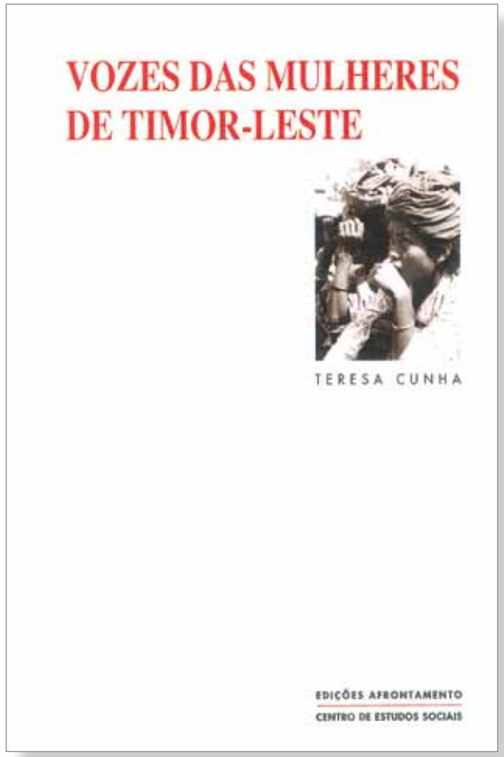
The power of these and many other oral histories resides in the immediacy and realism of their first person narratives, published as they are while the protagonists are still alive. It is also significant that these stories have been published for a broader English-speaking readership. This personal and political approach to the historical record of an international conflict adds weight to the struggle for gender equality in East Timor, which remains largely a conservative male-dominated society. These women emphasise that the fight for equality was not introduced by foreigners but has grown from within their own struggle for independence.

The Portuguese edition of *Vozes das Mulheres de Timor-Leste* [*Voices of East Timorese Women*], by Teresa Cunha, rescues the narratives of East Timorese women, as an invaluable source of knowledge for the peace-building process. These narratives derive from the tragic interaction between past wars and the uncertain future of political independence. Although these women and their narratives have been pushed towards the backdrop of history and thus remitted to

subordination, they resist becoming mere shadows and actively establish the terms in which their present is built, as part of the society, the state, and the identity of East Timor.

War in East Timor organised and systematised a severe silence, which resulted in widespread ignorance about the real situation of the territory and its people. The prime source of information about that space and time is the discourse on the resistance to Indonesian occupation, whose authors and protagonists are men, a fact that complicates the access to other sources. One must bear in mind that, in times of war, the discourse of national solidarity overrides hegemonically any other discourse, particularly those addressing sexual equality and justice. Timorese women are 'found' and 'perceived' in this narrative of resistance as witnesses and secondary victims of the essential story of male heroes in their national fight for independence. However, the narratives of these women compose the memory of East Timor, repeated by word of mouth and occasionally registered in reports of conferences and political meetings. Some belong to women who, after death, became symbols of national independence, such as Rosa Muki Bonaparte, Isabel Lobato and Maria Goreti, among others. Their words acquired the status of 'unquestionable documents' and, over the years, somewhere between myth and history, eventually became part of the legacy of resistance to future generations. These narratives are now part of history, sanctioned as they have been by official and orthodox reports of international institutions (Nunes, 2001). But the women interviewed in *Voices of East Timorese Women* are students, senior political officers, mothers, workers, former-guerrillas and political prisoners. These long interviews take many directions and are made both of silences and spoken words; they are part of the author's experience as an observer-participant and correspond to the traditional form of circulating knowledge in East Timor. The performative value of the word spoken and heard is crucial to understanding the epistemological and methodological purposes of this work, in its attempt to respond to the conceptual dynamism of East Timorese society (Cunha, 2006, pp. 18-19).

The polyphony of narrative discourses by Timorese women represents a possibility for rupture, alternative and reinterpretation of the hegemonic notions about peace and war. Ambivalent and often



contradictory, their voices emerge from a social, cultural and political situation of both domination and colonisation. These women simultaneously reproduce and break stereotypes; they replicate the consequences of submission while giving rise to counter-hegemonies. They are subject to local constraints and also to the global networks acting in East Timor. Consequently, their discourses are tense, hybrid and emerge halfway through war and peace. It is not yet possible to evaluate whether these processes of negotiation generate more freedom, empowerment and respect for women. However, their complexity is expressed by a multitude of voices that are both coherent and contradictory, complementary and conflicting, thus revealing the tensions between peace and violence, emancipation and oppression, cosmopolitanism and tradition, in a 'peripheral' and 'irrelevant' territory, according to hegemonic world views. The choice of both social emancipation and respect for indigenous traditions

characterises the field of resistance of women who exercise and transform apparently outdated practices, which are nevertheless disruptive towards the current sexist and militaristic model of East Timor (Cunha, 2006, p. 176).

NARRATIVES OF VIOLENCE: THE EVERYDAY PRACTICE OF TERROR

Among the narratives of everyday practice, a particular and sadly universal reality stands out: the narrative of violence; a type of discourse generated by extreme poverty, strong relations of inequality and close contact with terror and sheer survival on a daily basis. Old and new realities created by violence require an adequate vocabulary, with its polysemic words and metaphors; new words whose meanings are created and shared by the affected community, because violence has to be described and somehow justified by both victims and perpetrators. Violence against women may take multiple forms, wear several masks, and play its hegemonic role in many scenarios. Whenever long guerrilla wars rage, women and children are the most vulnerable victims. But in many cases women do more than passively suffer abuse and war crimes: they play an active and crucial role in resistance and survival. They develop coping mechanisms to take care of large families on their own. Many also organise with others, either to fight the enemy, often in a non-violent way, or to establish and sustain a support network for the armed resistance.

In East Timor, the condition of women was exacerbated terribly by the Indonesian occupation. Not only did women participate fully in the struggle, preparing rations, carrying munitions, and acting as observers for the armed resistance forces, but they also fought alongside men and undertook various clandestine functions. Women suffered horrifically at the hands of the occupying forces, to say the least." The following excerpt from a UN report on human rights in East Timor for the period from January to November 1999 reveals that institutionalised violence against women continued in the periods before and after the Indonesian government-sanctioned ballot:

> During the joint mission, the Special Rapporteur on violence against women heard testimonies from rape survivors and eyewitnesses to human rights violations. She found evidence of widespread violence against women in East Timor during the period under consideration. The violence was organized and involved members of the militia and members of TNI [Indonesian Armed Forces]; in some places, there was no distinction between the two as members of the militia were also members of TNI. In any event, it is clear that the highest level of the military command in East Timor knew, or had reason to know, that there was widespread violence against women in East Timor. There were cases of sexual slavery, sexual violence as a means of intimidation and sexual violence as a result of the climate of impunity created by the security forces operating in the island. (UN General Assembly, 1999)

In fact, from the day of the invasion, sexual violence and rape became hallmarks of the Indonesian occupation. Not only did the Indonesian army commit atrocities on East Timorese women, singling out the politically active for particular humiliation, but they also forced East Timorese men into public rape and killing of women. Children born of rape were likely to be abandoned, or handed over to church orphanages. Women who were victims of rape were often (but not always) ostracised by their own families and communities, sometimes ending up in prostitution as a result. Testimonies to the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation set up in East Timor in 2002 to address the human rights violations since 1975 revealed that countless women were forced into prostitution by the army of occupation. The Indonesian military also used women as sex slaves, and those living in poorer rural areas were particularly vulnerable to enforced slavery and prostitution. Another common practice of the occupying forces was to organise dance parties, forcing local women to join in. Afterwards they would abduct women to rape them or to take them as a 'second wife' during their stay in East Timor. Young, unmarried women in particular were easy prey. When the soldier left East Timor he would abandon his 'wife' and any children, often without support (Cristalis; Scott, 2006, pp. 35-38).

One of the bravest but least known acts during the East Timorese resistance to Indonesian occupation occurred in November 1998, when over twenty Timorese women told their stories of surviving sexual violence to crowds of hundreds at a public meeting in Dili. The stories were collated into an English language

book called *Buibere*, which means 'woman' in Mumbai, the second most common Timorese language after Tetum (Winters, 1999). It was written in English, published in Australia, and intended as an advocacy document for the international community. Between 1975 and 1999, there had only been four short but intense reports from international non-governmental organisations about gender-based persecution of women in East Timor, and no official United Nations comment whatsoever. In general, the international community ostensibly ignored the atrocities that were happening in East Timor, as poignantly outlined by Noam Chomsky in *A New Generation Draws the Line: Kosovo, East Timor and the Standards of the West*: 'During the final phase of atrocities, a senior diplomat in Jakarta formulated "the dilemma" faced by the great powers succinctly: "Indonesia matters and East Timor doesn't". […] The point was elegantly phrased by the editor of the Paris left-wing journal *Nouvel Observance*: "History has its principal currents, and the principal current passes through Cambodia, not Timor"' (Chomsky, 2000, pp. 76, 81).

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In Portuguese, another pioneer collection of personal narratives by women and men alike about the atrocities under Indonesian occupation had already been published in 1998, challenging international indifference (AA.VV, 1998, pp. 127-33). In November 2001, in independent East Timor, the local women's rights NGO *Forum Komunikasi Untuk Perempuan Loro Sae* (East Timorese Women's Communication Forum) released a second version of *Buibere*, in Tetum, at a public event with many of the women who had contributed with stories to the book present. This second edition was intended to formally respect and honour the contribution of East Timorese women to independence and the high price they paid during the Indonesian occupation. Some of the problems that continue to face the women of East Timor were graphically outlined by advocate Sister Maria de Lourdes Martins Cruz at the launch:

> 'A luta continua!' ['The fight continues!'] she said, and described how the women of East Timor were still second-class citizens in their own land. 'A luta continua!' and she described how girls still don't receive the same educational or employment opportunities as men. 'A luta continua!' and she told of domestic violence still rampant, women still serving as slaves in their own homes, women bought and sold like commodities under the tradition of bride price, and men leaders still unwilling to accept East Timorese women as equals. Ovation after ovation shook the hall. (Gabrielson, 2002)

This speech is striking in that in the eyes of those survivors present that day, independence did not necessarily mark the end of violence against women, just a new manifestation of violence and subordination. There appeared to be a clear linkage between the gender-based political persecution and violence by invading forces, understood as the burden of the feminine face of resistance, and endemic gender-based violence and inequality experienced by women as citizens in the transitional Timorese society.

Gender-based violence in East Timor is both an endemic problem and a legacy of the Indonesian occupation. Whatever the reality, it is a well-documented feature of post-conflict societies that domestic violence levels can rise, even when peace has been re-established. Often men, and even older women, who depend for their living on the work of their daughters and daughters-in-law, seek to return social norms to the pre-war status. In practice, this presents problems, particularly when conflict has been a part of life for several generations, as the brutalising aspects of war on human behaviour are difficult to eradicate. War also changes gender roles, and women often find themselves fulfilling roles previously assigned to men, who find their former role as breadwinners usurped. Widespread unemployment also causes bitterness and frustration, which may find expression in alcohol abuse and violence in the home (Cristalis; Scott, 2006, pp. 91-94).

In *Gender and Transitional Justice: The Women of East Timor*, Susan Harris Rimmer seeks to answer the question of what role international law has played in relation to East Timorese women engaged with transitional justice processes. Despite the placement of women in some key decision-making positions within the transitional justice mechanisms, Rimmer argues that women in East Timor generally did not receive tangible and satisfactory results from the justice system in the post independence period (Rimmer, 2010, pp. 2-3). Where women have been recognised at all in legal processes in East Timor, there is a danger that it has only led to marginalisation and stigmatisation of survivors of sexual violence. Trials have not contributed to a material rise of the basic living standards and status of women. There may also be negative consequences for survivors of domestic violence if there is no confidence in the judicial sector to acknowledge and protect women. Rimmer proposes an alternative way of addressing the situation of women, by moving beyond ideas of women as victims or even survivors, by redefining what it is to be a war 'veteran', so that women veterans may receive both maintenance and status in the new state (2010, p. 3). East Timorese women themselves have continuously stressed the need for justice to encompass their ongoing economic and social rights.

In reality, female combatants who served in the guerrilla army of East Timor were discriminated against throughout the fight for independence and only following protests were they (partially) recognised as war veterans (Niner, March 2012). Women fighters accepted that the struggle for their rights was not possible during the war, however, this same war created a group of highly skilled and motivated women who no longer accept widespread subordination and now work towards equality. But only now, with the war over, can women create and develop a separate identity alongside other international women's movements, yet in a complex process. This process involves voicing opposition to former brothers in arms, with whom they formed families and communities in the recent past and now work to rebuild their country. In modern East Timorese history, the crucial and unique role of women in the resistance has not yet been fully acknowledged and this affects women's complete and active participation in society (Niner, March 2012).

Conflict and violence carved deep scars in the new nation and its people. Moreover, East Timor is still dominated by a male elite of military and political leaders who, despite their past as fighters in the resistance, have been responsible for episodes of violence such as the national crisis of 2006 and the attempted murder of President Ramos Horta in 2008. In the words of Sara Niner, 'such ongoing instability, and an aggressive political culture, favours a type of strong, militarised masculinity that marginalises women, placing them in less visible traditional roles, and has a negative effect on their status and political participation' (March 2012).

THE NATION'S NARRATIVE: (EN)GENDERING EAST TIMOR

Ironically, women and the nation's historical narrative usually meet closer during periods of war, where women are the most defenceless victims. But in the aftermath women also take part in (re)building these same nations, both in colonial and postcolonial times. If history is another kind of narrative, what, then, is the role of female characters in it?

According to the official discourse of independence and nation building in Southeast Asia, women act as secondary characters in the nation's narrative, because the very definition of national history is destined to exclude or marginalise women. Colonial and post-colonial history concentrates on issues like inter-state diplomacy, political leadership and warfare, where men play the dominant roles, according to written sources that privilege male activities. In her introduction to *Other Pasts: Women, Gender and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia*, Barbara Watson Andaya stresses that, when the national story has already been laid out according to certain accepted formulae, women can only be included as a kind of supplement (Andaya, 2000). This has been especially evident in colonial and post-colonial history, where representations of nationalist movements and of the struggle against colonialism have been infused with masculine values. Histories already articulated in terms of themes such as the suppressed people, the emergence of charismatic leaders, the awakening of popular consciousness or the successful revolution have proved highly resistant to the incorporation of female characters and perspectives. But in reality, wars and liberation struggles frequently change the traditional roles that women play in their societies. When conflict is over, communities must come to terms with changed lives and sometimes, also, changed

aspirations. Women often find themselves resisting social pressure to reconstruct life as it was before the conflict began. Some may have become heads of their household through widowhood. Some may have been combatants. Many more are simply unwilling to abandon the process of relative empowerment they have somehow undergone.

Women are predominantly invisible characters in the narrative of East Timor as a nation, since most written accounts are focused on male leaders and combatants. However, over the last decade, a series of texts has been published not only by Timorese women but also by international scholars, driven by the need to acknowledge the decisive role of female action during the struggle for independence. *Independent Women: The story of women's activism in East Timor*, by Irena Cristalis and Catherine Scott, looks at the East Timorese journey from occupation to independence from the women's perspective and records the achievements of the East Timorese women's movement, in particular during the decade leading up to the 1999 referendum (Cristalis; Scott, 2006). It also examines the challenges faced by women after independence, by looking at efforts to consolidate the gains women made in wartime through the state (constitutional reform, legislation, governmental institutions) and in civil society (through pressure, advocacy and attempts at cultural change). The book includes interviews with East Timorese women activists who are raising gender-related issues at both governmental and non-governmental levels.

Independent Women refers to the 'women's movement' rather than to the 'feminist movement' because it is unclear to what extent East Timorese women identify with the term 'feminism', as currently understood in the West. Clearly some East Timorese women activists are motivated by feminist concepts, such as equal rights, political emancipation, and liberation from subordinate and oppressive social roles. But the majority would simply describe their quest as one for greater equality and a certain degree of economic independence, and against violence (Cristalis; Scott, 2006, p. 3). Regardless of the designation they may choose for their cause, East Timor's women activists do not wish to abandon their culture: its diversity and richness provide them with a strong sense of identity both as Timorese and as members of particular tribes, but they also want to preserve the independence and opportunities gained in wartime, as men try to regain the ground they perceive they have lost.

Although an embryonic women's movement preceded the Indonesian invasion, its character was shaped by the invasion and occupation, as were the lives of two generations of women. East Timorese women activists were networking internationally before the 1999 referendum and were keen to hear how women in other parts of the world had fared in similar circumstances. The experiences in Guatemala and South Africa, for instance, demonstrated the importance of obtaining peace and decolonisation agreements, which promoted women's rights and constitutional arrangements, and outlawed discrimination based on gender. East Timorese women argued for constitutional guarantees of international standards but also for affirmative action to correct gender imbalances. Although most male activists expected women to put the self-determination struggle first, gender considerations slowly crept into the resistance movement. President Suharto's fall from power changed the political situation in Indonesia and left East Timorese civil society with a moderate amount of freedom to organise. The 1999 referendum was followed by a transition period from 2000 to 2002, preparing the way for full independence on 20 May 2002. During these two years women activists from both inside the country and the diaspora worked ever closer together as they struggled to find the most effective ways to secure their rights and freedoms and to assert their interests in the emerging political and governmental institutions (Cristalis; Scott, 2006, pp. 5, 27, 45, 73).

But indeed, as it becomes evident, women have been and continue to be severely disadvantaged in East Timorese society. United Nations Development Programme representative, Finn Reske-Nielsen, aptly described their circumstances as follows:

> Traditionally in East Timor, women have tended to hold only a small percentage of public service and decision-making positions. In addition, poverty in East Timor has a female face. Two thirds of women are illiterate, many have large families, tend to sick children, and have heavy responsibilities within the household and the village. As a result, women's health suffers. The fact that mothers in East Timor are amongst the most likely in the world to die as a result of childbirth is a tragedy in the twenty-first century. (Reske-Nielsen, 2001)

The normalisation of life for the victims of occupation, including the guarantee of economic security for the disproportionate number of widows and the families they now head, is a major challenge for East Timor. The 2001 Election was an important first step toward equality of access to the decision-making process, with women winning 27 percent of the Constituent Assembly seats (Pecotish; Shults, 2006).

Historically, in East Timor, women have been excluded from traditional decision-making processes and they are still frequently prohibited the right to speak at community arbitration and adjudication sessions. In marked contrast to this, East Timor has actually boasted the greatest number of female Members of Parliament in Southeast Asia. Likewise, women have held high public offices, such as Ministers of Finance and Justice, and they are commonly appointed as judges and public attorneys whose authority is implicitly accepted by the same communities who continue to prohibit them from exercising any type of role in local resolution of conflicts. In 'Equal Before the Law, Unequal in the Community: Education and social construction of female authority in East Timor', Daniel Schroeter Simião addresses the fundamental issue of the different ways by which Timorese women had access to education during the past decades and even during the colonial regime, when urban and literate segments were set apart from other groups in the rural hinterland (Simião, 2008). This distinction became more marked throughout the period of Indonesian occupation and acquired new forms during the recent reconstruction of the State of East Timor. Hence, differences in recognised female authority—as the ones stated above—are a product of the structural contrasts of the communities, which take into account those women's belonging to different lineages and generations, both at the state and local level.

In East Timor, tradition is deeply hierarchical and characterised by a strong symbolic dualism in the conception of the world, which sets clear gender distinctions in almost every domain of social life. Masculine and feminine are clearly opposite principles in several ethnical groups from the Eastern islands and the respect for this distinction occupies an important position on the maintenance of the cosmical order (Simião, 2008, p. 226). In this cosmical distribution enunciated by the Timorese *lisan* (customs), the sphere where political and/or juridical decisions are taken became definitely connected to the masculine principle. The village is still the public space for the traditional relationship among communal groups, according to whom women cannot be allowed into decision-making processes. Such crafty division of the world into different spheres of influence allows for the coexistence of different representations concerning gender relations and female authority. This fact should lead to a more careful reflection about some stereotypes concerning the position of women in East Timorese society, and the sources of female simultaneous authority and lack of power in such scenarios. Actually, education is the clue for the recognition of female empowerment, when women perform roles such as judges, prosecutors and ministers.

The polyphony of narrative discourses by Timorese women represents a possibility for rupture, alternative and reinterpretation of the hegemonic notions about peace and war.

Under the Portuguese colonial domain, the education of the daughters of a 'creole elite' was the task of Catholic schools, namely the Canossian Sisters. The Catholic education provided by those nuns marked a whole generation of women who fought for the independence. Actually, many women who took an active part in the resistance were Canossian Sisters. It is the period of Indonesian occupation, however, that made the access to education possible for many women who have recently become judges and prosecutors in the modern East Timorese State. If during the Portuguese period the access to female education was achieved through religion, another form of education was possible for certain young women, especially those from Dili, during the Indonesian period, a more technical and less vocational education in Indonesian universities. In the course of their metropolitan

experience in the universities of Bali and Jakarta, those women contacted with feminist movements which, together with the authority from their family origins and formal education, made them question the gender differential values of Timorese tradition. In such cases, distance was indeed 'perceived as a good advisor and this escape was, as in many other cases, a way of searching for themselves, [which] takes different nuances for men and for women, as emancipation is understood as greater economic autonomy for men and greater social autonomy for women' (Seixas, 2002, p. 89, my translation). At the same time, far from Dili and from the possibility of finding in the metropolitan education (either Portuguese or Indonesian) access to the sources of a new kind of authority, a large number of women from the countryside also had their track to authority traced by local genealogies. This was the profile of many of the congresswomen elected for the Timorese Parliament.

Such plurality of positions is surely a matter of disagreement and it can explain the tendency of the women's movement in East Timor for dispersion: only in Dili, in 2003, there were 16 NGOs, all of them concerned with women rights, many of them with the same purposes, fighting for the same resources (Simião, 2008, p. 232). Such plurality also disturbs the elders of Timorese villages who, nonetheless, seem to have dealt rather well with it, identifying a domain in which all categories become equal: the State; and a way to inter-relate those categories: education. They keep the villages, nonetheless, as the niche of sexist traditions. This gender-related duality of criteria is one of the many dualities that characterise contemporary East Timorese society, as a consequence of the conflict between different cultural and colonial models. Three models overlap in the present transitional stage: the Portuguese colonial model, the Indonesian neo-colonial model, and Anglophone post-colonial models, which interrelate in different ways, creating multiple hybrid identities (Seixas, 2002, p. 95).

CONCLUSION: CONVERGING INTERESTS, EMPOWERMENT AND INTERCULTURAL TRANSITS

These—and other—readings demonstrate how feminist analysis and intervention should be defined by neither distancing 'others' (the 'other women') as counterpoles, nor drawing them close as facsimiles, but rather by locating itself among them, to adapt Clifford Geerts's thought, as expressed in *Local Knowledge* (1993 [1983], p. 70).

It is imperative to verify the existence, relevance and concerns of multiple agendas and priorities, in order to build a truly cosmopolitan and all-inclusive feminist project in East Timor. This is the model and cognitive process of democratisation that Teresa Cunha proposes. Those who consider women's participation in peace processes as a fundamental matter need to reassess the challenges that face common sense notions about the female gender. Women from the 'vulnerable South' can no longer be considered as exotic beings, and should be called forward to the dialogue that builds those 'spaces of empathy' mentioned earlier. The exercise of tolerance towards ambiguity is a key recommendation in order to carry out non-sexist juridical, political and cognitive practices (Cunha, 2006, pp. 179-80).

Clearly, female empowerment means different things at different times in history, as a result of cultural, religious, economic, political, social, and also individual circumstances. However, no matter how much feminist agendas might be made-up to resonate with women's everyday experiences under all those circumstances, ideas alone are not enough to put effective pressure on the state and society. In other words: empowerment needs to be perceived both as something 'that comes from the women themselves and something they can own with pride' (Rowlands, 1998, p. 3), in individualised forms of everyday resistance; and as a strategy for action, implemented by governments and institutions alike, and accepted—and put into practice—by society in general. Because, in reality, in male-dominated societies, though women may be permitted to engage in contained activism, those women mobilising themselves around highly organised global feminist agendas are unlikely to receive such indulgence.

If women experience oppression in locally specific ways, these experiences are by no means simply local in their origins and they cannot be effectively combated at a restricted, fragmented level alone, which will only yield limited effects. Wherever they are, then, feminists cannot ignore the global dimensions of gender issues any more than their locally specific manifestations. Localisation and globalisation—with their associated discursive productions—are not another dichotomy: localisation cannot be projected as a counterpoint to the global but is itself a significant dimension of globalisation. Local knowledge is in dynamic tension with global knowledge. And the issue of gender is very much at the heart of all these dynamics, strongly related to historical, cultural, ethnic and political specificities, which require an interdisciplinary, transnational approach.

In East Timor, for instance, one can say that faith has empowered women to cope with extreme violence and repression during the Indonesian occupation. Later, in independent East Timor, the immensely influential Catholic religion also provides an alternative locus of leadership and role-models for women. As a symbol of their culture and identity, religious faith restores a sense of humanity, worth and dignity to a people who have been stripped of everything: 'It increases their internal strength. It restores relation where brutality has destroyed the ability to trust, helps to promote reconciliation among neighbours, strengthens the surviving members of families. It is crucial as inspiration, resource, and lifeline; and in this way, it has served to empower women' (Cristalis; Scott, 2006, pp. 64-65). Likewise, the power of memory has been one of the most subversive that East Timorese women possess. The memory of lost sons, daughters and husbands drove them to keep on asking questions, to demand the bodies, and not to rest until explanations were offered.

Likewise, East Timorese native cultural practices are still very important and part of a complex centuries-old social system. An obvious example are the traditions of *barlake*, which vary from place to place but commonly include the giving of presents from the groom's family to his future bride and family, and are often translated into English as 'dowry' or 'bride-price'. *Barlake* has been cited as a major cause for the oppression of women and the high levels of domestic violence in the country. But arguments surrounding *barlake* are part of a much wider debate, as it remains a foremost practice of Timorese indigenous culture, whose spiritual, cultural and practical value some contemporary research has failed to understand (Niner, 2012, pp. 138-139).

To conclude, in the vast cultural diversity of Southeast Asia, past and present, global and local, converge in the analysis of concepts and issues of gender, closely related to the on-going political, economic, social and cultural transformations. Southeast Asia is an area of cultural intersection, as far as gender is concerned, of permanent cultural translation, that is, of reinterpretation, of repositioning of symbols and signs within existing hierarchies. In its critical readings, this essay has attempted to look beyond the arbitrary meanings directly or indirectly assigned to issues of gender, favoring contextualised interpretations that, in its permanent uncertainty, are likely to produce new hypotheses, theories and explanations. This constant intercultural translation encourages the return to questions persistently excluded from hegemonic discourse (be it political, academic or derived from plain common sense), to adopt the concept of 'return of the excluded', by Judith Butler (1996: 45-53; 2000). Butler's thought seems to be more optimistic than the one expressed by Gayatri Spivak in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', to whom historical and ideological factors have silenced the voices of those living in the national and global suburbs. To those excluded—whose epitome are non-Western women and, amongst them, the focus of this essay, East Timorese women—Spivak does not grant Butler's hypothesis of 'return', as for her, Western feminism has contributed to the construction of that silence, by denying a voice to the subaltern 'other' (Spivak, 1992, pp. 66-111).

For Butler, the universal—here understood as a synonym of hegemony, a Gramscian combination of power and consent (Gramsci, 1971)—can only be conceptualised in articulation with its own peripheries. Thus, what has been excluded from the concept of universality forces this same concept—from the outside, from the margins—to accept and include it again, which can only happen when the concept itself has evolved enough to include its own excluded. This pressure eventually leads to the re-articulation of the current concept of universality and its power. To the process through which universality readmits its own excluded, Butler calls 'translation'. Cultural translation—as the 'return of the excluded'—is a major force of contemporary democracy, challenging boundaries, fostering the evolution of society and opening new paths for emancipation, through subversive practices that alter everyday social relations. For both Homi Bhabha and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, the potential for change lies in peripheries marked by hybridity—

peripheries like East Timor—where newcomers (the excluded who return: women, people of the so-called third world, ethnic minorities, the poor, the oppressed) have the possibility of using subversion to undermine the strategies of power, regardless of the shape this power may assume (Bhabha, 1994; Santos, 2006, 2008, 2001, pp. 23-85). Perhaps the best conclusion for this essay would be the following passage by Noam Chomsky:

> Surely we should by now be willing to cast aside mythology and face the causes and consequences of our actions realistically, not only in East Timor. In that tortured corner of the world we now have an opportunity to remedy in some measure at least one of the most appalling crimes and tragedies of the terrible century that has finally come to a horrifying, wrenching close. (Chomsky, 2000, p. 86) RC

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