

## **East Timor, A Theology Of Death: Massacres, Memorials; Rites And Reconciliation**

*Claire Rawnsley*

### **Introduction**

The aim of the Paper is to explore a theology of death in the context of East Timor. Firstly, I ask why a “theology of death?” Why the word “theology”? Without getting into an in-depth discussion at this point, I have chosen the term “theology” because it embraces the divine whereas, a term that frequently designates to the East Timorese belief system and other similar beliefs is “animism”. This research lead me to look at the notion of animism (*nima* breath, vital principle, soul, spirit) which is understood as a belief that material objects and the physical environment are imbued with some kind of soul or spirit. It is important to recognise that the term “animism” was designated by E.B. Tylor (1832-1917) to what he called “primitive religion” in the 19th century (*Primitive Culture*, 1891). He assumed that animism is the earliest stage of an evolutionary understanding of religion, common among primitive people (Mautner 2000: 25). Tylor places animism on a sort of timeframe with the assumption that this form of belief is on the lowest scale of religion on the path to the monotheism. His theory has been criticised by scholars and my contention here is that by designating

indigenous belief systems under the umbrella of animism and by comparing animism to a monotheistic system which is considered on a higher scale of belief systems implies a reductionist position to animism. The problem of animism is discussion in itself but the problem here, as I am exploring here, is the notion of the “wandering ghost” in East Timorese belief system.

I begin by examining a theology of death in the framework of East Timor’s recent history by looking at East Timorese indigenous meanings of death and rituals, next, I ask how this understanding of death relates to the people’s grieving today in the wake of such massacres and destruction. To do this I will look at efforts being made towards a healing process such as the reconciliation process, the significance of memorials and the role of the Catholic Church.

After so many years of violence in East Timor what place does the dead play in indigenous thought and ritual experience? If the dead person has not been put to rest in the customary way does an abiding fear still exist that the spirit of those who have not been laid to rest will haunt the family and village community? On many occasions the person just “disappeared” and there is no corpse to bury consequently, how can the people sustain this loss? What is the East Timorese understanding here? Have the spirits been laid to rest? Have the ancestors been reconciled? To examine these questions I will look at the intertwining of belief systems: the indigenous, the Catholic and more recently the secular system (held by NGOs and UN and other groups).

## Number Who Died

It is necessary to situate a theology of death in the historical and political context of East Timor. In a country with a small population, 800 000 it has been estimated that a third of the population have died. On August 30th 1999, the first independent election was achieved and almost 80% of the population voted for independence. Within a few hours killings and burnings were carried out by the Indonesian military using the militias. Those who could be were evacuated or ran to the mountains for refuge. Several thousand people were killed, ranging from babies in their mother's womb, to small children, youth and the elderly. However this was not the first time violence was perpetrated (Martinkus 2001).

In 1975, an estimated 20 000 Indonesian troops were deployed to the region of East Timor. While casualty estimates vary, anywhere from 60 000-100 000 Timorese were probably killed in the first year after the invasion. In 1979, the US Agency for International Development estimated that 300 000 East Timorese, nearly half the population had been uprooted and moved into camps controlled by Indonesian armed Forces. By 1980, the occupation had left more than 100 000 dead from military action, starvation or disease, with some estimates running as high as 230 000.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Refer to Tanter and Selden 2001: 260 who note that the most catastrophic aspect of Indonesian rule was the appalling number of East Timorese deaths. Long before the terror campaign leading up to the 1999 ballot, Indonesian rule exacted a terrible toll. See John Waddington, "East Timor: How many people Missing?" Timor Information Service no. 28 (Feb 1980); reprinted with further comment in Australia, Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, Inquiry into East Timor, Transcript Evidence, 1982, 697-714. .. Waddington refuted important criticisms of the 1980 study in his Senate testimony, "Inquiry into East Timor 710-14. (Refer to Selden and Tanter 2001) that even the Indonesian government figures are horrific: East Timorese dead since 1975. (See Taylor in Carey and Bentley 1995, p. 240).

### **Population Estimates**

From 1975 to 1999 up to the departure of the Indonesian military, massacres were systematically carried out. Gravesites of the locations of these massacres are still being documented and investigated. People also died in the invasion the bombardment, others died of malnutrition in forced relocations of which we today would call concentration camps. There was also forced sterilisation of women. Besides the heavy bombardment there was also chemical warfare and sources claim that 30 000 died as the result of defoliants (napalm) (Taylor1999).

By 1978, it was estimated that the population was less than 500 000. The list of massacres included: Lacluta 500; Dili massacres1982; Kraras 300; Remexio; entire villages were eliminated; the military aimed was to exterminate the people. Militia violence in Liquica District in March and April 1999, including a massacres of a group of villagers who were hiding in the Liquica Church on 6 April 1999 (Traub 2000).

### **Have The Dead Been Put To Rest?**

As a result of the Indonesian invasion one third of the population has died due to violence, murder, starvation and disease through the Indonesian invasion and occupation. During this period there were several mass killings or massacres where sometimes whole villages were decimated or even eliminated. The number in a village could be anything from 300 to 1000. During the 24 years of the terror and the harsh conditions of put in place by the Occupation, the people were not able to put their dead to rest in the customary way. They were not able to carry out their traditional rituals and burials. At times the military removed all signs of the killings by moving the bodies to

other places. Bodies were thrown into mass graves so these people or their families and village community were not been able to mourn, carry out rituals and restore the traditional order or put to rest what is known in traditional societies “wandering souls”.

## **1. Indigenous Belief System**

The indigenous understanding of laying the spirits of the dead to rest has been in place for hundred of years. It was disrupted to some extent by the Indonesian occupation of 24 years but today is still close to the hearts of the people, especially the villagers. In the East Timor indigenous belief system, culture and the land are interrelated. The land is where the ancestors are buried and also where each lineage originated. Many objects such as huge rocks and old trees are carved and revered as *lulik* objects (Soares, 2001). In this culture the spirits of the dead are treated with awe and fear.

### **The Wandering Soul**

The notion of the “wandering soul” is pervasive to most early traditional cultures and can be traced back at least to the Chinese - who saw everything alive inhabited by spirits. They distinguished between those spirits who were attached to a human body, and those unattached. Those which were unattached could wander about hence the term “wandering ghost”. Normally the spirit of the dead does not bother anyone but if no one buries or offers sacrifices to the deceased, then the spirit then becomes a “wandering ghost” it also is a sign that the living have failed in their obligations to the ancestors.

### **To Dispatch The Dead**

Elizabeth Traube (1986) has studied the Mambai people in central East Timor. She points out that in the Mambai belief, actions are guided by reciprocity. This relationship with others is radically altered by the performance known as, to “dispatch the dead”. This custom (Mambai) occurs when such a performance is carried out to its final conclusion. The buffalo horns from long past sacrifices long past are laid upon the “ship of the dead” and dispatched to the place of the dead. For the people, the dead take on different “faces”. They say, “We do not know you any more - you do not know us any more - the horns are dismantled which signifies a material token of the living’s presence - so the memory of the dead fades as Mambai say “we no longer feel for them” (Traube 1986: 201-3).

### **The Restoration Of Order**

The dispatching of the dead is an important ceremony not only to put the dead to rest (so the community can feel there are no longer unattached spirits roaming about) but also to restore order to the living. The anthropologist, David Hicks (1976) explains that “Invalid corpses, dead souls and close kin of the dead person are temporary symbols of the chaos that arises and certain rituals are required to re-order” (1976: 110). Rituals were put in place to separate opposites, that is, the dead from the living. He notes that the rites of passage not only removes the corpse and the dead soul from the secular world and fixes them firmly in the sacred, but also separates lineage kin ties from the sacred world and restores the living to secular life.

## **Bad Deaths**

In East Timor as I have pointed out there have been so many violent deaths of all ages that it is necessary here to look at what indigenous East Timorese considered as the wandering ghost idea and tied to this, is what is called a “bad death”. If the dead person had what is called a “bad death” that is, dying an unnatural death it is thought that the spirit will seek vengeance on the living that is, the family and the village (Smart 1969: 58). If the deceased was murdered or died suffering a wrong, a sense of injustice compels the “ghost” to stay on around the family and community until the wrong has been avenged and the spirit is satisfied (Lin 1992: 18-19).

Elizabeth Traube (1986: 204) observed that some people claimed to have encountered these roaming spirits late at night in the forest -generally the emphasis was on positive aspects of the relationship with the dead - however if the dead should venture into the realm of the living their very presence was constructed as a sign of displeasure.

R.H. Barnes has noted that “the distinction between a good and a bad death is extremely widespread in SE Asia. He studied this class of deaths which required special treatment and noted:

Included in this call of deaths are those from a fall, or by a weapon or death at sea. It is thought that this kind of death is the person’s own fault and the soul of a bad death will suffer a different fate. The corpse in these cases could not be placed in the house but had to be left outside (1974: 174).

In one tradition the priest takes a red cloth - and if this is not used it is thought someone else will die a bad death. The idea is to take the badness from the village which is associated with the death the badness is taken into the red cloth. On returning from the

ceremony the participants encircle a tree in order to confuse the soul of the deceased. This is so that the spirit cannot follow when they return home. They put up a sign to prevent the dead soul from entering the home - sealing the house to prevent the dead soul from entering. These examples show that the border between the realm of the living and the dead to be impenetrable and not easy to bridge when dreaming (Barnes 1974).

In the light of this discussion it can be seen that the people have not had adequate time to grieve properly and carry out the appropriate funeral rites. This need is important because the funeral rites contain important sociological and symbolic meanings that foster alliances between lineages of those who gave birth to life and these bonds do not end when their linking members die (Forman 1980: 175). In the case of East Timor families sometimes whole families have been massacred. The alliances of those remaining lineage members have to bear the burden for the wandering ghosts of their kin. In some cases where the rites have not been performed there is the belief that the spirit can never reach its resting place. If there has been no body buried, the spirit is entirely shut out of the spirit land (Moss 1925: 141). Moss (1925) points out that there seems to be a definite connection between the absence of a proper burial and then the spirit becomes a wandering ghost.

## **2. Catholic Faith**

I have briefly set out the main elements of the indigenous belief system however, in ET as it is known 90% of the people are Catholics yet at the same time it is recognized that 70% of the people still hold their own indigenous beliefs (Soares 2001). This implies

that there is a large proportion of the population who hold both indigenous and Catholic belief systems. This experience is illustrated by Filomena an East Timorese woman:

I was born Catholic, a little one, [as a baby] but not all times but sometimes we need it like our culture, we still go and ask the blessing of our ancestors, just in the cemetery we have to go and bring flowers for the cemetery, and we believe first, God and secondly, [in] the souls of our ancestors and our parents and things like that (Radio National, 19/5/02).

It is evident here the two belief systems are intertwined. To understand how this is so it is necessary to understand the situation of the Church in East Timor. In its early history the Catholic church was seen as a foreign church that supported the colonial Portuguese administration. At this time up to 1970, a fewer than a third, i.e., 180 000 people were registered as Catholics. The church was seen as a place where someone went to be “civilised” and educated. This attitude is reflected in the life of Xanana Gusmao where his father was a teacher (Niner 2000). He wanted Xanana to be educated at the seminary in Dare because this was the only place he could go as they did not have any other means to be educated.

However, the situation for the Church changed after the Indonesian occupation in 1975. People were threatened with death, a loss of culture in fact, as one writer stated, the Indonesian control was a gradual murder of the people and a murder of Timorese culture (Archer 1995: 121 in Carey & Bentley). In such circumstances, the Church became the only place where the people could have any freedom. During the Resistance the Church supported the people. Aditjondro (1994: 69) provides several reasons why the church became stronger:

1. religious policy of Indonesia the Pancasila- the five traditional religions
2. the support of the church through leadership of Bishops Lopes and Belo
3. through various church activities the people could associate freely
4. the iconography of the church
5. the adoption of Tetum at the language of the church liturgy

The Church ceremonies, ritual prayers became part of the daily life of the people. All events in Timor begin with prayers and Mass and church services are regularly attended (Da Silva and Kendall 2002). It is also important to understand in these circumstances why so many public protests since 1989 have started or finished at religious events or places of worship (Archer 1995: 127). The most famous event is at Moetael church which ended in the Santa Cruz massacre at the cemetery. The church building was regarded as a sacred place but even this was not respected by the Indonesian military or militia. Several massacres were carried out in other churches where at times 100-300 people had taken shelter. Well known are Suai and Liquica massacres (Traube 2000).

### **Memorials At Suai**

Another example of how the two belief systems are intertwined is displayed at the Suai Church massacre where- the church was burned and people murdered inside, mainly women and children. There are now two memorials of this event, one near the Church set up by the people themselves. It consists of a circle with a rounded stones on each is a name, signifying each person who died. (The bodies were moved to West Timor and buried in a mass grave - a witness who saw this reported it to the UN). This memorial is called the "circle of stones". The other memorial is situated away from the church but

up the same road it is in the form of a western designed memorial. The people's names are inscribed on a marble stone. The three priests who died head the list. The place is roped off so that one stands at a distance - whereas, at the other memorial "the circle of stones", as it called, has no protection and there is no hierarchical order of names.

### **3. Clinical/Secular Approach**

I have provided a brief account of the role of the indigenous and the Catholic beliefs in relation to remembering the dead. The third system is not a belief system as such but is closely linked to people who have experienced a violence and death of relatives and friends. I have called this the clinical/secular process because in this western approach to death the corpse is disposed of either buried or cremated. For people in the West most people die out of their own familiar surroundings and, to view a dead body is an unfamiliar sight. The person is often drugged to relieve the pain for themselves and their relatives and an aloneness exists for the individual. As a result an illusion is created and maintained and the dying person is sometimes denied the opportunity to face the reality of death. The scientific view underlying this is that individual organic life is finite not only by necessity but in essence, whereas, the religious belief considers death as an interruption of natural life. This view is held by some NGOs, the UN people and others who have come to help in building the country and in some cases hold no religious beliefs.

## **New Colonisers**

In May 1999, UNAMET the UN Mission in ET first organised the ballot. Then after the Indonesian destruction there was INTERFET, the international military force in ET; deployed Sept. 1999. After that in Feb to May 2000, UNTAET, the United Nations transitional administration in East Timor was employed. The long-term goal of these organisations was to institute a democratic, political society. This was warmly received by the East Timorese. The urgent requirements such as food, water, health, shelter, roads and infrastructure had to be addressed immediately. However there is still an enormous need to address the psychological scars still present in the communities. Recently an NGO worker observed that there is a serious “undercurrent of trauma in the country ... but there is only a thin veil covering it”. Some people don’t refer to it but you always know it is there (Wiseman 2004).

## **Commission Of Reception Truth And Reconciliation (Cavr)**

There still remain the question of reconciliation. The Commission of reception truth and reconciliation (CAVR) is one of the largest institutions. As *La’o Hamutuk Bulletin* (Nov 2003) notes:

Although on the Commission are East Timorese many key staff, all funding and the basic structure and methodology come from overseas. CAVR is trying to establish the truth about events from 1974 to 1999. ... However it has relied heavily of consultants, advisors and internationals leadership ... It organises at a village level support to those who give statements and participate in community based discussions on the impact of violence and healing workshops for survivors.

Isabel Amaral-Guterres recounts her own experience of working with survivors and victims from 1974-1995. She observes:

Many of them claim that it is better just to forget and go on because it is too painful to dig up the past. Others want to know why? where? who and how? Why are their loved ones killed? Where are their bodies? Who ordered the killing? How did it happen? Did they leave messages? Is there any information about the way three were executed?

Then she states:

... we cannot begin to inquire into the truth of what happened until the mourning is finished. And mourning does not end until the bodies are properly buried and the spirits of the dead are able to be at rest. Now in East Timor we have passed the initial time of mourning some refugees need to bring home the bodies of their dead to their traditional places.

Some people need to come home and visit graves of their ancestors. There are different groups emerging to deal with the loss of family - one group called *Novi Novi* was formed in Suai after so many men were killed in 1999. Another group is called, "no graves". This is in Licquica where husbands and sons just disappeared. Not knowing where their bodies are is of great sorrow to the ET (Martins & Kendall 2002 ).

To illustrate the "wandering ghost" notion a poignant incident was portrayed in the Film, *Birth of a Nation* (2002 Part 2). It concerned Lu-Olo, now President of Fretilin Party. He lived in the mountains for 24 years with the Resistance movement. He never saw his family all that time - they thought he was dead. They held a funeral rite to put his spirit to rest. Then when he returned in 1999, his family were overcome with fear when they saw him and said, "You should not have come back because we have already put your spirit to rest". His relatives found it hard to reconcile his presence among them. They considered him a "wandering ghost". As a result, Lu-Olo and other Falintil people feel there should be a national reconciliation day where the spirits of those who were thought to be dead have returned to their families.

## Other Issues

In the East Timor Constitution there is no mention of respecting or preserving indigenous customs religious beliefs, culture and traditions. There is mention of the Catholic Church and recognition of its support for the Resistance. There is also, one phrase which recognises tolerance of other religions. This absence is remarkable when it is evident that 70-80% of the people still carry on in their traditional lifestyle, dress and customs. It is interesting to observe that Xanana Gusmao who in his *Life* gives a special description of his relationship with the land and the spirits. As he points out, it was only when he went to the mountains to support the Resistance that he became aware his real identity as a Timorese. He writes:

This was my first immersion in the belly of my Homeland! I experienced an atmosphere I had never known: welcoming fogs took us into their cool embrace and imparted a soft hue to the ochre-brown earth that sustained and gave life to enormous *ai bubur*, eucalyptus trees. I learnt to truly appreciate the songs of my Homeland one night in an old hut, harmonies disappearing out into the cold darkness, the old men and women competing with passionate but not yet tempered voices of the youth. I celebrated my first real encounter with my pure mountain origins, genuinely pure, by eating *koto Moruk*, bitter bean, and drinking *daulorok*, palm wine, to which the suffocating smoke of the fires lent a human breath. It was a bitter delight to find an identity amongst the crumbling explosions of war, a war that had pushed me into this open space of Homeland, confused tired and searching for my place to fight (Niner 2000: 40)

Elsewhere he recounts his experience:

... this war has afforded me the opportunity to know East Timor from one end of the half island to the other. To learn to love our motherland moment by moment step by step each small rock every small stone. Every day to twenty-five years this land my mother has seduced me with her power and her magnificence (See introduction by Xanana Gusmao in Ross Bird 1999).

Xanana Gusmao in these reflections illustrates his deep affinity with the land and culture. He articulates the unique spirit of the East Timorese and acknowledges the

traditional ways and beliefs. Yet as I have noted within the structure of the Constitution there is no evidence of recognizing indigenous belief systems at all. Does this omission in the Constitution reflect what is termed by some anthropologists as a “state-centric approach” which too readily subsumes indigenous, peoples’ beliefs and traditions under the need to modernise? I use the term, “state-centric” here to refer to the new colonisers that is the UN and its related organisations which came to rebuild the country and also the new elite in East Timor. What I am suggesting here is that “state-centric” thinking had an significant impact on shaping the national identity of East Timor.

### **State-Centricism**

Bradley Howard explains the problem of state-centric approach in relation to indigenous cultures. He writes:

State-centric people characteristically define indigenous societies as pre-state or stateless societies, terms that suggest an inherent deficiency and therefore, influence indigenous people’s status as power subjects of international law. When state-centric people identify indigenous tribal organisations and communities of bands as corporate groups they are better able to deliberately effect the legal and social transformation of indigenous organisation into the actual corporate organisations thus opening otherwise inalienable lands to market forces (Howard 2003: 4.).

The question of recognising East Timor’s indigenous beliefs and culture are integral to peace-building and is just as necessary as basic needs although it is understandable that the latter have taken precedence.

## References

- Acquiario, Luigi, Stella Zammataro and Andrew Sully. 2002. *East Timor: Birth of a Nation. Part 2. Lu'Olo's Story*. Film Australia and Film Victoria.
- Aditjondro, George J. 1994. *In the Shadow of Mount Ramelau: The Impact of the Occupation of East Timor*. Indonesian Documentation and Information Centre.
- Amaral-Guterres, Isabel. 2002 "East Timor: Reconciliation and Justice." *Eureka Street*. 12 (4) 14-15.
- Archer, Robert. 1995 "Catholic Church in East Timor." In Carey, Peter & G. Carter Bentley. eds. *East Timor at the Crossroads: The Forging of a Nation*. London: Cassell.
- Barnes, R.H. 1974 *Kedang: A Study of the Collective Thought of an Eastern Indonesian People*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Bird, Ross. 1999. *Inside Out East Timor: Photography*. Text by Xanana Gusmao and Jose Ramos Horta and Bishop Belo, Melbourne: Herman Press.
- Carey, Peter & G. Carter Bentley. eds. 1995 *East Timor at the Crossroads: The Forging of a Nation*. London: Cassell.
- Cox, Steve. 1995 *Generations of Resistance: East Timor*. With Historical Introduction by Peter Carey. London: Cassell.
- East Timor Constitution*, 20 May 2002.
- Forman, Shepard. 1977. "East Timor: Exchange and Political Hierarchy at the Time of the European Discoveries." In Hutterer, Karl L. *Economic Exchange and Social Interaction in Southeast Asia: Perspectives from Prehistory, History and Ethnography*. Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia No 13.
- Gusmao, Xanana. In Ross Bird 1999. *Inside Out East Timor: Photography*. Text by Xanana Gusmao, Jose Ramos Horta and Bishop Belo. Melbourne: Herman Press.
- Hicks, David. 1976. *Tetum Ghosts and Kin: Fieldwork in an Indonesian Community*. Mayfield Pub.
- Howard, Bradley Reed. 2003. *Indigenous Peoples and the State: The Struggle for Native Rights*. Illinois University Press.
- Kennedy, Raymond. 1943. *Islands and Peoples of the Indies*. Baltimore Press.
- Kohn, Rachael. "The Faith of Timor." Radio National. Sunday 19/5/02.
- Lin, Yutang. 1992. [1938] *The Importance of Living: A Lyrical Philosophy*. Singapore: Heinemann.

Martins da Silva, Mira and Susan Kendall. 2002. "Issues for women in East Timor: The Aftermath of Indonesian Occupation." University of Sydney (Expanding our Horizons Conference 22 Feb 2002).

Mautner, Thomas. ed. 2000. *Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*. London: Penguin.

Martinkus, John. 2001. *A Dirty Little War*. Sydney: Random House.

Moss, Rosalind. 1925. *The Life after Death in Oceania and the Malay Archipelago*. Oxford: Humphrey Milford.

Niner, Sarah. ed. 2000. *To Resist is to Win: The Autobiography of Xanana Gusmao*. Melbourne: Auroa Books.

Simpson, Christopher "Timor is burning", School of Communication, American University Available URL <http://www.auslig.gov.au/acres/referenc/dili.htm> Accessed 22 Sept. 1999.

Smart, Ninian. 1969. *The Religious Experience of Mankind*. London: Collins.

Soares, Dionisio Babo. 2001. "East Timor: Perceptions of Culture and Environment" (Conference on Sustainable Development in Dili East Timor." 25-31 January 2001).

Steele, Stephen. 2000. "The Widows of Maliana." *Florida Catholic*. Sept 21 2000.

Tanter, Richard. & Mark Selden & Stephen R. Shalom. 2001. "East Timor Faces the Future." In Richard Tanter Mark Selden, & Stephen R. Shalom. eds. *Bitter Flowers, Sweet Flowers: East Timor, Indonesia and the World Community*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Taylor, John G. 1999. *East Timor: The Price of Freedom*. London: Zed Books.

*The La'o Hamutuk Bulletin*. 2003.4 (5) 1-15.

Traub, James. 2000. "Inventing East Timor." *Foreign Affairs*. 39(4), 74-89.

Traube, Elizabeth. 1986. *Cosmology and Social Life: Ritual Exchange among the Mambai of East Timor*. Chicago: Chicago Press.

Tylor Edward B. 1913. [1817] *Primitive Culture*. London: Murray.

Wing-Tsit Chan. 1973. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Translated and Compiled. Princeton: Princeton University Press.