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Abstract

Murals and graffiti are part of the landscape of the cities and villages of Timor-Leste. Some portray violent events and their legacy from the Indonesian occupation; others celebrate the achievement of independence and Timorese identity. During the 2006 crisis the walls 'shouted' words of frustration at the political leadership of the country due to the political violence which ensued after the dismissal of petitioner soldiers' from the armed forces. Visual analysis of street art in Timor-Leste is part of the initial stage of a PhD research project on Intergenerational perceptions of human rights in Timor-Leste, which will use focus groups as the primary methodology. This research project aims to contribute to a comprehensive knowledge about the East Timorese understandings of human rights and the ways in which they are being translated into a vernacular form. The factor of 'generations' is central in this research, reflecting the fact that issues of history, memory and commemoration are vital in Timor-Leste's contemporary society. The visual analysis research method was chosen due to the observation that the walls are one of the most accessible and far-reaching means of communication in Timor-Leste, especially among the young people. Also, we consider that the sensory nature of visual arts creates a place for expressing emotional and embodied experiences of colonialism and on-going debates about identity. The collection of photographs from murals and graffiti analysed here is based on a published book about street art in Timor-Leste (Parkinson 2010) and also in photographs taken between 2003 and 2011 by various authors.

Keywords

timor, graffiti, murals, rights, east, human, beyond, perceptions, visible

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Beyond the visible: perceptions of human rights in Timor-Leste street art

Marisa Ramos Gonçalves¹

Murals and graffiti are part of the landscape of the cities and villages of Timor-Leste. Some portray violent events and their legacy from the Indonesian occupation; others celebrate the achievement of independence and Timorese identity. During the 2006 crisis the walls ‘shouted’ words of frustration at the political leadership of the country due to the political violence which ensued after the dismissal of petitioner soldiers’ from the armed forces.

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Memory and social catharsis

Murals and graffiti in Timor-Leste display violent events from the Indonesian occupation period, mainly through the use of images of skulls, figures representing devils, angels and spirits of the dead. East Timorese customary practices are made of strong interactions with the past, whereby keeping memories and honouring the dead is an important aspect of achieving justice and carrying on social life. The murals play the important role of memorialisation of the past and, simultaneously, of individual and social catharsis according to the East Timorese poet Abé Barreto Soares (Ibid, 110).

A ghostly figure bearing a skull face and wearing a green hooded coat points in the viewers’ direction as if calling to them. The painting² in a wall of Díli includes a text in Tetun language, which reads ‘Matebian. Ha’u sei hein ó se ó hanoin aat ba rai ida ne’e’, meaning ‘Ghosts of the dead. I’ll wait for you if you have bad intentions towards this land’. The *Matebian* (ancestors/ghosts of the dead) are particularly relevant in the East Timorese animist tradition. The Timorese believe that ‘if someone has died a ‘bad’ or unnatural death [...] that the spirit may seek vengeance on the family and whole community’ (Kent 2010, 209). This is particularly relevant to the people who died during the Indonesian occupation conflict and who were not buried according to the traditional rituals because their remains were not found. The *Matebian* are believed by a large part of society to be ‘wandering ghosts’ with power to affect the living (Ibid). In this sense they are the ‘martyrs and war heroes who sacrificed their life during the resistance’ (Trindade and Bryant 2007, 18).

Matebian is also the name of a mountain in the eastern part of the country, considered to be a sanctuary of East Timorese resistance where FRETILIN³ guerrilla fighters organised their struggle during the early years of the Indonesian occupation. In 1978 hundreds of people died when a military

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² A photograph of this graffiti is included in Parkinson 2010, 114.

³ *Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente* (Revolutionary Front of Independent East Timor). The acronym FRETILIN stands for the Timorese party which was created in 1974 in the period of decolonisation and in the run-up to the planned first elections of the country. These elections did not take place because a civil war broke between FRETILIN and one of the other parties, UDT (*União Democrática Timorense*). After the Indonesian invasion in 1975, FRETILIN members sought refuge in the mountains and organised the guerrilla resistance against the Indonesian forces (Infopédia 2003-2011).

operation of encirclement and intense aerial bombing campaigns was launched by the Indonesians in Mount *Matebian* (McWilliam 2005, 27; CAVR 2005, 81-82).

We can draw some parallels with the experience of Northern Ireland, where the collective memory of a violent and socially fragmented past is commemorated in painted murals. After three decades of conflict and a peace process, the walls in the city of Belfast still portray symbols which represent the heroes and places of struggle from the two sides of the conflict. Rolston (2010, 290) argues that the commemoration of the past through the murals in Northern Ireland builds bridges for the future and allows the present to be bearable to the society. It is also a place to express the identity of a society through a process of developing a collective memory. According to Jelin (2003, cited in Rolston):

Individual memories are always socially framed ... This entails that the social is always present, even in the most 'individual' moments ... all memories are more reconstructions than recollections ... Memory is not an object that is simply there to be extracted, but rather it is produced by active subjects that share a culture and an ethos.

The ghostly murals in Timor-Leste express central values of East Timorese identity such as the respect for the ancestors and fallen heroes and the sacrifice (*susar*) and the suffering (*terus*) of the East Timorese people during the years of Indonesian occupation (Silva 2010, 67).

Commemorating national identity

Set against a background of painted sky and clouds, a figure of a woman with one eye is composed of several East Timorese symbolic objects and elements of traditional culture. The *uma lulik* (sacred house) is at the base, representing the structure of society, the centre of Timorese spirituality which worships the ancestors. The crocodile (symbolising the island of Timor and a sacred totem) and the *babadok* (drum played during traditional ceremonies) are other representative elements of East Timorese culture which make up the painting of her body. The female figure's body is split in half by a *surik* (the sword used by the Timorese warrior). She wears a traditional breastplate and a feather head-dress (used by the male elders, usually not by women), which suggests that this figure is not strictly representing an actual woman, and most probably stands for the motherland.

Figure 1 - Mural in Dili



Photo: Pedro Damião, 2003

The mural described above celebrates East Timorese cultural heritage. Street art in Timor-Leste also commemorates the achievement of independence strongly associated with East Timorese identity. The struggle against colonialism is the founding element of the nation which brings the East Timorese together, irrespective of the ethnic and political backgrounds of individuals (Leach 2008, 145).

Youth express their nationalist pride and sense of nation through symbols of resistance such as the resistance fighters and the national flag. The artists make use of revolutionary iconography, especially the images of Che Guevara (1928-67) and Bob Marley (1945-81). FALINTIL⁴ fighters, like Xanana Gusmão and Konis Santana (1957-1998), who are seen as inspirational models for youth, are portrayed as to look similar to these icons (see Parkinson 2010 27, 72).

The FALINTIL members adopted similar hairstyle and apparel to the icons. For example, the guerrilla fighters in the mountains adopted a *rastafari* hairstyle and the image of Bob Marley and *reggae music* were used by the urban clandestine resistance as symbols of rebellion against Indonesian military power (Myrntinen 2005, 241). Konis Santana's hairstyle, beard and beret closely resemble Che Guevara's look.⁵ The uncertainty of the circumstances of Konis' death also add to him being regarded as a cult figure in East Timor (Mattoso 2005, 302).

The younger members of the *geração foun*⁶, the generation which was born during the period of Indonesian occupation, and are now between their late twenties and early thirties, seek the legitimisation of their role in the resistance movement (Bexley 2007b, 70-71). Moreover, the relevance of arts for understanding post-independence identity dilemmas among East Timorese youth has been highlighted by the research of Angie Bexley (2007a). The mediums of artistic expression, like visual arts, music, theatre and performance, are able to capture a 'sense of belonging' through the emotions and bodily expressions conveyed (Ibid, 288-89).

Because members of this generation have been marginalised in the narrative of the struggle for independence, I argue that the murals are one of the public mediums for the affirmation of their contributions.

Walls of Political Dissent

Graffiti as a means of resistance to legal and political authority has been identified with youth cultures in several parts of the world. The mural tradition with public and political meaning was made prominent through the work of Mexican artists like Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros during the 1930s (Schrack 2010). Notable examples of this form of political resistance existed in the former Soviet Union, Germany, Northern Ireland, Nicaragua, Palestine (Ferrell 1995) and are still favoured tools by contemporary activists in countries like Mexico, USA (Ferrell 2005) and Venezuela (Abreu Sojo 2003). Graffiti has also been used by Egyptian artist-activists to demand political change during the revolution that brought down the President Mubarak in 2011 and afterwards in their continued struggle for freedom of expression (Cavalluzzo 2011).

Unlike most countries, Timor-Leste's physical public space has not, for the most part, been privatised and police surveillance to control the use of street art is certainly not a priority in a post-conflict country like Timor-Leste. Thus the 'the street art spirit' which is characterised by the evasion of spatial and social control and resistance to forms of urban policing in cities throughout the world (Ferrell 1995, 79; Cavalluzzo 2011, 77), is not a feature of Timor-Leste's reality. The accelerated pace of construction in the capital city Díli, however, is already resulting in the reduction of public space.

Rather than running away from the police, during the 2006 political crisis the Timorese graffiti artists were running away from 'themselves', other Timorese youth who were involved in violent fighting. The country appeared to be divided over ethnic divisions portrayed along the lines of an

⁴ *Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste* (Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor). The acronym FALINTIL designates the Timorese armed resistance force active during the Indonesian occupation.

⁵ The similarities are striking if one looks at the photograph on the cover of José Mattoso's biography of Konis Santana (Mattoso, 2005).

⁶ This expression stands for the young generation.

East-West (*Loromonu* vs. *Lorosa'e*) dispute (Trindade and Castro 2007, 10). In the words of one graffiti artist, Alfeo Sanches:

In the middle of the crisis in 2006 I was scared [...] If you painted 'no east and no west', afterwards someone from the east or the west would hang around. You were scared to paint such a message, but you really wanted to paint this strong message [...] so you just went ahead and painted it. The feeling, though, amongst everyone, was fear (Parkinson 2010, 124)

The street art mirrored the nation's contradictions, territorial and angry accusations of the marginalised youth mixed with peaceful graffiti that attempted to appeal to national unity, painted by artists like Alfeo Sanches. In the urban centre of the capital Díli, youth complained about a sense of indifference from the political leadership, due to the choice of Portuguese as the official language⁷ and their lack of opportunities to study and work (Wigglesworth 2010, 62-63). Some groups of young people started to engage in a form of 'violent identity', translated into affiliation with martial arts groups (Trindade 2008, 18; Scambary 2009).

Figure 2 - 'Timor is one'



(Photo: Vanda Narciso, 2009)

During the 2006 crisis the walls of Timor-Leste 'shouted' words of frustration towards the political leadership of the country. In March 2006 the Timorese Armed Forces (F-FDTL), supported by the Government, dismissed 595 soldiers (one third of the F-FDTL). These were 'westerner' soldiers who complained about the discrimination they faced in regard to promotions and accommodation compared to 'easterner' soldiers. While the East/West divide never emerged in Timorese society as a relevant ethnic separation, a complexity of factors related with people's grievances towards the State, economic difficulties, land disputes and political tensions contributed to the lack of law and order. The conflict lasted several months after the first episode and it spiralled into violent 'martial arts

⁷ Timor-Leste is a multilingual country, where Tetun (co-official language along with Portuguese) and other 19 national languages coexist. Indonesian and English are defined as working languages by the East Timorese Constitution.

groups' and youth gangs threatening communities and burning the houses of 'the other' geographical group.⁸

The rebel Alfredo Reinado,⁹ a controversial figure who was defiant of the government, became a hero for disenfranchised youth, especially the youngsters from western districts. His name and image, accompanied by angry words, were repeatedly painted on the walls of Díli between 2006 and 2008 (see Parkinson 2010, 125-131). Through this period of turmoil, the walls demonstrated Timorese youth's sense of unfulfilled rights.

The murals were a medium for youth to communicate political dissent and discontent but also to engage with ideas of identity and culture, justice and reconciliation, by following a global tradition of mural painting for socio-political protest.

Figure 3 - 'We the displaced want peace and J...Unity'. A refugee camp existed behind this wall in 2006-2008



(Photo: Manuel Ribeiro, 2011)

Youth voices in public space

Giroux (2003, 554) describes how the public sphere accessible to youth in the United States has become smaller and argues that this has a negative impact on their civil and democratic rights. In the post-independence period East Timorese youth have had similar experiences. They feel they have been denied a voice in the privileged public sphere(s) (the state institutions and international organisations present in the country). The older generation has criticised young people's 'instant' attitude to life and attributed to them the responsibility for the violence which occurred in 2006 (Bexley 2007b, 72). After experiencing colonialism and the denial of civil and political rights, East Timorese youth have found that independence has not yet offered them the enjoyment of basic rights such as education, employment and political participation.

⁸ For a detailed analysis of the historical background and political roots of the crisis, see Trindade and Castro (2007, 10-18).

⁹ In 2006, Alfredo Reinado led the petitioners, along with unemployed youth, to hold demonstrations against the Government's decision to dismiss the soldiers leading to a spiral of violence in Díli which displaced 100,000 people and forced the Government to step down.

In the aftermath of the 2006 political crisis, the state and aid organisations in Timor-Leste reoriented part of their programmes to finance projects aimed to foster employment and social inclusion of the younger generation. Recognising that walls are one of the most inclusive and far-reaching means of communication in Timor-Leste, the president José Ramos-Horta and several NGOs commissioned mural projects across the country (Beck 2010). In 2006 the President provided support to a group of artists from *Arte Moris* (Living Art), a free art school in Díli, to paint the walls of the capital of Timor-Leste conveying ideas of peace and national unity.

A mural project was again commissioned in 2009 to commemorate the first bicycle ‘tour of Timor’ in the country. The event, which was part of the president’s office initiative ‘Dili, City of Peace’, led to the painting of the walls of the city of Baucau with murals depicting themes of peace and promises of development.

Although it could be argued that this clearly demonstrates an attempt by the state to control the messages conveyed in a traditionally alternative ‘protest space’, it could also be argued that the President is ‘listening to the voices’ of the younger generation and recognising their importance. In Timor-Leste, the dialogue between different generations is essential for the transmission of ethical and cultural values and for the social cohesion of the country.

Figure 4 - ‘Goodbye conflict, welcome development’, winning mural of the competition for the first ‘tour the Timor’



(Photo: Vanda Narciso, 2009)

Visualising Human Rights

The history of Timor-Leste is about the success of human rights discourse in pursuing the right to self-determination, the rights of freedom of speech and thought, and the integrity of East Timorese cultural values and ethnic identities. These achievements emerged after a long history of colonialism and struggle for independence pervaded with violation and denial of fundamental human rights. The independence years brought the granting of democratic rights, the recognition of East Timorese cultural identity, and the enjoyment of newly-acquired political and civil rights which had always been denied by colonial state structures.

Nevertheless, the younger generation’s exposure to the paradox between prevailing international human rights discourses and socially disruptive practices in Timor-Leste’s post-colonial

experience (political violence, malfunctioning justice and rule of law, unequal access to economic and employment rights) provided a challenge to an effective human rights culture in the country. In addition, the rapid introduction of liberal norms without promotion of interaction with Timorese understandings and experiences has led the people to perceive democracy and human rights as a top-down imposition from external actors and urban political elites (Brown and Gusmão 2010, 64-65).

Finally, the right to justice is one of the most pressing issues in East Timorese society. There is a tension between the need for reconciliation and peace and the denial of victims' rights for redress regarding the killings, rapes and grave human rights violations which occurred during Indonesian occupation. While the political leadership adopted a policy of forgetting the past to ensure social stability in the present, large parts of East Timorese society are expecting intervention by the Timorese government and the United Nations to seek justice for the victims and their families (Kent 2011).

So, why has street art been embraced by the East Timorese youth as a medium of communication to express such conflicting feelings as suffering, frustration, pride, national belonging and hope in the post-independence period?

Figure 5 – 'Suffering'. Mural in Arte Moris School, Dili



(Photo: Manuel Ribeiro, 2011)

Ferrell (1995, 87) argues that street art represents an alternative space for 'youthful resistance, too often dismissed as mindlessly destructive', where new social arrangements are imagined.

The imagination of a new society projected onto the walls of this young country is perhaps the strongest message that can be visualised. In the contemporary world this is the closest idea to the concept of human rights, our 'ethical vision of a desired future':

Much is at stake in writing about human rights advocacy. The topic captures many ethical visions of a different future premised on human dignity: of global justice, equality and non-discrimination; of individual and group empowerment; and of meeting basic human and security needs in the face of armed struggle, environmental degradation, famines and poverty. [...] advocacy brought these principles to the intersection of clashing community, state, and global power interests (Quataert 2009, xi-xii).

In postcolonial Timorese street art the search for human dignity continues, whether it is invoking the ghosts of the past or protesting against the wrongs of the present, whether it is proclaiming the victory of a people's right to self-determination or the prevailing discrimination and poverty inside East Timorese society.

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