
COMMEMORATING THE SANTA CRUZ MASSACRE IN DILI, TIMOR-LESTE

Pierpaolo De Giosa, *Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology*

ABSTRACT

This photo-essay is a tale of the commemorations of the Santa Cruz massacre in Dili, the national capital of Timor-Leste. By documenting the symbolic side of this city, this short essay sheds light on this public holiday as a national ritual and, at the same time, highlights the role of the major actors involved. In particular, the commemorations of this massacre hold a special meaning for the recognition of the role played by clandestine youth groups to the struggle for independence – a contribution still partly neglected in the post-independence nation-building process.

KEYWORDS

Santa Cruz Massacre, 12 November, National Youth Holiday, Urban Symbolism, Dili, East Timor

BIO

Pierpaolo De Giosa is a socio-cultural anthropologist with research interests in urban and political anthropology, the politics of heritage, space and place-making, and Southeast Asia (in particular Indonesia, Malaysia, and Timor-Leste). He obtained his PhD from Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg for his research on heritage politics and the workings of World Heritage in Melaka (Malaysia), as a member of the group “The Global Political Economy of Cultural Heritage” while based at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. At the moment he is working on a monograph entitled *World Heritage and Urban Politics in Melaka. A Cityscape below the Winds*.

pierpa.degios@zoho.com

Dili, 12 November 1991

Almost twenty years after the occupation of Portuguese Timor by Indonesia, this eastern part of Timor island was still characterized by a violent conflict between pro-independence resistance and the Indonesian Army. On the day now remembered as Santa Cruz massacre thousands of people congregated at the Church de Santo António de Motael in order to attend a memorial service for Sebastião Gomes, a young activist killed by the army just in front of the church on 28 October 1991. The crowd, then, followed a procession – and peaceful demonstration – towards Santa Cruz Cemetery for the burial ceremony. It was in this graveyard that the Indonesian troops opened fire and killed more than two hundred people; others were missing in the same number, and hundreds were arrested in the aftermath (see CAVR 2005). The massacre was witnessed by foreign journalists. The footage smuggled into Australia by British journalist Max Stahl, in particular, brought this event to world attention.

This “Bloody Tuesday” is today considered a turning point in the struggle for independence. Through global visibility, the images generated solidarity campaigns worldwide and the direct diplomatic involvement of other countries – a long process that led to the end of the Indonesian occupation and the *United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor* (UNTAET) in 1999, until the de-facto independence in 2002. This short visually grounded ethnographic essay revisits the annual commemorations of this massacre as a public holiday – and nation-building ritual – shaping urban space in Dili. This “imagetext” (as it would be called by William J. T. Mitchell 1994) is based upon data collected for a broader project on the use of urban symbols to strengthen social cohesion (see Nas and De Giosa 2011) in the two major cities of the island of Timor, namely Kupang (in the western part, which belongs to Indonesia) and Dili (national capital of East Timor, or Timor-Leste). I have carried

out an ethnographic fieldwork in these two cities between August 2010 and January 2011. Thus the commemorations of the Santa Cruz massacre, that I am going to present here, were held on 12 November 2010. These commemorations are particularly important for the recognition of the role played by young clandestine activists in the struggle for liberation. In this photo-essay I offer a lens to explore the major symbols and visual expressions of this solemn act of remembrance, and to make sense of the main actors involved.

A Background: The Remnants of a Turbulent Past

Although the Portuguese had been in the region since the sixteenth century, they established the colony of Portuguese Timor only in 1702. Dili became its capital in 1769, for long time nothing more than a forgotten colonial settlement at the periphery of the Portuguese empire. Following the Portuguese Carnation Revolution, FRETILIN (the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) declared independence in 1975. Fearing the raise of a communist state, the Indonesian Army invaded East Timor under the auspices of anti-communist countries. Resistance to the Indonesian occupation was reorganized through the years into three main wings: the armed front FALINTIL (the Armed Forces for the Liberation of East Timor), the diaspora from abroad forming a diplomatic front, and the youth civilian clandestine groups. Dili has gone, since then, through a turbulent history of conflict and destruction between pro-independence organizations and pro-integration forces, especially the pro-Indonesia militias and youth gangs allied with the army.

Paradoxically, the Indonesian administration under President Suharto employed the kind of politics of the so-called “gifts”. While, on the one hand, Jakarta was fighting the resistance movement, on the other hand it engaged into a process for the development of Dili through pro-integration campaigns through the construction of infrastructures and monuments such as, for example, the Integration Statue – a Timorese warrior in traditional dress breaking the chains of colonialism, implicitly the Portuguese colonization. Catholic structures figure among the most acclaimed “gifts” of Suharto such as for example the *Cristo Rei* and the Cathedral built in the eighties, supposed to be the biggest Roman Catholic church in Southeast Asia. However, as we will see, the relationship between Jakarta and the East Timorese Catholic Church was a difficult one. Today East Timorese are proud of these Catholic symbols, although they still remember the Indonesian occupation, I was told by Mr. Francisco (the custodian of Dili’s Cathedral).

When in 1999, under the pressure of the international community, Indonesia allowed a referendum offering a choice between an autonomy plan or independence, the majority of East Timorese voted for the second option. Although the referendum was carried out under the control of the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET), through a series of systematic attacks the Indonesian Army and pro-integration paramilitary groups razed a great number of buildings in the country (with Dili as main target) – actually a planned scorched-earth strategy to destroy anything useful for the enemy, and symbolically to take back the so-called Indonesian “gifts”. It emerged then, from the ashes of Dili, a townscape of “difficult memories” (Leach 2009) made of places of imprisonment and torture such as the jail Comarca Balide.

Since the independence the so-called “Generation of ’75” who grew up during the Portuguese era, and that proclaimed independence in 1975, has gained the most powerful positions in the new independent nation: mostly people connected to the first two wings of the resistance mentioned above such as Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão (former first commander of FALINTIL), José Manuel Ramos-Horta (long-term exiled spokesman of the resistance), or Mari Alkatiri (one of the founders of, and still serving, FRETILIN). Thus it is not unsurprising that in the reconstruction and nation-building process they have privileged a sort of “Luso-Timorese” heritage as a re-imagination of a new nation-state with a special connection to the Portuguese past. After declaring Portuguese national language (an idiom spoken by a minority in the country by then), they have focused the initial efforts of symbolic reconstruction on the remnants of the Portuguese monuments and buildings (see Prista 2006).



FIGURE 1: *Cristo Rei*. Standing on a globe on the top of a hill in Fatucama Cape (six kilometers from downtown Dili), the statue is 27 meters high in line with the Indonesian nationalist symbolism, as East Timor (*Timor Timur* in Indonesian language) was the 27th Province of the Republic. Built five years after the massacre, it was a Suharto's "gift" for the twentieth anniversary of the integration. Ironically, this monument was inaugurated four days after the East Timorese Ramos-Horta and Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo have been awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize. Attending the unveiling of the statue together with Suharto, Bishop Belo expressed his perplexity with these words: "What's the point of building a statue of Jesus if the people are not going to be treated according to the gospel? It would be better to improve the situation rather than build statues" (cited in Gunn, 2000: 233).

When I arrived in Dili in late 2010 the national capital of this young country was still a "wounded city" (see Susser and Schneider 2003) facing the challenges of reconstruction, in terms of built

environment, infrastructures, as well as public life and security. In its first decade as capital of a sovereign country, Dili still suffered from more recent civil unrest and insecurity that unveiled further challenges on the way to a fully pacified country. Several outbreaks of violence and factional fighting (involving the military, police force, and street gangs) resulted in the 2006 crisis and the attempted assassinations of the then President of the Republic Ramos-Horta and Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão in 2008. The United Nations peacekeeping mission left the country only in 2012. Amidst the ruins of Indonesian destruction and the regeneration of Portuguese heritage, several murals were calling for peace and unity.



FIGURE 2: A mural with doves of peace saying: *Mai ita ba Sidade Dili*. It literally means “Let us go to Dili City” in Tetum, the language that has been declared as official language together with Portuguese after independence.



FIGURE 3: A mural reading “peace” (*dame*) at Dili’s municipal stadium. On the one hand, the nationalist narrative of the officialdom emphasizes the five centuries of “struggle” (*fumi*) against foreign oppression, and public discourses on the past revolves around the experience of “suffering” (*terus*) (see Adams 2019; Gunn 1999; da Silva 2008). On the other hand, street art after independence forwards a message – and hope – for a new era of peace.

Remembering on 12 Novembru

The month of November holds a special meaning for the relationship between the dead and the living. In Timor-Leste the night between 1 and 2 November (the All Saints Day and All Souls Day respectively) is emotionally celebrated by people as opening of the “Day of the Souls of the Dead”, *Loron Matebian* or *Finadu*. At night thousands of candles light up the darkness of Dili’s streets. Families gather together at midnight in order to pray and remember the souls of deceased relatives. At midnight the ancestors are supposed to come to their relatives’ table. After prayers everybody can enjoy food, ancestors included. If this day symbolically connects the worlds of the living and the dead, the commemorations held on 12 November (*Selebrasaun Loron 12 Novembru*) connects the freedom’s martyrs to the East Timorese future generations.

The memory of 12 *Novembru* is especially important for a group of resistance victims and survivors, those filling the numerous groups making up the youth and civilian resistance front who played a major role in demonstrations such as the one held on 12 November 1991: RENETIL (the National Resistance of Students of East Timor), OJECTIL (the Organisation of Catholic East Timorese Youth and Students) which became later on OJETIL (the Organisation of East Timorese Youth and Students), OPJLATIL (the Popular Organisation of Timorese Youth Lorikeet Warriors), and FITUN (the Always United Front of Timor), just to mention a few. Given the dominant position of the old generation and the veterans in the leadership of the country, the so-called *Geração Foun* (the new generation) – who grew up during the Indonesian occupation, and with no fluency in Portuguese – has been neglected in the official nationalist narrative for years after independence. While the role of selected veterans and resistance leaders connected to FALINTIL has been glorified through official memorialization and selective pension schemes, the role of youth civil society groups has been overlooked (see Arthur 2019; Leach 2017). In 2011 indeed, when “the twentieth anniversary of the Santa Cruz demonstration approached, the secretary of state for veterans’ affairs explained the 1991 organisers could only count their involvement as one day of service” (International Crisis Group 2011: 8).

It is in this context, that former members of the youth resistance groups and relatives of victims of the Santa Cruz massacre have pushed the government to a fair recognition of those who have fallen in the struggle for liberation, although not officially part of major forces such as FALINTIL or FRETILIN. After independence a special committee for 12 November, Komite 12 Novembru, has been established by some of the survivors, including its chairman Gregorio Saldanha – who was among former OJETIL activists who organized the demonstration of 1991, himself shot and detained after the aftermath. Komite 12 Novembru is especially active in lobbying for a full recognition of the youth clandestine resistance contribution to independence by turning the Santa Cruz Cemetery into a memorial site. It also continues to urge the Indonesian and East Timorese governments to search for mass graves used after the massacre in order to give to the victims a proper burial.

The government of Timor-Leste has gradually moved towards the recognition of this important youth resistance. In fact, since 2005 the 12 November anniversary is a public holiday, the National Youth Day (*Loron Nasional Juventude*). The commemorations of November 2010 are significant in this context. In fact, Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão finally announced the prize to the best design for the project of a monument in memory of the Santa Cruz massacre. Yet, the construction of a monument commemorating the massacre in 2012 did not solve the friction between the Komite 12 Novembru and the government. The latter, in fact, built a memorial – reproducing a young man helping his injured friend as in the footage taken by Max Stahl – that does not have any inscription referring to the committee or the victims’ names. Furthermore it built this monument in front of Motael Church instead of the Santa Cruz Cemetery where the committee is continuing to push for the construction of a memorial site (see also Arthur 2019; Kent 2015; Leach 2017). Since then, the committee deliberately bypass the monument in front of Motael Church during the commemorations (see Kent 2015: 10-11). The transformation of Santa Cruz Cemetery into a memorial site continue to be a source of dissatisfaction. In 2017 Gregorio Saldanha said that the committee has provided a plan, but they were still waiting the government to fund it.

Besides the *Geração Foun* and East Timorese leaders, the Catholic Church plays a crucial role due to its support to civilian resistance in the past. During the Indonesian occupation “participation in the numerous religious activities of the Catholic Church” seemed to be “the only way of associating freely and publicly in large numbers” (Aditjondro, 1994: 69). Churches in Dili were functioning as a place of

refuge and security for East Timorese. They have been for pro-independence youth activists what the mountains have been for FALINTIL during the guerrilla war against the Indonesian Army. This is the case especially for Motael Church where Sebastião Gomes was killed in 1991. Indonesian Army knew it well as shown by the words of General Syafei: “The Church, said Syafei, used “humanity, democracy, human rights and freedom” as a cover for illicit activities” (Human Rights Watch, 1993: 25). During the Indonesian years, catholic symbols became a target for pro-integration militias. Many Virgin Mary *grottos* were destroyed, and other desecrations or proper “violations” took place in Dili around churches or statues such as for example when a dead snake was found around the neck of the Virgin Mary statue in front of the bishop’s residence (Aditjondro, 1994: 72).



FIGURE 4: *The march starts at Motael Church. This is the oldest Roman Catholic church in the country.*



FIGURE 5: *Students carrying a cross with the colors of Timor-Leste's national flag.* The cross is brought in procession to the Santa Cruz Cemetery. The march starts after a Mass.



FIGURE 6: *A young girl waiting the procession with the national flag.* This flag was adopted for the first time in 1975 when the country declared independence from Portugal. After few days the Indonesian Army occupied East Timor. It continued to be an important symbol of struggle until when, on Independence Day in 2002, it was re-adopted as official national flag. The flag “was associated with the people as a whole and evoked the ideal unity of the nation” (Traube 2011: 131). According to the Constitution, the colors represents in order “the traces of colonialism” (yellow), “the obscurantism that needs to be overcome” (black), “the struggle for national liberation” (red), and “peace” (white), while the star is “the light that guides” (Timor-Leste 2002) (for other discussions about the flag see Arthur 2019).



FIGURE 7: *The Crocodile's Drum-Band of São Pedro-Comoro.* According to a Timorese folktale originally the island of Timor was a crocodile. After independence the crocodile has been regenerated as national symbol for the unity of the country.



FIGURE 8: *Thousands of people walk through the streets of Dili where remnants of destruction still recounts tales of a turbulent past.*



FIGURE 9-10: This banner reads “Our deaths, your lives. Our sacrifice, our independence” (*Ami nia mate, imi nia moris. Ami nia sacrificio, ita nia independencia*). *Viva Juventude Lorico Assuain* is a direct reference to the youth and students in general, and the *loriku aswa'in* (literally the “lorikeet warriors”, the name under which those who participated in the demonstration of 12 November 2012 reorganized the new generation resistance) in particular: a call for the recognition of the contribution of clandestine youth groups to the struggle for independence during the Indonesian occupation.



FIGURE 11: *Relatives of the victims marching from Motael Church to Santa Cruz Cemetery.*



FIGURE 12: *Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão (left) giving a speech at the entrance of Santa Cruz Cemetery. There were other politicians attending the ceremony at Santa Cruz Cemetery, including Alkatiri and the then President of the Republic of Timor-Leste Ramos-Horta. The presence of politicians from the old generation followed recent trends such the awarding of “clandestine” medals to the victims, and survivors, of the massacre (see Leach 2017: 191).*



FIGURE 13: *The tomb of Sebastião Gomes is the point of convergence of the commemorations where people lay flowers, light candles, and pray. Only recently government has upgraded the gravestone with a bust and an epitaph. This picture, taken in 2010, thus shows the former concrete cross headstone. On 12 November 2010, Alkatiri and Xanana Gusmão paid homage to Sebastião Gomes as well. The presence of politicians that time was a turning point for the recognition of the contribution of the youth to the struggle for independence. Sebastião Gomes has become the symbol of all the youth victims and martyrs for the independence, but also the union of all East Timorese fostering a spirit of national cohesion.*



FIGURE 14: *A relative of a victim sitting at the Santa Cruz Cemetery.*



FIGURE 15: *People gathering at the Santa Cruz Cemetery.*



FIGURE 16: *People conclude the commemoration with the traditional tebe-tebe dance.*



FIGURE 17: *A mural reading Dili Cidade da Paz. The “Dili – City of Peace” concept was adopted by former President Ramos-Horta in 2009. This new label is celebrated through international sport events such as Dili’s annual marathon and the Tour de Timor.*

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