

Post-independence Timorese Literature and the Aesthetics of Accountability

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The objective of this paper is to examine the production of literary accounts by Timorese authors about justice and injustice in Timor-Leste since independence. The sources for this study include poems and short stories published in Tetum, Indonesian and Portuguese in one of the local newspapers, *Timor Post*, material from poetry readings held in Timor-Leste and interviews with the authors. Following a brief introduction to the literary arts of Timor-Leste we will examine a selection of contemporary poems that exemplify prevalent motifs in Timor-Leste's literature. These poems demonstrate the ways in which the theme of justice is developing to replace the theme of independence that dominated Timorese literature written prior to 1999. I will argue that this contemporary body of literature exercises a hidden, informal kind of accountability, or an 'aesthetics of accountability,' that is entwined with the formal pursuits of the transitional justice sector.

The Literary Scene²

Prior to independence there has been a handful of Timorese authors of notoriety including Fernando Sylvan, Borja da Costa and Xanana Gusmao. These authors composed in the Portuguese language and their primary theme was the search for independence for East Timor. During the Portuguese and Indonesian periods of rule they wrote in an environment of censorship and repression, so that Timorese poetry could not be enjoyed as a public art within East Timor, but rather was published abroad or relished in silence as an act of resistance. These poets remain a strong presence in the cultural memory of Timor-Leste. Their works are the subject of study for younger generations of Timorese writers. However, this new generation of artists can more openly express themselves within the context of democracy, globalization and technology. As a result, the style and content of Timorese literature is moving in new directions.

Despite the dynamic changes in this field, written forms of literature remains an area of study that has been mostly overlooked. There are no bookstores or university programs devoted to Timorese literature. Works are most accessible through the Saturday edition of the newspaper mentioned above, *Timor Post*, and at public recitations often sponsored by a group of artists led by the poet, Abe Barreto Soares. The most widely used forum for Timorese literature is the internet where several blogs provide access to new works and an exchange of commentary between writers and readers. There have been several radio shows and literature contests as well as a page devoted to poetry in the political magazine, *Talitakum*, but none of these ventures have produced a permanent venue for publication and promotion of the literary arts.

Another challenge to accessing contemporary Timorese literature is language. A reader must know multiple languages to enjoy the developing body of literature because two of the defining characteristics of post-independence works are a world - view and polylinguism. To survey Timorese writing written after 1999 requires a reading knowledge of at least Indonesian, English, Portuguese and Tetum, and if possible other local languages such as Fataluku and Makassae. Poems in all of these languages have appeared in the local newspapers and at poetry readings, and according to my research most Timorese writers compose in more than one language. It is not uncommon for a mixture of

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² As a point of clarification, this paper only examines the written literature of Timor-Leste and does not include oral literature. Because oral literature is not included the paper reflects literary life primarily in Dili and among an educated elite. A study of the literary life of Timorese living in rural areas could produce different conclusions. The literary genre of biography is also not included in this study although there have been several biographies published by Timorese authors. One reason for excluding this genre from the study was that research revealed that many of these biographies relied on ghost writers.

languages to be used within the text of a single poem. A reader also frequently encounters literature that references foreign affairs. In this survey there were poems specifically written about events in Aceh, Gaza and the United States. In summary, the poetry emerging from Timor-Leste is a mixture of languages and styles that is cosmopolitan and diverse in its expression.

During the course of this research I encountered people, particularly working within the international community, who were not able to overcome these challenges to accessibility and told me that Timorese poetry ‘did not exist.’ The results of this study prove that Timorese poetry as only one of the genres of Timorese literature is thriving as both a high intellectual pursuit and a popular art form. Furthermore, poetry is engaged indirectly and directly with the politics of justice.

Motifs in Timorese Literature

Below we will examine several poems that represent common motifs within contemporary Timorese literature that are not exclusive, meaning that a single composition may contain more than one of these motifs, defined as follows:

Trauma

Writings of this kind are built around narratives inspired by victim’s stories. They exhibit the characteristics of ‘trauma’ literature, such as repetition, incomplete phrasing, abrupt ends, awkward transitions, unusual rhythm patterns and melancholy.

Denouncement

These works feature advocacy narratives that respond to failings of the political system and call for reform. The tone and technique of these pieces are often rhetorical.

Healing

This motif is expressed through hopeful narratives that explore the process of forgiving, reconciliation, and accountability outside the formal justice sector. These works draw on traditional Timorese images and folklore.

Close Readings of a Selection of Poems³

Trauma

A common character in the post-independence Timorese literature is the wounded witness – a survivor of human rights abuses. This figure is a narrator who tells a story in an effort to heal, but in each case the protagonist discovers the wound remains and the text reopens it, instead of leading to an end. The text brings the wound to life again, and places it in a public, visible place. As the text flows, so do traumatizing memories and emotions. Cancio Ximenes’ poem, ‘Luka berdarah’ (Bleeding Wound, 2007) is the most illustrative of the representations of trauma.

Luka Berdarah

Luka masa laluh masih memerah
Luka-luka itu masih terbalut perban kesedihan
Tapi...

Dengan tingkahmu
Engkau ukir luka baru di atas luka lama
Hingga luka masa lalu kian berdarah
Dan semakin berdarah-darah

Bleeding Wound

The wound from the past still reddens
Those wounds are still bandaged with guaze and
sadness
But...

With your deeds
You engrave a new wound on top of the old
wound
Until the wound of the past bleeds on
And all the more it bleeds and bleeds

³ Unless noted all translations by Leigh-Ashley Lipscomb. All of these poems appeared in Saturday editions of the Timor Post which the author acquired through clippings or in the newspaper archives with the permission of the Editor of the Timor Post.

Luka berdarah, darah-darah pun terluka
 Darah terluka, luka-luka pun berdarah
 Luka menganga
 Darah mendanau
 Laksana kubangan
 Tempat luka-luka berkubang

The wound bleeds, blood and blood it is
 ever wounded
 Blood of the wounded, wounds and
 wounds they are ever bleeding
 The wound gapes
 The blood pools
 Resembling a puddle
 The spot where the wounds are muddied

Kapan luka-luka itu disembuhkan?
 Kapan kubangan darah itu kering?
 Kapan luka masa lalu itu membekas?
 Tanyakanlah kepada luka yang berdarah-darah.

When will these wounds be healed?
 When will these puddles of blood dry?
 When will that wound of the past leave a trace?
 Ask the wound that bleeds and bleeds.

This poem is striking in comparison to many others in the trauma literature genre because it uses rhythm in highly patterned ways. The majority of the poem is written in neat trochees, with particular lines conforming to set patterns for emphasis. It is interesting to note that the two lines where the rhythm is broken are the places in the poem where the poet makes accusations, and the wound reopens. In the second stanza, the poet uses rhythm most deliberately for an aesthetic effect. Lines 3,4 and 5 are written in identical meter for greater impact. The meter of the final line of the second stanza matches the last line of the first stanza. Overall, the patterned constructions contribute to the flow of the poem. This metric regularity is aesthetically pleasurable, which keeps the reader's attention even though the poem describes a scene that is grotesque and unpleasant. The sounds of the poem pump and throb violently like blood from an open wound.

Where the poem's meter is highly irregular, it expresses the protagonist's vulnerability. The final line of the poem is the most ragged. The wound is personified, which is made more explicit by the use of the word *kepada* that indicates an action directed towards a person. Here the poet asserts the affect of violence – the wound itself – holds the answers to healing. The symptom is the solution, but the solution is the symptom in an unbreakable cycle. The wound remains open and vulnerable even as the poem ends.

Complementing this regular use of rhythm are various techniques of repetition. The assonance of 'a's and 'u's throughout the poem, and particularly at the end of lines creates aural symmetry in the poem. The poem uses both alliteration and consonance. The first line is fully alliterated (*Luka masa laluh masih memerah*). 'D' sounds are also repeated throughout the poem for example in the line '*darah mendanau*.' This alliteration and consonance enhance the repetition of the words *luka* and *darah* throughout the poem. The repetition of these images is also mnemonic: repetition creates memory. The writer wants the blood and the wound to be seen and remembered. This desire is explicated in the next to the last line when he asks when the wound will leave a trace. The point the writer makes here is even though it is bleeding, the blood remains invisible and then people continue to wound the same place (*tempat*) again.

The writer uses the poem to ask the audience: when will the violence of the past have meaning? For this poet the wound must be seen and heard. Its perception by an outside audience in itself will endow the wound with meaning – not the impossible task of identifying its origins or erasing it forever. Much like the formal mechanism of a truth commission, this poem hinges on the public testimony of a traumatized witness who reveals truths and creates social memory of human rights abuses committed in the past.

Denouncement

A poem that is representative of denouncement is 'Jangan' by Santina, or simply, 'Don't!' (2005)

Jangan
Jangan berbicara tentang keadilan
Mari kita menghitung berapa
Banyak
Batu nisan yang tersebar di
Loro-sae

Don't!
 Don't talk about justice
 Let's count how many
 Many
 gravestones there are spread across
 Loro'sae

*Jangan berbicara tentang
Rekonsiliasi
Mari kita berdebat tentang berapa
Real estate yang akan kita bangun
Diatas batu nisan manusia*

Yang berkorban demi keadilan

*Jangan bicara tentang kenyataan
Mari kita berdiskusi tentang
Apakah pembantaian itu fiktif*

Don't talk about
Reconciliation
Let's debate about how much
Real estate that we will develop
Over the gravestones of human
beings
Who were sacrificed for justice

Don't talk about facts
Let's discuss about
whether that slaughter was fictitious.

Above all, the feeling of this poem is uncomfortable. There is no rhyme and no meter. 'Don't' is a strong and harsh command. There is assonance of the 'a' (ah) sound throughout the poem that mimics the sound of an angry outcry (Aaaah!). The assonance is balanced by the consonance of the 'b' sound, which enhances the tones of disgust and sarcasm in the poem. For emphasis and resolution in the final lines of the poem, the poet breaks this pattern with the use of the word 'fiktif.' The 'f' contrasts with the dominant 'b' sounds, and the 'i' contrasts with the 'ah' sounds.

The context within which this poem was published was the announcement of the convening of the Commission of Truth and Friendship (CTF). The poet's questions about the meaning of justice appear to be directly related to the anxiety and anger at the creation of this transitional justice institution that many people feared would grant amnesty to Indonesian perpetrators. The poem reflects these events in its treatment of the politics of reconciliation.

For example, the poem accepts that sacrifices were made for justice, and justice was the cause of independence before 1999 (Over the gravestones of human/beings/Who were sacrificed for justice). But, it denounces the post-independence extension of the equation, so that independence = justice = reconciliation. The poem argues that reconciliation is not honoring the purpose of the pre-independence sacrifices of life. It posits the sacrifices of life for independence are now being sold out for the sake of economic gain (Don't talk about/Reconciliation/ Let's debate about how much/Real estate that we will develop). Reconciliation, for this poet, is a fictitious form of justice that is not equivalent to the real sacrifices made by people for independence. If the deaths were fictitious, then perhaps reconciliation would be appropriate as a form of justice.

This poem exhibits a common technique of Timorese literary closure. The poet asks a rhetorical question to resolve the poem and challenge (rather than provide an answer) to the reader. This text raises questions about what degree the distinction between 'fact' and 'fiction' can be made in the context of the politicization of justice in Timor-Leste. It questions whether 'justice,' as decided by Timor-Leste and Indonesia's political leaders, can be believed to provide an authentic, truthful, complete, and memorial account of the past. The poem questions whether justice, or the rule of law, will be based on facts or fictions and in so doing engages in the politics of transitional justice.

Healing

Other poets write about the benefits of truth and reconciliation, and do not always portray these forms of justice as obstacles to judicial forms of accountability.

For example, one poem by Abe Barreto Soares:

Burus Rohan Laek⁴
*Buat hotu sei rahun
Buat hotu sei nakfera
Buat hotu sei sai uut
Dubun foun sei mosu, haburas rai tetuk*

Flourish Everlasting
Everything will be crushed
Everything will be broken
Everything will become dusty
New buds will appear, the flat land flourishing

⁴ The translation of this poem is from *Terra* and is the only authoritative one in English.

<i>Ita sei hamulak</i>	We will pray
<i>Ita sei hananu knananuk bei ala</i>	We will sing the songs of ancestors
<i>Ita sei tebe</i>	We will <i>tebe</i>
<i>Ita sei bidu</i>	We will <i>bidu</i>
<i>hadulas latuk uma lulik</i>	circling the stones of the sacred house
<i>Biti boot sei nahe</i>	A big mat will be spread out
<i>Ita hotu sei tuur</i>	We all will sit down
<i>Ita fuan sei mamar</i>	Our heads will cool
<i>Ita ulun sei malirin</i>	Our hearts will be soft
<i>Haklaken lia loos</i>	telling the truth
<i>Haktuir lia naksalak</i>	recounting the wrongdoings
<i>K'solok domin sei mosu</i>	The happiness of love will appear
<i>K'manek dame sei matak</i>	The beauty of peace will be green
<i>Buras no buras</i>	Flourish and flourish
<i>Buras rohan laek</i>	Flourish everlasting

Barretto's poem tells the story of the way in which truth, reconciliation and accountability could emerge in local communities after the destruction of 1999 and 2006. Collective sound rather than the silence of impunity is the anecdote for suffering that is suggested by this poem. The author's use of *ita*⁵ (the 1st person plural marker specifically designated in Tetum to include the speaker and listener, or here the reader and writer) is a key element to understanding the intended audience, message and aesthetics of this poem. The subject of the poem is 'we' – an intrinsically inclusive view of Timorese identity that does not distinguish between political or ethnic identities. His use of *ita* is also notable because it eschews the commonly used terms of victim and perpetrator. He avoids these labels even though he is writing in this poem about reconciliation meetings where perpetrators and victims would face each other. The implication of this diction is that accountability is and should be a collective concept that does not emphasize differences. There are not multiple subjects in this poem (i.e. us and them). *Ita*, the collective, will speak of wrongdoings. This subtle word choice is important and powerful because it implies that only when truth is told by *all* parties to the conflict, will Timor-Leste establish peace and flourish. Barretto's poem is interpreted here as an allegory for collective Timorese accountability and the peace and healing which can come from a process that combines this kind of accountability with reconciliation.

Finding Justice in Poetry

Of the over 100 poems collected in public venues and from private individuals for this study of post-independence Timorese writers, over half of the poems were about justice. In addition approximately 10 short stories addressed the same theme. As the poems above illustrate, some poems are more direct than others in their discussion of this theme.

Interviews with the authors of these works revealed many of the poets were working within the justice sector – either for the courts or the truth commissions or reporting on them. The content and context of these works in this study of contemporary literature reveal that in post-independence Timor-Leste, literature, and in particular, poetry, is acting as a forum for artists and citizens to provide personal commentaries – both positive and negative - on the justice systems they worked within, and to respond to the traumatic and complex process of the Timorese nation confronting the past.

Timorese poetry plays various roles in defining the nature of justice in society. It releases the trauma of years of suffering and oppression and exposes emotional truths alongside the factual and forensic truths pursued by the formal transitional justice institutions. Timorese poetry also acts as a forum for dissent and denouncement when the justice system fails: it is an activist's tool to call attention to and transform the state of impunity. Finally, poetry acts as a model for reconciliation and healing to prevent

⁵ The Indonesian version of the poem uses the same kind of grammatical construction, with the word *kita*.

future human rights abuses. This new body of poetry focuses on the stories of justice and injustice in Timor-Leste and captures the views of people who have participated in these processes.

These poets choose literature for its credibility as a political tool for change used by the older generation of Timorese writers during the Resistance, and for its use of aesthetics that can enhance their vision's persuasiveness. In this way poetry acts as a vessel for people's views on transitional justice. It comprises an independent and 'hidden' form of assigning meaning to the experience of injustice and to exercise accountability for the past and for the present circumstances of violence within Timor-Leste. In so doing all of these poems depict the unifying cause of the Timorese people both before and after independence as the search for justice, and enhance the meaning and pursuit of accountability.

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