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Women of Timor-Leste: Unyielding in the fight against oppression and violence

by Berta Antonieta Tilman Pereira

Through the centuries, women have survived violence in Timor-Leste. They were actively involved in the fight for independence. But only fragments of their history have been written and remain largely invisible on a sociopolitical level.

The Weavers of Memory

History in Timor-Leste's communal societies is passed from generation to generation orally. The history of women, however, only truly comes alive where they assemble. Whether that is working the land on the farm, making *tais* (traditional cloth), or weaving *bote* (traditional baskets). Their history, in particular, can be found in traditional woven clothing – the intricate patterns weaving a rich narrative of their own memories.

In this sense, the importance of weaving *tais* transcends being a job or arts and crafts for tourists. In Timor-Leste, *tais* is not your everyday clothes. You wear them for traditional rituals, at weddings and even at funerals. Following independence, these weaving patterns were stolen and commercially exploited by private companies, disrespecting the women's labor, threatening their livelihood and appropriating their intellectual property.



left:
Woven history: the group Buibere nia Riska painted murals concerning the socio-economic function and participation of women on the walls of the national stadium in Dili in September 2019. (Photo: Anemi Wick)

right:
Woman preparing the fruits of harvest. (Photo: Titiso Kour-Ara)



Oppression rooted in tradition and foreign rule

Life in Timor-Leste centers on the rural. Even today, 64% of East Timorese are subsistence farmers, more than half of them are women. The connection of these women to mother earth is inseparable. Their stories are written in the corn and the cassava that they plant and store for the dry season. Their memories are planted within the seeds of local plants and herbs. The knowledge and history of their lives is passed down through the generations.

Unlike women in the West, East Timorese women are subject to traditional practices. A large part of these traditional practices exclude them from making their own decisions. Our national hero Rosa Muki Bonaparte famously wrote in her 1975 manifesto:

During the time of Indonesian occupation, women were planting, preparing and smuggling food to the mountains to feed the clandestine movement at great personal risk. Women showed great courage in the long struggle for national independence, they were empowered and their contributions were recognized. Without the revolutionary acts of East Timorese women during this time, the outcome may be different today. While women at present remain just as strong, they must continue to fight for their own political and economic liberation and struggle against the patriarchal, colonial, and traditional forces that seek to disenfranchise them.

“ The principal objective of women participating in the revolution is not, strictly speaking, the emancipation of women as women, but the triumph of the revolution, and consequently, the liberation of women as a social being who is the target of a double exploitation: that under the traditional conceptions and that under the colonialist conceptions ” (East Timor’s “Red Rosa”, David Hutt, New Mandala, 18. August, 2017)

Muki, a women’s rights activist, member of the FRETILIN national committee and general secretary of the East Timor Popular Women’s Orga-

Women working the land (Photo: Ego Lemos)



nization (OPMT, *Organizasaun Popular da Mulher de Timor*), was killed early in the Indonesian Invasion.

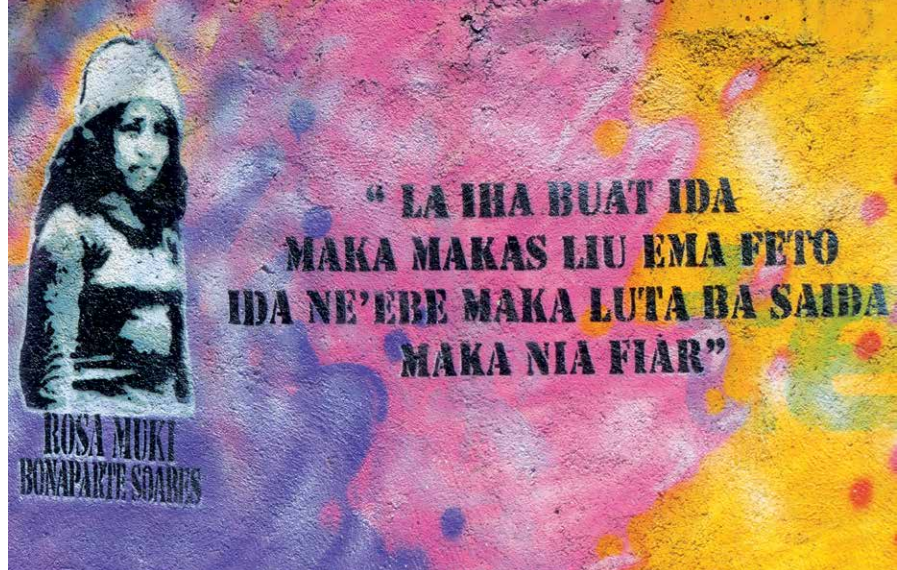
She helped us to identify and reflect the deeply rooted oppressions stemming from customary traditions, as well as a colonial legacy affecting women to this day. Our traditional practices are unwritten rituals and ways of life passed on through the generations. They vary from clan to clan.

Traditions dispossess women of their self-determination

Timor-Leste's traditional practices continue to live on, especially in rituals such as marriages and funerals. By shaping these important moments, they continue to shape us and our communities. Some cultural practices have been reinterpreted as culturally normative and unquestionable as a part of national pride. They are collective rituals binding our communities together. Some can also be regarded positively such as:

- *nahe biti* ('spreading the woven mat'), where everyone sits on a mat and discusses problems on a level playing field to find solutions.
- *fó sala* ('compensate mistakes'), the practice of paying a fine if you swear or insult someone and;
- *tara bandu* ('banning'), a practice preserving nature to protect sacred places and the environment.

The key commonality uniting these practices is that women's involvement is usually indirect or passive.



Rosa Muki Bonaparte: „Nothing is stronger than a woman fighting for what she believes in“ Graffiti in Dili (Photo: Monika Schlicher)

Some have, with time, subordinated women to men and threatened their right to self-determination. This becomes clear in the practice of *barlaki*, a traditional marriage meant to unify the spouses' families by invoking certain rituals and accumulating wealth for the unified line. *Barlaki* can also be understood as a marriage between two families.

In a process of mediation between the uncles as male representatives of their families, the type and amount of *barlaki* is determined, with the aim of tying the families together and sealing the union. This practice excludes women from the decision making process in two ways: for centuries they could neither decide what kind of marriage they wanted, nor what conditions should apply to the husband's family. This led to the practice being reinterpreted as a dowry, with the men gaining ownership of the women, who are in turn commodified, making some men feel justified in regulating, controlling or domestically abusing their wives.



“Women cannot move freely”, the group Buibere nia Riska painted murals concerning the socioeconomic function and participation of women on the walls of the national stadium in Dili in september 2019. (Photo: Anemi Wick)

Foreign rule exacerbates the impact of patriarchal structures

These traditional practices have survived unchanged for hundreds of years despite colonialism and oppressive regimes. This is because both systems are patriarchal, seeking to control, exercise male dominance and continuing the cycle of oppression of women. For example, my mother was born in 1960 under Portuguese colonialism. According to her, women could not walk alone for fear of being abducted and raped by the Portuguese military. They had to be accompanied by a male relative even during daytime.

Under Indonesian occupation [1975–1999], it was essentially the same story: Since 1975 my mother was part of the East Timor Popular Women's Organization (OPMT, *Organizasaun Popular da Mulher de Timor*) in Alas, Manufahi, the region where she lived. As part of their popular education policy, she tried to convince people who had fled to the mountains not to surrender to the Indonesians. This landed her on the Indonesian army's red list, putting her and her entire family at risk of being killed. Indonesian soldiers followed and surveilled her, trying to woo her into 'marriage'. To save herself from being prostituted and protecting her family from retribution should she refuse, she had to find a husband quickly.

Ostracization of the survivors

My mother's story is not extraordinary. It is the story of countless East Timorese women saving their families and themselves by living with Indonesian soldiers or police, being forced into prostitution by the Japanese military in WWII or just being forced into a sudden marriage. Further, the women who sacrificed their lives in this way and their children are ostracized from Timorese society even today. Instead of recognizing their sacrifice as a heroic deed saving lives, society judges them and labels them 'nona ba bapa' or 'nona ba malae' (prostitute of the Indonesians and the foreigners).

Systematic imprisonment and torture of women to gather information was common under the Indonesian occupation. Rape as a weapon of war is another commonly used tactic by the oppressors to denigrate and shame women. These gruesome acts have barely received any attention in the discourse, as that would involve the mentioning of a women's 'intimate parts'. Discussion of sexualized violence is seen as shameful and taboo. Women's struggles in liberating the country are not fully recognized and celebrated and most statues still glorify male war heroes. Only the CAVR (Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste) stands out as a unique resource, documenting the experiences of countless women. Based on societal and traditional norms, on actions and

*"I tell my story, because I don't want the next generation to fall victim to violence" On December 7, 2018, the anniversary of the Indonesian invasion, the organization *Asosiasaun Chega! ba ita* and several other groups organized a memorial march in the city of Bacau of survivors of sexualized violence during wartime. Under the slogan »Hear our Story – Act to Change« this event was part of a nationwide campaign against gender-based violence. The trip around the city led to former military and police stations and to torture sites, such as the Hotel Flamboyan. (Photo: ACbit)*



judgements by the government, the society and their families, women are still being ostracized and have to constantly struggle for recognition.

Resiliency and Dignity

Women play a pivotal role in East Timorese society. Their existence under double oppression is in itself an act of resistance and a fight for independence and self-determination every day. Even today, their contributions to the struggle that are seen as traditionally 'female', be it supporting the revolutionary forces of the past, or raising a new generation of leaders of today, are not properly remembered and valued. It is the time for us to celebrate women's contributions in Timor-Leste's society – past, present, and future.

We should center the courage and strength of rural women in our consciousness. Their knowledge of the land, food, nutrition, natural medicines and clothing has to be preserved. In 1975 Rosa Muki Bonaparte and the women-led OPMT succeeded in drastically reducing the illiteracy rate. A system of crèches and public childcare options were meant to lead to more equality in the home. This is the kind of movement we need to reactivate. There is so much knowledge and so many skills the OPMT could not pass on to younger generations, as they were interrupted by the illegal Indonesian invasion. Let's not forget our female heroes, like Rosa Muki Bonaparte, and ensure that her legacy and presence in Timor-Leste's history is not forgotten within our next generation by building public libraries or agriculture research center's in her name.



East Timorese women have held on to their lightheartedness and their drive. They are not afraid to laugh and make their voices heard in public or dance the *tebe-tebe* (a traditional circle dance) while harvesting corn. If you travel around Timor-Leste, it will be women welcoming guests with a cup of coffee. Not only did they prepare the coffee, but they also collected the beans from the tree they planted in the soil long ago. The connection of these women with Timor-Leste's land, their oral histories and their resiliency, passing from generation to generation, represents the wealth of a nation worth preserving and celebrating. We must remember that women are not victims. They are resilient survivors and each woman is an act of revolution, a history that stretches back hundreds of years on this land. Their voices are worth listening to and learning from to shape a future of Timor-Leste for all.

Traditionally, the weavers perpetuate history (Photo: Monika Schlicher)

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Timor-Leste's strong women (UN Photo by Martine Perret)

About the Author

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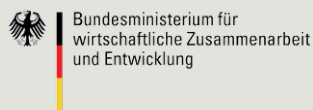
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