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Circulating stories: East Timorese in Australia and questions of post-independence identity

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ABSTRACT

During the Indonesian occupation of East Timor, diasporic groups played a central role in the campaign for self-determination. Throughout the occupation, East Timorese in Australia maintained a strong sense of long-distance nationalism, which drove, directly or indirectly, communal and social activities. The fight to free East Timor was at the core of the exiles' collective imagination, defining them as a largely homeland focused community. However, in the aftermath of the independence, the role and position of the diaspora have been less clear and the exiles have struggled to redefine their relationship with their home country. Personal experiences upon return and perceptions of political, cultural, economic and social development (or lack thereof) have led to renewed questioning of identity and belonging. This article explores the renewed questioning of identity and belonging embedded in people's 'circulating stories' of change, sacrifice and return.

Key words: East Timor, diaspora, socio-political and cultural change, identity, narrative practice

Much has been written about East Timor and the challenges it faces as an independent nation, particularly with reference to the 2006–07 political crisis in the country (e.g. Kingsbury & Leach 2007; McWilliam 2007; McWilliam & Bexley 2008; Rees 2004; Scambary 2006, 2007, 2008; Shoesmith 2007; Simonsen 2006; Traube 2007). However, relatively little attention has been paid to the situation post-independence of those who left East Timor during the civil war of 1975 and the Indonesian occupation. During the Indonesian occupation of the territory, the diaspora played a central role in the campaign for self-determination. The actions of the people living in exile maintained a level of diplomatic pressure on international power brokers and ensured that the East-Timorese people's cause was not forgotten. The exiles represented a vital resource in the struggle for independence. At the same time, the political campaign and the sense of an imagined community on which it rested provided a means by which the refugees could alleviate feelings of loss and guilt associated with their flight. In the aftermath of the independence, the role and position of the diaspora have been less clear and the exiles have struggled to redefine their relationship with their home country. Personal experiences upon return and perceptions of political, cultural, economic and social development (or lack thereof) have led to renewed questioning of identity and belonging.

In this article, I explore this renewed questioning of identity and belonging through the concept of 'circulating stories'. 'Circulating stories' refers to a practice of storytelling that emerged within the East-Timorese diaspora in the aftermath of independence. It resembles the symbolic-interactionist approach to gossip (Haviland 1977; Heilman 1976) whereby narratives provide individuals 'with a map of their social environment and with current information about happenings, inhabitants and their dispositions', by which they 'align their actions' (Rapport & Overing 2000:154). More specifically, it refers to the ways by which the East-Timorese exiles draw on the experience of friends and family who have returned to East Timor in order to make sense of their personal and social experience of independence and renegotiate their position in relation to independent East Timor.

The article, which is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with the East-Timorese community in Melbourne, Australia, begins with a brief description of the community and, drawing on existing scholarship of exile and return, I explore how the notion of return has formed part of the East-Timorese refugees' exile identities.ⁱ This is followed by an exploration of the concept of circulating stories and a consideration of the narratives upon which they are based. The circulating stories and the exiles' post-independence experiences are underpinned by a moral discourse of sacrifice, which draws on an East-Timorese 'cultural code of reciprocity' (Traube 2007). This discourse is discussed in the third part of the article, which is followed by an exploration of how the circulating stories represent a process of othering justified by the discourse of morality and sacrifice.

THE EAST-TIMOEOSE COMMUNITY IN MELBOURNE AND THE QUESTION OF RETURN

There are approximately 20 000 East Timorese living in Australia, of which 9320 were born in East Timor. Of the Timor-born, approximately 5000 live in Melbourne, making this the largest East-Timorese community in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). The East-Timorese community in Melbourne is not a homogeneous group; it is characterised by variation in language, culture and religion, as well as generational, political and socioeconomic differences. The various ethno-linguistic, generational and political groups are connected by a common past and a shared historical experience of displacement. A sense of shared identity and belonging is maintained through language, food, cultural artefacts and practices, histories, myths and legends, as well as social interaction with other East Timorese. Within this overarching community, there are smaller 'sub-communities', such as the 'twin communities' (Thatcher 1992) of the Timorese Chinese and the *mestiço*/indigenous Timorese, the political groupings of União Democrática Timorense (UDT) and Frente Revolucionaria de Timor-Leste Independente (Fretilin) supporters, and the group of young

‘modern Timorese’ who are committed to the preservation and regeneration of East-Timorese culture and cultural identity.

The article focuses on the narratives of *mestiço* and indigenous Timorese who were politically active during the Indonesian occupation of East Timor.ⁱⁱ In contrast to the Timorese Chinese who generally made roots in Australia at an early stage of their exile and envisaged their future in Australia (Thatcher 1992), many of the *mestiço* and indigenous Timorese maintained a strong sense of long-distance nationalism throughout the occupation period and, at large, imagined exile as *temporary* displacement. During the nationalist campaign, this group of refugees intertwined their exile identities with the symbols of home and return. Through the public articulation of a narrative of return, they demonstrated their ongoing commitment to the East-Timorese cause and placed themselves within the future discourses of the East-Timorese nation. However, despite the centrality of the ‘myth of return’ for this particular group, only a minority have returned to East Timor on a permanent or semi-permanent basis, and independence brought renewed ambiguity to the question of belonging and home (Askland 2009).

The ambiguity experienced by the exiles is closely connected to the question of return and an increased sense of liminality. For the East-Timorese exiles, the question of return had, during the Indonesian occupation, been closely tied to the political campaign and the idea of return was intertwined with the notions of contributing to the independent nation and rebuilding the country. The dream of return acted as a way of dealing with challenges of exile and it was often imagined as the ultimate resolution of the difficulties faced. Memories of their ancestral home represented ‘symbolic anchors’ (Gupta & Ferguson 1997:39), which became unifying symbols in the personal and social struggles of belonging. Though not all of the East-Timorese refugees articulated a homing desire through a wish of eventual return to their place of origin, the myths of return and cultural identification with a geographical location other than that of exile frequently guided diasporic practice. They serve to strengthen a sense of ‘we-ness’, a sense of ethnic solidarity and communion (Safran 1991; Shuval 2000),

and they bestow a sense of continuity—a bridge that connected the past, the present and the future.

The prominence of the myth of return in the exiles' imaginations is not unique to the East Timorese. In fact, ideas about the homeland and an ideology, or a myth, of return to the homeland, are inscribed into most definitions of exile (e.g. Gready 1994; Said 2000) and diaspora (e.g. King & Christou 2010; Leavey, Sembhi & Livingston 2004; Phillips & Potter 2009; Safran 1991). Exile has been described as an 'unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home' (Said 2000:173), and ideas of displacement, misplacement and uprootedness have characterised conventional discussions of refugees and migrants (Marrus 1985; Shawcross 1989; Stein 1981). Subsequently, return has often been understood as a natural and logical solution to displacement, and repatriation has been conceived as 'a restoration of order in the relationship between people, culture, and place' (Stølen 2007:9) whereby conditions existing before the flight are re-established and the refugee enters their habitual way of life, culture and identity.

More recent studies on migration, exile and return have, however, found that rather than being a condition characterised by discontinuity and rupture, exile is a state of biculturalism in which continued attachment to original culture and loyalties to host country/ies coexist (Askland 2007; Wise 2006). Diaspora—and exile—is increasingly perceived as a condition 'put into play through the experience of being *from* one place and *of* another' (Anthias 1998:565); it is a space characterised by a powerful combination of 'roots' and 'routes' (Clifford 1994, 1997; Gilroy 1993). Moreover, it has been identified that, whilst the homeland and the notion of return may represent a commanding element in the (re)creation of community and sense of belonging in exile, it is also root of potential conflict and rupture. As argued by King and Christou (2010:110), the notion of return will often be

fuelled by nostalgia for the imagined stability and coherence of past times and places; the plan is to relocate the dislocated self somehow in an earlier, more authentic, time and place.

But return in this regard is to ‘a home of no return’ (Brah 1996:192); it is to an imagined place, a memory or a desire. Whereas return is imagined as a project of homecoming to ‘the cradle of partially-lost collective identity’ (King & Christou 2010:111), homelands will not always offer the welcoming embrace that the exiles have dreamt of and it may invoke feelings of disillusionment and loss. Accordingly, it is evident that return will often be more complex than anticipated and, rather than representing closure, it represents one of multiple steps in a continuous process of movement (King 2000; Sinatti 2011). As I will illustrate in the next section, return in this regard does not have to be a personal experience; rather, through the narratives of people who have returned—permanently, semi-permanently or for visits—those who remain in exile can make the adjustment to the next stage in their migratory journey.

CIRCULATING STORIES

The fieldwork on which this article is based took place in the period between December 2006 and October 2007. During this period, the East-Timorese nation faced its greatest challenge yet when the country fell into a political crisis and communal violence erupted in the capital, Dili. The political conflict had multiple linked causes—real-political, historical, cultural, ethno-linguistic, developmental and socio-economic factors intertwine.ⁱⁱⁱ Nonetheless, many of the East-Timorese living in exile perceived the crisis as the result of limited progress on key socio-economic indicators, such as health and income, as well as inactivity and incompetence of the East-Timorese political elites. Despite ongoing pride in their ancestral

culture, the exiles expressed frustration, disappointment, anger, disillusionment and sadness when speaking about the political crisis, the situation of the East-Timorese people and the future of their home country. They were concerned about the lack of development within various governmental sectors, including education, sanitation and water, health and infrastructure, unemployment, community animosities and violence. Rather than improving the East-Timorese people's lives, independence was seen to have brought increased poverty and struggle.

Thoughts and opinions about the political crisis and the post-independence situation in East Timor gained authority through a narrative activity within the diaspora, which drew on the image of post-independence East Timor as it was presented in the narratives of people's experiences upon return. Although only a minority of the exiles actively sought information about East Timor through newspapers, internet websites, email groups, and friends and family in East Timor, everybody I spoke with during the course of my fieldwork articulated strong opinions about the political, social, cultural and economic development of the country. Occasionally, emotional descriptions founded in political rhetoric were at odds with factual information, conveying the personal story beneath the narrative more so than the actual situation in East Timor. The inconsistency between the personal narratives and information derived from various sources such as academic writings and government reports left me wondering on what basis these narratives were founded. Although political affiliation, age, class and personal experiences of the civil war and the Indonesian occupation create certain biases, these did not in themselves create the narratives. More so, these narratives were sustained by what I have called 'circulating stories.' This term refers to a narrative activity within the diaspora through which personal accounts of change, sacrifice and return were told and retold. The circulating stories reflected accounts of post-independence East Timor as experienced by people who had returned to the territory in the aftermath of independence. These accounts have been adopted by the wider diaspora and, through their

telling and retelling, become removed from the particular personal narratives from which they originate and circulate by their pre-empted capacities as ‘truths.’

The circulating stories described a mixture of emotions in which a sense of homecoming, initial optimism and hope intersected with feelings of estrangement, change, exclusion and rejection, though the two main themes were change and resentment as these are portrayed in the returnees’ personal narratives of return. The exiles’ experience of change manifested itself in the circulating stories through a juxtaposition of nostalgic memories of childhood play in a pristine environment with contemporary descriptions of ruined towns, polluted neighbourhoods, damaged infrastructure and immense poverty. It was also embedded in negative stereotypes of the local population. Local people were represented as lazy and deceitful, unwilling to show initiative, and reluctant to take responsibility for their actions. Those who have received higher education, either in Indonesia or at the university in Dili, were described as snobby. They were said to carry an attitude of superiority, reluctant to engage in tasks that were not related to their education. The circulating stories described the East Timorese, in particular the residents of Dili, as being absorbed in the superficialities of modernity. It was said that, instead of considering fixing the roof of the house or tiling the mud floor to ensure a healthy environment for their children, people yearned for the latest mobile phone, dreamt of a satellite dish so that they could watch Indonesian television, or desired the latest model of Nike sneakers. These generalisations were placed in opposition to nostalgic memories and, together with the narratives of change to landscapes (urban and rural), popular culture, customs, values and morality, they pervaded the circulating stories through retellings of incidents and experiences of family members, friends, or acquaintances who had returned.

Through the stories about change, the exiles shared an experience of separation. The circulating stories portrayed this sense of separation through accounts of how those who returned felt different, as outsiders upon return. It was paralleled by descriptions of incidents of resentment and animosity, which enhanced the sense of rupture and segregation. The

stories of those who had returned described feelings of exclusion and estrangement due to a sense of scepticism and resentment harboured by the local population towards people from the diaspora. These feelings were bound to the socio-political and socio-economic dynamics of newly independent East Timor. Following the 1999 referendum and the arrival of the UN and the international donor community, a new class and status structure emerged in East Timor. To some extent this reflected the socioeconomic structures of the Portuguese colonial time, with the elite being represented by respected resistance leaders, religious leaders, diaspora Timorese, mestiços and foreign traders (Knezevic 2007:108). The privileged of the Portuguese era seemed to recapture their privileged position quickly, causing dissatisfaction amongst local Timorese whose hardship in many ways increased.^{iv}

Resentment towards returning East Timorese further developed due to a perceived bias within UN and donor agencies towards people from the diaspora in the competition for the best paid jobs (Knezevic 2007; Saldanha 2001). The returnees possessed multiple language skills, often speaking a minimum of three languages (Tetum, Portuguese and English), and their multi-linguistic skills, educational background and their understanding of both Timorese and 'Western' cultures were highly valued within the UN bureaucracy and the donor community. Returnees were seen to possess a greater understanding of local conditions than international staff and it was believed that they could help improve communication between international personnel and the local population. In contrast, many of those who had stayed in East Timor and endured the struggle of the Indonesian occupation felt that they themselves possessed 'a superior knowledge of the needs of the people and the social and political complexity of their country' (Gusmão 2003:296). The advantages held by returnees led to frustration amongst unemployed locals who experienced 'loss of social status, as well as exclusion from one of the few sources of cash income' (Knezevic 2007:131). Limited opportunities for work and influence in post-independence East Timor fuelled their resentment. People from the diaspora were often seen as arrogant and opportunistic, returning for the good jobs, the status, and the high salary. A 'social envy' (Knezevic 2007:111) grew

amongst the local population over what they saw as the better lives of the returnees. This notion of social envy and jealousy is reflected in the following quote by Savio, a Portuguese-Timorese man who returned in 2001 for the first time in 26 years:

And the way that people [are] in there, [it's] so hard—because we go there with our holiday money and we kind of like act like relaxed people, have a talk in the bar, have a beer and everything, and a lot of youth sort of, kind of jealous. They always threaten us and—I didn't like it. They call me a foreigner. I hate that, when they call a foreigner. I've been in Portugal, they called me a foreigner, in Australia they call me a foreigner, and then I go to Timor and they call me a foreigner [laughs]. What the hell! I said, no, I don't want this, I might as well go back to Australia. It's the way that they treat you, as if you are not welcome. They threatened me, threw stones, I was really scared, and the next door neighbour threatened me ... They are just jealous, just because you have a bit more luxury, you've got money to buy a beer, you know, they think you are showing off. But, because, for me it is normal to go and buy a beer in the bar, that's what we do here ... they sit there and stare at people in the bar. When you walk, you go back to the car, they don't go away ... they come close to you and they say 'you went away, you are a coward, you run away in '75 and now you come back, showing off' ... I was really scared.

In the diaspora, the stories of resentment circulated as stories of unfair and undeserved treatment and discrimination. It was emphasised that many of those who returned did not desire the well-paid, high-status jobs of the UN, the donor communities or the public service, but rather returned with altruistic motives of contributing to the new nation. Back in East Timor, it was explained, many of the returnees tried to distance themselves from those who returned to work for the UN or international NGOs and who attained a 'high-flyer' lifestyle. The circulating stories were based on the narratives of returnees who lived and worked in

local neighbourhoods, surviving on local salaries or volunteering for community organisations. It was stressed that this group of returnees tried to distance themselves from the ‘high-flyers’ and that they, like the local population, were highly critical of the arrogance exhibited by those who returned with selfish motives. Indeed, many of the exiles empathised with the local population and their frustration with some of the people returning from the diaspora. However, though they could rationalise and explain such attitudes, it did not remove the pain and hurt that they felt when faced with the resentment and anger of the locals or with the stories of such.

The feeling of resentment is connected to experiences of exclusion. Both the notion of resentment and exclusion form part of a process of essentialism that occurred in the East-Timorese community following independence. In the aftermath of independence, questions about inclusion and exclusion, national identity and national membership attained renewed force (Crockford 2007; Soares 2003; Wise 2006). The East-Timorese people had to rediscover who they are on their own terms; that is, they have had to re-establish a national identity beyond the bipolar opposition of the Indonesian occupational regime from which East-Timorese nationalism has grown. This process, and its influence upon people’s experiences of return, is explored by the Australian anthropologist Amanda Wise (2006). She argues that the process of redefining national identity post-independence turned into ‘a process of trying ... to excavate traditional identities from under the cultural layers of colonial rule and occupation’ (Wise 2006:178). These processes, she continues, showed signs of ‘exclusionary practices of cultural boundary making as a means to eject whichever otherness seemed the biggest threat to a sense of “East Timorese Identity”’ (Wise 2006:178–9). Paradoxically, the local population, particularly the young and the disempowered, wanted to evict Westernness more so than Indonesianness, the former being perceived as the new ‘cultural Other’ threatening the notion of East Timoresehood (Wise 2006:179). As such, the rediscovery of national identity frequently attained an essentialist notion of what it means to

be East Timorese. It led to a questioning of the exiles' identity as East Timorese, often excluding the returnees from this category due to their association with 'Westernness.'^v

Such experiences were clearly articulated by one of the study participants, Theresa. Theresa left East Timor in 1975 when she was four years old. She is of Timorese, Chinese and Portuguese ancestry and has straight, long, black hair and fair skin. Despite her mixed ancestry and her association with both Chinese and Portuguese cultural heritage, she always perceived herself as East Timorese, this to some extent reflecting the degree of rejection she experienced as a refugee in both Portugal and Australia. She explained that:

I went back to Timor wanting to find out what my true identity was, wanting to belong. You know, having gone to Portugal, living here, you've always had the comments from kids at school saying that 'You are not really Portuguese' or 'You are not really Australian,' you know, what are you? So there's all those questions which went through my mind, and I wanted to go back to see whether I fit in or whatever. But it actually raised so many more issues for me, 'cause, for me, I mean, I am so bicultural there, I've got my paternal grandparents, one's Portuguese, one was from Macau, and my mother's side is indigenous, so I was still, felt, you know, made to feel as if I was not Timorese because of the skin colour. And initially when I stepped out of the plane, that smell, the smell made me feel like, 'Oh, my God, I, I remember this smell,' you know, I actually felt like, for the first time, yeah, I belong, you know. And then I started dealing with, even in my own family, my mother's side, the indigenous side, you know, sly remarks, 'Oh, you are Chinese,' 'You are Portuguese,' you know that, and I—I didn't know how to cope with some of these prejudices or—and, you know, some remarks even came from my own family saying that 'Oh, you are not Timorese' ... And, [then] all these issues started going through my head, you know, thinking, 'God, you know, maybe I'm not Timorese!'

During my fieldwork, I came to realise that the sense of rejection and exclusion was not only felt in relation to the local population. Recounting the stories of close and distant family members who had returned, the exiles explained that many of the returnees also had experienced rejection by the political elite. This was particularly so for UDT supporters, who claimed that they had been discriminated against due to their political background. For example, a story that I was told on a number of occasions recounts the experience of a Timorese-Portuguese man who had left East Timor in 1974, when he, at the age of 24, was sent to Portugal to study veterinary science. In contrast to many others who studied in Portugal at this time, Faustino supported UDT, a political allegiance he has kept throughout his years in exile. In 2000, he returned to East Timor, wanting to contribute to the rebuilding of the new country. He had planned to volunteer and, through his work, he wanted to contribute in the re-establishment of the agricultural sector. His offer was, however, rejected at the political level in which he wanted it implemented and it became practically not possible for him to volunteer at the local level. In all the renditions of this story that I heard, it was suggested that he faced these difficulties because of his political background, and the story was used to illustrate—and justify—the great disappointment that many of the exiles felt towards the political elite and what they perceived as an emerging culture of nepotism and corruption.

The circulating stories emphasised that, for most of the returnees, return was seen as an obligation and that it included a degree of sacrifice. Many put their lives in Australia on hold, leaving their work, children, family and friends with the intention to contribute towards a better future for East Timor and its people. The perceived lack of gratitude for their contribution and their sincere wish to help led to disappointment, and many have since returned to Australia disillusioned and saddened by the loss of what they throughout the occupation had imagined as home. The circulating stories articulated these emotions as well as the frustration, anger, disappointment and disillusionment arising from the experience of resentment, rejection and exclusion. In order to understand the emotions that they disclose, I

will in the following section discuss the exiles' expectations and hopes for independence and how they relate to what I call a moral discourse of sacrifice.

MORAL DISCOURSE OF SACRIFICE

The time of the referendum and the initial period of independence were emotional times for the East Timorese in Australia; a dream had come true, justice had been done. Feelings of relief, happiness, pride and confidence were compounded by a sense of euphoria, hope and optimism. As illustrated in the following two quotes, anything seemed possible; the East-Timorese had been able to overcome the greatest challenge of all and, united, the people would respond to the challenges of the future.

I guess, at that time the only thing that we thought of that we got the independence and we would, no matter what, even if they burn the city and the whole country, we would be able to rebuild. And we thought at that time our, the main, the main wheel of power was just to gain independence. Whatever came after would be everything ok.

... we had these high expectations for everything. We thought, ok, we've got independence now, we've got *our* leaders, there's no other way than going forward and we can achieve *anything* easily because if we, if we managed so much with Indonesia who invaded us, and even the other countries getting independence, with Timor, once independence, of course we will get the best. It's a small island and the population is so small. We're gonna have everyone with food on the table, kids at school, proper results, all these things, you know, the basic that a person, a person needs to survive.

These high expectations of independence were not based on ignorance or naivety. Rather, they reflect the exiles' faith in the East Timorese as a united people, in their endurance and their capacity for resistance. It was through this unity, endurance and resistance, as well as their vision for the future, that the East Timorese achieved, against all odds, the end of human rights' abuses, their right to self-determination, justice and peace.

The expectations of independence can also be seen in relation to what anthropologist Elizabeth Traube (2007:18) refers to as a 'cultural code of reciprocity', in which 'those who suffer are entitled to be recompensed'. The notion of reciprocity reflects a categorical scheme that can be found throughout eastern Indonesia, which classifies social and cultural icons according to a system of complementary categories; that is, they are ordered into pairs of opposites such as male/female, elder/younger, above/below, outside/insider, heaven/earth (Fox 1996:132; Soares 2003:34; Traube 1986:4). Such dialectic exchange relationships have been observed amongst a number of Timorese ethno-linguistic groups, such as the Mambai (Traube 1986, 2007), the Makassae (Forman 1980), the Fataluku (McWilliam 2007a), and the Ema (Clamagirand 1980), and notions of exchange and the dual organisation of the world remain prominent across the East-Timorese landscape. Indeed, as argued by East-Timorese anthropologist Dionísio da Costa Babo Soares (2003:35), 'traditional thinking regarding dual cultural categories might have some influence on the way the political forms of expression and explanation of life processes among the East Timorese are formulated.'

According to Soares (2003:36), a particular dual category, namely that of the past and the present/future, has become pervasive in post-independence East Timor and in the East-Timorese people's portrayal of struggle. This category is paralleled with dyadic pairs such as outsider/insider, *ema a'at* (lit. bad people)/*ema diak* (good people), *rai funu* (lit. land of war)/*rai diak* (lit. good soil), invader/landowner, and us/them. The distinction between past and present/future is articulated in the categories *hun* (roots, origins, past, history) and *rohan* (future, end). Through this dualism, the East Timorese apply the past (*hun*) as a 'source' to predict, classify or explain events of today and possible events of the future

(rohan) (Soares 2003:38–9). The notion of hun and rohan forms part of the cyclic relationship between manifest and non-manifest life, the secular inhabited by the living and the cosmos inhabited by the spirits and the ancestors (Soares 2004:22). Ensuring a balance between these worlds is pivotal for life to proceed, and ‘[f]ailure to observe appropriate rituals/exchange leads to an imbalance, which might result in negative consequences to those living in the secular world’ (Soares 2004:22). This implies an idiom of exchange and reciprocity, through which balance between cosmos and the living world, as well as social order, is sustained. In light of this, it can be argued that the cultural code of reciprocity and the notion of morality are reflected in the general East-Timorese society and the East-Timorese people’s perceptions, rationalisation and explanation of post-independence realities. I will further argue that, despite their detachment from traditional belief systems, cosmology and social life, the East Timorese living in exile have retained the notions of morality that lie beneath the dualistic complex of East-Timorese society. This can be seen in the circulating stories and the exiles’ negotiation of boundaries, belonging and, ultimately, identity.

SUFFERING AND SACRIFICE OF EAST-TIMORESE EXILES

The disappointment and disillusionment expressed in the circulating stories of the exiles reflect the moral discourse of sacrifice. Although the participants do not compare their struggles to the suffering of those who lived under the occupational regime, the exiles’ narratives portray both suffering and sacrifices. Whilst the flight from East Timor removed the imminent threat of persecution and abuse, fear and worry for family and friends who remained in East Timor continued to cast a shadow over the exiles’ lives. Life in exile was not easy and many of the East-Timorese refugees found themselves depending on government assistance. Many experienced loss of social status and, despite education and previous work in white-collar industries, they were forced to take on jobs as factory workers, tram drivers, cleaners and so on. Many put their lives ‘on hold,’ sacrificing their careers,

work opportunities, education opportunities, and family lives for East Timor and the fight for independence. This is illustrated in the story of Sarah and her husband, Aziby. I met Sarah and Aziby on various occasions, but the following narrative is primarily based on information collected during my interview with Sarah in March of 2007.

Sarah's story

Sarah lives in a small house in the Dandenong area together with her husband, Aziby, and their three daughters who are 8, 16, and 17 years of age. The oldest girls attend high school, whereas their youngest is still in primary school. Their youngest daughter suffers from a condition that requires extra attention, and three days a week she attends a school for disabled children. Sarah and Aziby wanted their youngest daughter to attend a mainstream school, but because of lack of funding at the local school, they were forced to send her to an alternative education facility three days a week. The family lives on a corner block not far from the train station. When I visited Sarah and Aziby, I noticed that the house was run down and the garden was marked by the prolonged drought in Melbourne. I was struck by the limited space that the family of five occupied. The girls' bedrooms were to the left of the entrance, and the lounge room to the right. A turquoise lounge suite was placed in front of the television and room had been made for a computer desk in the corner. Pictures of the girls and other family members decorated the walls. Only one window lit up the room. The house was modestly furnished and gave the impression of accommodating a family trying to make ends meet on a meagre budget.

Sarah is a passionate woman with a warm smile. She is of Portuguese-Timorese descent and grew up belonging to the East-Timorese elite. She went to Portuguese schools, but throughout her childhood she lived close to the indigenous population and she never considered herself as one of the privileged. Because of her parents' work, Sarah moved around a lot. Her father worked for the Portuguese government setting up infrastructure in the districts, such as hospitals and schools, and her mother was a teacher. Her mother's work

largely consisted of establishing schools in local communities. Both her father and mother were well respected in the Timorese community. Her family was quite well off, but she was taught not to take her privileges for granted and that she had to work hard in life. She learnt from her parents, and their vision of life and philosophy of hard work have helped her cope with the pressures and financial strains that she has experienced in exile.

Sarah described her childhood with fondness and affection, though the memories of tranquillity and peace end in 1975 when she was ten years old and was forced to flee the civil war together with her brother and mother. The family fled to Australia, believing that the conflict would be short lived. They anticipated an imminent return. It was first after the Indonesian invasion of East Timor that they realised they would not be able to return home. They then decided to move to Portugal, where Sarah met Aziby some years later. Aziby had been studying in Lisbon at the time of the invasion and had lived in exile in Portugal ever since. In 1986, wanting to be closer to East Timor, Aziby decided to move to Australia. Two years later, Sarah followed.

When Sarah arrived in Australia, Aziby was already actively involved in Fretilin and the campaign for independence. He would organise meetings and demonstrations, and Sarah would help by making posters, distributing flyers and doing other tasks. Because of Aziby's involvement, he was unable to work and the family relied on Sarah's income as a childcare worker. Relying on only one income, the expanding family struggled financially and they had to lead modest lives. Dreams of further education and career were postponed as the struggle for independence and the freedom of East Timor was seen as a greater cause than their individual prosperity:

[Other priorities] had to be pushed out. And like, you know, even with the—for instance, some of Aziby's, some of his friends, now at the time, they weren't as involved in the struggle, but then they had their careers, they had their house and everything paid off, and now they can enjoy their retirement, whereas someone like

Aziby, he missed out on that. But he's not blaming [it] on the struggle. He's happy, because—and I said to him, 'At the end of the day, if you had gone like them, built your business, get your house, we could have had two or three houses now, but then you'll feel that there's something in you, like, I've got all this, but I don't deserve it.' Do you know what I mean? At least now you are still on your way, you are half way there, but at least, you know, I deserve it.

As this quote suggests, Sarah and Aziby could not set themselves up for the future in the same way as other exiles because of their involvement in the struggle. Their financial situation was, and still is, a strain, and both Sarah and Aziby sacrificed personal dreams for the collective struggle for independence.

Concerned about the changes that have occurred in East Timor since she fled, and with hardly any family or friends left in East Timor, Sarah has decided not to go back. Aziby, on the other hand, returned immediately after independence. His experiences, as well as the experiences of friends and family who have returned, have left Sarah with an image of East Timor as a foreign country where people like her are not welcome. She provided an emotional account of how Aziby experienced his East-Timorese identity being questioned because of his skin colour and how he felt excluded and resented by local people. Though this was not directed directly at her, Sarah felt hurt and was disappointed by the lack of recognition of her, Aziby's and the rest of the diaspora's contribution to the struggle. Even more hurtful than the resentment from the local population, Sarah explained, was the difficulties for Aziby and herself to retain East-Timorese citizenship and the subsequent feeling of being excluded from the East-Timorese nation.

The East-Timorese constitution (RDTL 2002) states that people born in East Timor or children of parents born in East Timor are to be considered citizens of the nation. To apply for citizenship, applicants must provide a current birth certificate issued by the República Democrática de Timor-Leste (RDTL), a civil registration card, a RDTL electoral card, and/or

any other documentation supporting that the applicant is a Timorese national. Indonesian-issued birth certificates and marriage certificates, catholic-issued baptism certificates and Portuguese birth certificates issued after 1975 are not accepted. Applicants who possess these documents must apply for these to be converted into a 2005 RDTL Birth Certificate. To apply for a 2005 RDTL Birth Certificate, the applicant must provide: (a) a baptism certificate, civil registration card or birth date letter from the hospital; (b) a baptism certificate or birth certificate of both mother and father, and (c) marriage certificate of mother and father. In circumstances where the parents' documents are unavailable, a recommendation from the Timorese Community Leader in the Australian state in which the applicant lives, which certifies that the applicant is a Timor-born citizen, should be provided.^{vi}

The guidelines for applying for citizenship are intricate and confusing, and the complexity of the process has led Sarah and many others to believe that they are not entitled to citizenship. The confusion surrounding the process was clearly articulated by Sarah during one of our conversations when she told me that she has to go to East Timor to sit an interview if she is to apply for citizenship. She expressed uncertainty about the documentation she needs to present with an application and is doubtful if she will be eligible to apply in the first place as she only holds Portuguese identity papers. Sarah has not made contact with the Honorary Consulate in Melbourne, the Consulate General in Sydney, or the East-Timorese Embassy in Canberra with regards to the process of applying for citizenship, and her understanding of the process is based on information provided by others in the diaspora. This (mis)information accentuated the feelings of exclusion and rejection and Sarah was upset by the perceived refusal of what she argued is her birth right. She felt humiliated by what she described as discrimination against those who live in exile:

I think it's sort of like a humiliation, it's like you go and beg for your, for your birthright or something ... Why is it so hard all of a sudden to accept people? ...

because to be, it's almost as if you are being discriminated by your own race, like, do you know what I mean? Like, 'You needed me, but now we don't need you, so good bye,' you know ... a lot of people are disappointed. Why should I have to go all the way to Timor just to prove my point? Do you know what I mean? And I say, like, when you guys needed us to vote for Timor to be independent, all I needed to go was to go here, to a school to vote, and take my birth certificate, anything that said I was born in Timor and I was Timorese. So if I voted as a Timorese, that's proof that I'm Timorese, you still have my papers, why isn't that enough?

Sarah's experiences are not unique. Many of the participants of the study recounted similar feelings of being excluded from the East-Timorese nation. They experienced the questioning of their East-Timorese identity as humiliating and offensive, and many felt denied what they expected as a 'payment' for their sacrifices for the East-Timorese nation; explicitly, the recognition of their contribution and their inclusion into the East-Timorese nation. The circulating stories can be seen as a response to these 'unpaid wages.' They reflect a process of othering (Said 2003:332), in which the exiles are repositioning themselves in relation to East Timor. The tensions embedded within these stories, exemplified in the negative stereotypes ascribed to the East-Timorese people, suggest a redefinition of boundaries through which the exiles positioned themselves as different to the East Timorese 'at home.' The imagined community of the East-Timorese nation through which the exiles previously articulated their belonging has ruptured, and the exiles are increasingly redefining their lives away from the transnational sphere in which their identity as East Timorese was nurtured. This process of redefinition will be explored in the following section.

NEGOTIATING BOUNDARIES

The circulating stories formed part of the process by which the East-Timorese exiles' negotiated their identity and boundaries of belonging. Narratives and self are intimately linked and, as identified by Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps (1996:20), 'narratives transform life's journeys into sequences of events and evoke shifting and enduring perspectives on experience.' Narratives are articulations of human experience. They are simultaneously born from experience and give shape to experience (Bruner 1997; Ochs & Capps 1996). They provide an essential connection 'between our own sense of self and our sense of others' (Bruner 1986:69), and through various forms of narrative practice our lives and selves attain meaning (Kerby 1991:3ff; Rapport & Overing 2000:283–4). Narratives are developed, maintained and transformed through social interaction. Rather than presenting a complete picture of the individual, her or his past, present, and future aspirations, personal narratives are partial representations and portrayals of the world as experienced by the individual (Ganguly 1992; Ochs & Capps 1996). This social, dynamic and flexible notion of narratives is central to the concept of circulating stories. However, circulating stories are distinguished from personal narratives in their autonomous status and collective appeal. The circulating stories are removed from the personal experiences and the personal narratives from which they developed, and represent 'cultural sites'—that is, 'institutions which have developed in the interrelationship between global and local ties (Olwig 1997:17)—that enable a collective connection between exiles' past and present, home and displacement.

Narratives such as those embedded in the circulating stories mirror the sense of biculturalism discussed at the outset of this article and illustrate the exiles' complex and multiple belongings, hybrid identities, and continuous representation of everyday subjectivity. They illustrate how identity and selfhood are not 'externally fixed in some essentialised past' but rather 'subject to the continual interplay of history, culture and power' (Hall 1989:70). Moreover, they illustrate how identity and selfhood 'find their definition in

relation to significant Others just as they articulate ideas of self and selfhood which are communicated and given meaning through social interaction' (Rew & Campbell 1999:13). This implies that identity rests on experiences of cultural difference; that is, as suggested by Fredrik Barth (1969) in his classic introduction to the book *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, identity reflects relations and social processes. According to Barth, ethnic groups and ethnic identities should be perceived in relation to the socially effective means through which the imagining of ethnic groups and boundaries are produced and sustained. Ethnic distinctions, he argues, 'entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories' (Barth 1969:9–10). Ethnic identity is a product of negotiation of boundaries rather than of cultural traits, and it is characterised by dynamic qualities subjected to negotiation and contextually restricted choice (Barth 1969).

The transactional nature of ethnicity and the processes of incorporation and exclusion described by Barth are not restricted to ethnicity and can be found within all modes of identification, whether this is association founded upon ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, age, sexuality or other characteristics (Askland 2005:183). Tsuda (2003:9) argues that '[i]dentity refers to a conscious awareness of who one is in the world based on association with certain sociocultural characteristics of membership in social groups.' It refers to a transactional, dialectic process through which boundaries of belonging and identification are produced and negotiated, reproduced, and transformed (Jenkins 1994); that is, to sociocultural formations that are 'fundamentally relational, interactional, intersubjective, dialogical and mutually transformative processes' (Ottosson 2010:276). Identity is internally experienced and externally defined. It consists of internal definitions (self-identity)—through which individuals signal to themselves or others their identification with and ascription to particular values, codes of practice, signals or signs—and external definitions (social identity)—through which individuals are defined and/or categorised by others in accordance

with standardised cultural norms and social roles. Internal and external definitions are not mutually exclusive, but are unremittingly implicated in one another (Hagendoorn 1993; Jenkins 1994:198–9; Tsuda 2003:9–10). External categorisations may reinforce internal definitions and they may be assimilated, in whole or in part, into a group's or an individual's identity. This process of internalisation, as well as the internal and external definitions in themselves, mirrors the relational aspect of identity; through the identified practical consequences of difference, categorisations and self-definitions are constituted ideologically and socially.

Barth's argument and the concepts of internal and external definitions are useful when trying to understand the process of redefinition that emerged in the East-Timorese diaspora. When I speak of the process of questioning identity and negotiating boundaries of belonging in which the East-Timorese exiles engaged, this must be seen in relation to their experience of difference and change. The circulating stories of the East-Timorese diaspora emerged in the shadow of the changing circumstances of post-independence and they reflected an enhanced experience of difference between people still in East Timor and those abroad. With the realisation of independence, the exiles' everyday realities were altered and they were faced with new categorisations that challenged their previous definition and, ultimately, experience of self. It was in the shadow of these changes that the questioning of identity and the process of negotiating boundaries of belonging transpired. Following independence, the exiles' experience of self were confronted by an emerging external definition proposed by others in East Timor, set within the context of their previous imagined community of belonging. This external classification was at odds with the exiles' self-definition and sense of self, subsequently creating a void in which disappointment, disillusionment, frustration and a sense of loss emerged. As the circumstances changed, boundaries shifted.

The changing definitions, categorisations and boundaries suggest a change in the East-Timorese exiles' concerns; the (perceived) categorisation of the exiles as foreigners, traitors, opportunists, outsiders, 'Westerners' and 'non-Timorese,' threatened the exiles' selfhood and identity and, as a consequence, their self-definition was increasingly set according to the difference they experience between themselves and those 'at home.' The circulating stories can be seen as a response to the emerging divergence between the diasporas' and the local East-Timorese people's external and internal definitions, the conflict between returnees/diasporas and local people, as well as the exiles' concern about their present situation and their future. The circulating stories formed part of the exiles' (re)creation of meaning, and they maintained the exile community's unity, morality and history through their subtle portrayal of communal values and expectations. They defined the exiles in opposition to their significant others, namely the East-Timorese people, and they reflected the exiles' altered self-awareness that attained a renewed focus on the hybrid nature of their identity. Though indicating a continued concern for East Timor and a connection to their ancestral past, the circulating stories positioned the East-Timorese exiles outside the moral community of the East-Timorese nation. This repositioning was justified by reference to the moral discourse of sacrifice and the cultural code of reciprocity, which, according to the exiles, the East-Timorese nation and its people had failed to fulfil.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that through circulating stories, East-Timorese exiles have engaged in a narrative practice of storytelling by which they have redefined their social environment and negotiated boundaries of belonging. The exiles felt their efforts, their sacrifices and struggle, had been left unrecompensed. Such sentiments were largely founded upon experiences and perceptions of change, rejection and exclusion as they were articulated in stories circulating through the diaspora. The stories articulated a complex set of emotions in which initial warm

feelings of homecoming were juxtaposed to feelings of estrangement, change, exclusion and rejection. These experiences—or the embodiment of these experiences through the telling and retelling of the stories—were at the heart of feelings of disappointment, disillusionment, anger and frustration exhibited by many of the exiles. They formed part of a process of othering by which the exiles negotiated their identities and their boundaries of belonging. Faced with the (perceived) categorisation of themselves as outsiders, traitors, foreigners, ‘Westerners,’ opportunists and ‘non-Timorese,’ the exiles moved the borders of their self-definition and increasingly placed themselves in opposition to their former (imagined) community of belonging. Dwelling upon their experiences of the East-Timorese nation’s failure to fulfil their obligation towards the East-Timorese people and them as exiles, they negotiated a space in which their decision to remain in Australia and remove themselves from the transnational sphere was legitimised. New boundaries of identity and belonging were, as such, established on the back of experiences of change, resentment and exclusion.

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NOTES

ⁱ The fieldwork was conducted in relation to the research project *East Timorese in Melbourne: Community and Identity at a Time of Political Unrest in Timor-Leste* (Askland 2009). All real names have been changed and pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

ⁱⁱ I entered the field through three main approaches: participant observation; discussions with individuals in key roles associated with the community; and, semi-structured interviews. I formally interviewed 56 East Timorese, representing a spread of the community in terms of ethnicity, political affiliation, gender, age, year of flight, and year of arrival in Australia. In addition, I informally engaged with East Timorese in individual and familial settings over the course of the fieldwork, spending a lot of time in people's homes, engaging with community organisations, and participating in community events. Whereas the research project incorporated the whole community, this paper excludes the Timorese-Chinese section of the community who often refrained from the political campaign and focussed their energy on reconstituting their lives in exile.

ⁱⁱⁱ For information about the 2006–07 political crisis, see for example: Scambary 2006, 2007; Shoesmith 2007; UN 2006; USAID 2006.

^{iv} In relation to the diaspora Timorese, it is important to note that it was primarily people belonging to the political and financial elite who were able to flee the Indonesian invasion and ensuing occupation.

^v The question of post-independence identity and authenticity has also been explored by Fiona Crockford (2000, 2007) who argue that people from the diaspora have been subjected to 'moral judgements framed within discourses of East Timorese authenticity. Within such discursive formations, both "Australianisation" and "Indonesianisation" were variously marked as signifiers of inauthenticity and conceptualised as a corrupting force' (Crockford 2007:284).

^{vi} This information was garnered from Mr João Jong at the Honorary Consulate of Timor-Leste in Melbourne in a meeting on the 16 May 2007, and from a letter dated the 6 April 2005 issued by the Consulate General of RDTL in Sydney, which outlines the passport proceedings for the RDTL.

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