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Rethinking ‘civil society’ and ‘victim-centred’ transitional justice in Timor-Leste

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Over the course of conducting research in Timor-Leste over the past decade I have become increasingly aware of the limits of the globalised, standardised model of transitional justice. My research has revealed to me that local understandings and expectations of transitional justice exceed – perhaps inevitably – the justice possibilities available through formal, time-bound mechanisms such as criminal prosecutions and truth commissions. It has also highlighted that the process of ‘dealing with the past’ is not confined to the initial transitional period but is being shaped in an ongoing way through the practices of, and the interactions between, a wide range of actors who possess varying degrees of power. These observations have led me to argue that transitional justice needs to be thought about differently – as a dynamic and open-ended social and political process, rather than as a short-term project oriented around a set of formal mechanisms. In other words, I have come to the view that transitional justice scholars, practitioners and activists need to move beyond a preoccupation with official institutions and short-term outcomes and consider how best to support people’s ongoing and locally grounded efforts to rebuild their lives after conflict.

With these insights in mind, I was initially optimistic about the decision by East Timorese civil society organisations (CSOs) around 10 years ago to establish a national victims’ association. It seemed to me that a victims’

association (comprised of civilians who directly experienced human rights violations during the 24-year Indonesian occupation) presented an opportunity to build a locally grounded and inclusive social movement for transitional justice that was responsive to ordinary people's needs and priorities. I also thought that this movement might help to challenge the forward-looking, heroic narrative of nation-building promoted by East Timorese political elites (which privileges the experiences and rights of elite former combatants) by encouraging new forms of solidarity and political agency grounded in common experiences of suffering.

Yet, over the past 10 years, I have observed the victims' association struggle to develop into a social movement. In this chapter, I draw on recent fieldwork in Timor-Leste to reflect on some of the reasons why this may be the case. I have concluded that the victims' rights agenda promoted by CSOs is grounded in a liberal, individualist human rights paradigm, which has limited mobilising power in a context where other, very different, subjectivities coexist. This agenda, I suggest, is unable to respond to people's immediate and everyday needs and priorities, including the imperative to restore relations of trust, sociality and reciprocity with their kin.

In the first part of this chapter, I describe the evolution of the victims' association and its connection to ideas of 'victim-centredness' that are now prominent in the field of transitional justice. I then draw on my observations of the 2015 Victims Congress to reflect on some of the challenges that arose in building the association, showing how many of these challenges reflect the degree to which victim-centred strategies have been interpreted narrowly, in accordance with a liberal transitional justice framework. In the second half of this chapter, I explore how ordinary East Timorese are seeking to address some of their important economic, social and spiritual needs in the aftermath of the conflict through strategies and practices embedded in the realm of the everyday. Some of these activities are being initiated by local communities with little or no external support, while others are being led by faith-based actors. I suggest that attending to these practices – which are often overlooked by the liberal, institutionally oriented transitional justice field – might foster a broader, more pluralistic understanding of civil society transitional justice activity.

Building the victims' association: Promoting 'victim-centredness'?

The establishment of Timor-Leste's victims' association needs to be understood against the backdrop of political leaders' ambivalent responses to the report of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR). Entitled *Chega!* (No More! Stop! Enough!), and tabled in the National Parliament in 2005, the report offers a disturbing account of the 'massive, widespread and systematic atrocities' that took place during the Indonesian occupation – including extrajudicial killings, torture, disappearances and sexual violence – and finds the Indonesian Government and security forces 'primarily responsible and accountable' for the deaths of between 100,000 and 180,000 civilians (CAVR 2005, ch. 8, 5–6). *Chega!* also contains 205 recommendations for policy reform in areas as diverse as prosecutions for serious crimes perpetrators; reparations; human rights training; education; reforms to the military, police and security forces; prisons; missing persons; commemoration and memorialisation; and the rights of women and youth.

Since the report's completion, East Timorese CSO activists and their international supporters have continued to advocate for the implementation of its recommendations, focusing their efforts on the need for a reparations program to support 'vulnerable victims' and for the establishment of an 'Institute for Memory' (to implement other agreed-to *Chega!* recommendations, including a commission for missing persons). This small group of elite, educated, Dili-based activists has also continued to lobby both the Timor-Leste Government and the international community for the establishment of an international tribunal to prosecute those who committed war crimes and crimes against humanity during the Indonesian occupation (among them senior members of the Indonesian military). More than 10 years later, progress towards many of these goals remains elusive. There was some renewed momentum around the time of *Chega!*'s 10-year anniversary, when civil society activists successfully lobbied Timor-Leste's president to host a workshop on the report's legacy and decided to bypass the parliament and appeal directly to the prime minister and president to establish an Institute for Memory. These efforts led, in 2016, to the passing of a presidential decree law to establish a *Centro Nasional Chega!* (National *Chega!* Centre) to implement some of the CAVR recommendations (as well as those of a second, bilateral truth commission, known as the

Commission for Truth and Friendship (CTF)).¹ Despite this promising development, the mandate of the new centre is limited. The focus is on the ‘institutionalisation of memory’ and the promotion of human rights through education and training; there is no reference to prosecutions, reparations or a missing persons’ commission, and the term ‘victim’ is eschewed in favour of the more politically palatable term ‘survivor’.²

The political elite’s lukewarm responses to *Chega!* can be understood, in part, as a reflection of the pragmatic priority that has been placed on building bilateral relations with Indonesia, the nation’s large neighbour and former occupier. This focus has led to the rejection of a prosecutorial path and the promotion of a ‘reconciliatory agenda’ that is perhaps best embodied in the bilateral institution of the CTF. Political leaders have argued that a reconciliatory path is more culturally appropriate to the Timor-Leste context than the pursuit of prosecutorial justice; in this vein, they have criticised local CSO activists – who have links to international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Human Rights Watch, the International Center for Transitional Justice and Amnesty International – for pushing a ‘foreign’ agenda that is of little relevance to the lives and priorities of ordinary people (Kent 2015, 66–67). In addition to pragmatic, geopolitical considerations, however, there is something about the narrative of civilian suffering contained in *Chega!* that members of the political elite take issue with. This narrative undercuts current heroic ‘imaginings’ of the Timor-Leste nation that celebrate the capacity, forbearance and fortitude of the East Timorese people in overcoming successive national occupiers and achieving independence. The heroic narrative of the conflict is contained in the nation’s Constitution, which underscores the importance of ‘valorising’ the nation’s heroes. Valorisation is occurring in a very tangible sense, through an elaborate and graduated veterans’ pension scheme that provides monthly pensions to those who can claim to have participated in the resistance struggle for the required number of years and to family members of deceased veterans (martyrs). Through the scheme, which provides monthly payments that are well

1 The CTF was established by the East Timorese and Indonesian governments in 2005 to seek the ‘conclusive truth’ in order to contribute to a ‘definitive closure on issues of the past [that] would further promote bilateral relations’ (Government of Indonesia and Democratic Republic of Indonesia 2005, para. 8).

2 Decree Law 48/2016, Establishing the *Chega!* National Public Institute: From Memory to Hope. It should be noted that since this chapter was written, the CNC has shown itself to be a creative institution that is pushing the boundaries of its mandate.

above the average East Timorese monthly income, a clear hierarchy of citizenship has been constructed, in which the status of elite (mostly male) former combatants is elevated over that of other citizens.

It is against this backdrop that CSOs have, since 2008, worked to establish and foster the national victims' association. The association – known as the National Association of Victims of the Political Conflict 1974–1999 – consists of district-based 'focal points' in each of Timor-Leste's 13 districts, plus a national coordinator, who is funded by a small consortium of Dili-based CSOs. The association holds annual meetings and a National Victims Congress every three years, during which members reflect on the progress made over the previous years and plan for the future. The activities of the association include, among other things, lobbying political leaders on the need for prosecutions and reparations, linking 'vulnerable victims' in each district into existing forms of social support and organising forms of commemoration of violent events of district significance.

The decision to build a national victims' association resonates with the priority that has been placed on 'victim-centred' transitional justice over the last decade by scholars, practitioners and civil society activists. While victim-centredness remains ill-defined, it is often construed as requiring 'institutionalised avenues' for victim participation in formal transitional justice mechanisms (Nesiah 2016, 24) and as suggesting that victims and/or victims' representatives need to be engaged in the planning and implementation of transitional justice measures (Robins 2011, 77). Simon Robins proposes a more radical formulation, suggesting that a victim-centred transitional justice process 'arises in response to the explicit needs of victims, as defined by victims themselves' (Robins 2011, 77). Yet, regardless of how it is defined, victim-centredness is understood both as a good in itself and as having a 'strategic' value (e.g. Magarrell 2007, 2). Its inherent good is said to lie in the fact that it reinforces victims' dignity by treating them not as passive recipients of transitional justice measures but as active agents with the ability to claim their rights (Nesiah 2016, 24). Its strategic value is thought to lie in the fact that victim-centredness increases the ground-level legitimacy of transitional justice processes and therefore enhances their long-term effectiveness. For East Timorese CSO activists working to establish the victims' association, then, an implicit objective of this work is to build legitimacy for the transitional justice agenda (both among the political elite and among the broader

community) by ensuring that victims themselves have an opportunity to shape the national debate on questions of justice, reconciliation and reparations.

Despite these worthy goals, the very slipperiness of the concept of victim-centredness has led some scholars to express wariness about its promotion as a panacea for questions of transitional justice legitimacy. Vasuki Nesiah (2016, 24–25), for instance, suggests there is a need to be alert to the ways in which victim-centredness is constructed within a transitional justice field that has become increasingly standardised and normative. As transitional justice has come to revolve around a ‘toolkit’ of prescribed mechanisms, including trials, truth commissions and reparations programs, there is a danger that victim-centredness may amount to little more than requiring victims to channel their demands into a narrow, predetermined set of priorities ‘that may not accord with the specifics of local context’ (Nesiah 2016, 20). Current conceptualisations of victim-centredness have also been criticised for promoting a ‘homogenising model’ of victimhood that papers over the differences present within victimised populations (for instance, among victims of different socioeconomic, religious, ethnic, geographic and other backgrounds, and among victims with different political and ideological agendas) (Nesiah 2016, 25). It has also been argued that, because transitional justice has a close relationship to – and often intrinsically embodies the values of – ideological liberalism, victim-centred strategies tend to promote narrow, individualistic victim identities. This may not do justice to the ways in which people in different societies conceptualise their identities, or understand questions of harm or redress (Robins 2015, 182–88). As I will now discuss, many of these issues have been at play in the context of the victims’ association in Timor-Leste.

Challenges of building the victims’ association in Timor-Leste

As many East Timorese CSO activists concede, progress in building the victims’ association has been slow. These difficulties were evident at the 2015 Victims Congress I attended and during interviews I conducted around it. The congress involved the district focal points from around Timor-Leste and was facilitated by a number of prominent human rights CSO activists from Dili. A key aim was to consider how the victims’ association could reduce its reliance on the financial support of CSOs

(which, in any case, is minimal).³ The congress also reviewed progress made on resolutions since the last congress, in particular: strategies to support vulnerable women victims in the rural areas; collaborate with government, political parties and business; strengthen national and international cooperation; and lobby for a reparations law.

It soon became clear, however, that in some districts there was not a great deal happening at all. One very practical issue raised was that a lack of resources and transport made it difficult for district-based victims groups to organise themselves and plan activities. Compounding this was the fact that, 10 years after the winding up of Timor-Leste's truth commission, it was felt that donors were no longer interested in supporting transitional justice initiatives. The difficulty of garnering support from the Timor-Leste Government was also raised. While two members of the victims' association had recently been elected to the National Parliament as part of a deliberate strategy to build the association's profile and ensure victims' interests were directly represented in the formal political process, these parliamentarians had 'lost their spirit of voluntarism', according to several congress participants, and were no longer interested in victims' issues.⁴ All of this has left the association reliant on Dili-based CSOs (who themselves struggle with declining levels of donor funding) for logistical and financial support. Very little progress was made at the congress on how to reduce this dependency.

Yet, even if victims could overcome some of the financial and other constraints to meeting regularly, it was clear that other factors were complicating attempts to build a strong victims' association. For instance, the difficulties of building common goals among a diverse group were evident. Aside from experiencing a violent event (for instance, the death of a family member, a rape, an experience of torture) at some point during the Indonesian occupation, the group of victims present at the congress seemed to have little in common. They were geographically dispersed, had very different socioeconomic circumstances and education levels and different political affiliations.

3 Only \$30,000 is provided annually for the secretariat of the victims' association in any case, which covers the running costs of one car and the costs of organising several meetings.

4 Observations from 2015 Victims Congress.

Over the course of the congress, other confusions and anxieties also emerged. Several participants suggested that the population in their district remained confused about the purpose of the victims' association. It was said that some community members erroneously believed that joining the association might provide a means through which they could negotiate access to a veterans' pension. An undertone of anxiety also seemed to be present during the discussion of district-level memorials and commemorations; the subtext seemed to be that, in a context where political leaders were seeking to promote reconciliation with Indonesia, efforts by district-based victims' groups to organise large-scale commemorations of violent incidents would be provocative. Anxiety also seemed to be present among those who had been victims of violence committed by Timor-Leste's resistance movement. For instance, several participants who, during the early years of the Indonesian occupation had been detained and mistreated in makeshift FRETILIN-run rehabilitation prisons (*Reabilitação Nacional* – RENAL) for 'reactionaries', raised questions about whether they could legitimately be part of the victims' association.

The challenges that emerged at the congress suggest, then, that the victims' association has struggled due to several overlapping obstacles. First is the general difficulty of building social movements in contexts of impoverishment and limited resources, where people are preoccupied with basic livelihoods concerns. Second is the extent to which, in accordance with the prescribed transitional justice toolkit, victim-centredness has been understood narrowly; it seems clear that CSOs have sought to deliberately create and shape the activities of victims' groups, rather than responding to and supporting organic, 'bottom-up' initiatives (e.g. see Robins 2013, 204). Third, and relatedly, there seems an anxiety – perhaps borne from recent conflict (both with Indonesia and internally, as in the conflict of 2006) – about antagonising the state by undercutting its reconciliation agenda. Yet, more than this, there is also a sense that CSOs have attempted to promote a certain kind of subjectivity among members of the victims' association – that of the individual, rights-holding victim who, through forms of active citizenship, is capable of exerting claims to rights (Jeffery and Jakala 2015, 44; Basok and Ilcan 2016, 314). In the Timor-Leste context, this form of subjectivity, and its related assumptions about political agency, associative life and citizenship, appears – now at least – to have limited resonance.

As the work of Sally Engle Merry underscores, individuals are 'the location of multiple and potentially contradictory subjectivities' that are influenced by dominant and subdominant discourses (Merry 2006, 184). This is no less the case in Timor-Leste, where victim subjectivities promoted by CSOs coexist with other, often more powerful, forms of identification. In a context where the national liberation struggle continues to exert a powerful influence on understandings of identity, discourses that highlight the need to recognise the suffering of victims of all political persuasions struggle to compete with heroic, nationalist discourses that promote the rights of, and reward for, those who sacrificed for the nation's liberation. The concerns raised at the victims' congress by former detainees in FRETILIN prisons speak to these difficulties, revealing the extent to which discussion of violence committed by the East Timorese resistance movement remains taboo.

As already noted, resistance-based identities have in fact been deliberately cultivated by government policies in recent years, which have seen the establishment of a veterans' scheme that provides substantial pensions to those who can successfully claim to have participated in the resistance struggle. In a context where many people struggle to meet their basic needs, the significant economic, social and political capital that is gained by successfully negotiating a veterans' pension is a key driver of this form of identification. By contrast, there is very little to be gained, either socially or materially, by identifying as a victim.

Coexisting with nationalist, resistance-based identities are strong locally embedded conceptions of identity. As in many other kinship-based societies, East Timorese strongly identify as part of extended families, as linked to clan and ancestors. Survival, both social and economic, is fundamentally dependent on the maintenance of relations of reciprocity. These relations are regulated by strong moral codes – referred to as *adat* (custom) – that provide the basis for both solidarity and social control. In such a context, conceptions of harm as the violation of the rights of an individual, autonomous agent do not encompass the degree to which harm is experienced as socially shared, as a fracturing of complex webs of kinship and social alliances (Robins 2015, 196; Sakti 2013, 441). The fact that the state has a limited capacity to uphold rights, particularly outside of the nation's capital, Dili, (and has shown little interest in recognising victim identities in any case) further reduces the power of the victims' rights agenda. All of this means that while this agenda may promise a great deal, it is currently unable to respond to some of the most important

social, economic and spiritual needs of those who have been affected by the conflict. As I will now discuss, these needs are to some degree being addressed through everyday practices and strategies of social repair that are embedded in the realm of the extended family.

Beyond the victims' association: Everyday reconciliation and the work of faith-based actors

To illustrate what I mean by everyday practices, let me begin with an anecdote. In July 2016, I travelled to the district of Aileu to interview the district-level 'focal point' for the national victims' association about their activities. 'Mario', the young coordinator, who was also a teacher in the local school, explained to me that it was difficult to generate interest in the victims' association and that there was very little district-related activity taking place. When I asked about programs such as organising district-level commemorations or lobbying local leaders on issues of justice or reparations, he had little to report. Most of the time, said Mario, he waited for direction from the national coordinator of the victims' association. From time to time, he was called to participate in meetings or workshops in Dili. At other times, he was asked to provide the names of 'vulnerable women victims' so that they could be linked into forms of material support.

Feeling disappointed at the lack of interview data, I asked Mario if he would be willing to accompany me to some of the mass graves where, in 1974/75 (at the height of the internal political conflict between Timor-Leste's two key political parties, UDT (*União Democrática Timorense*) and FRETILIN (*Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente*)), UDT prisoners had been buried after being killed by FRETILIN. While on our travels, Mario and I talked about many things, including his own family background. He told me that he was originally from Viqueque District and that his mother, who had been a key member of the women's resistance organisation OPMT (*Organização Popular da Mulher Timorense*), had been killed in the late 1970s. Mario then described how he had recently travelled as part of a group of 150 members of his extended family to collect his mother's remains. The family, he said, had used 'traditional methods' to locate the site of the remains (which had involved listening to one member of the family, for whom the location had appeared in

a dream). Mario further explained that when they arrived in the vicinity of the remains they were able to identify the exact location because some blood suddenly appeared on the ground as a sign. Once recovered, Mario's mother's remains were reburied at her birthplace after elaborate rituals – both customary and Catholic – had been performed. It was clear that the whole process had taken many months of planning, had been a significant expense and had consumed several days. It had required all the members of Mario's extended family to be present.

Mario's story of recovering his mother's remains is by no means unusual. Much has now been written about the extensive activity that has been occurring since the end of the occupation as families work to identify, recover and rebury the remains of those who died or were killed during the conflict (e.g. McWilliam 2008, 224–225; Bovensiepen 2014, 103; Grenfell 2012, 97; Kent 2016, 43). The whereabouts of many of these bodies was often unknown during the occupation. Large numbers of civilians perished from aerial bombardment, starvation and disease as they sheltered in the mountains behind FRETILIN lines in the early years of the occupation, their bodies interred in shallow bush graves or left to decay. Others were never seen by family members following their arrest by the Indonesian military or police. Part of the significance of these practices and rituals lies in the ways in which they work to reinforce kinship relationships, webs of sociality and trust that, in the wake of the fracturing effects of the Indonesian occupation, are critically important to families' sense of wellbeing.

Reburial rituals such as those described by Mario also underscore the degree to which, for many East Timorese, the dead remain a very real presence in the lives of the living. It is well known that in contexts where burial rituals have been disrupted and where uncertainty surrounding the fate of disappeared persons persists victims' families experience acute anxiety. This anxiety is magnified in a context such as Timor-Leste where the dead are thought to have a continuing influence in the lives of the living, and where relations with the dead are paramount to the wellbeing of their descendants. Maintaining good relations with the dead requires responding to their demands for attention and compensation, and conducting 'proper' burials (Myrtinnen 2014, 97). In cases where people are thought to have died 'bad deaths' – that is, deaths due to sudden and violent circumstances – there is a particular urgency about the need to conduct mortuary rituals, because of the power of the dead to disrupt the lives of the living. In these cases, it is often suggested that

the dead will continue to ‘wander’ as ghosts and torment the lives of their descendants (by causing illness and death among the living) unless rituals are performed to render them spiritually harmless (McWilliam 2008, 224–225; Sakti 2013, 438).

An appreciation of the importance of maintaining equilibrium between the world of the living and the dead helps to shed a different perspective on some of the motivating factors behind families’ attempts to claim veterans’ pensions on behalf of their deceased relatives (martyrs). These efforts should not be understood simply as attempts by families to elevate their social, economic and political status (in contexts of acute poverty), but perhaps first and foremost as a means of appeasing the spirits of the dead by giving due recognition to their contributions and providing them with a dignified secondary burial. Accessing a veteran’s pension enables families to undertake expeditions to recover the remains of the dead, purchase cement to construct new graves and headstones, and conduct associated rituals, all of which are often extremely costly. As one informant explained to me, it is only after appropriately reburying the dead that money from veterans’ pensions can be used for everyday necessities. ‘The dead come first.’⁵

In addition to family-led practices of remembrance and reburial, which often take place with little external support, faith-based actors are also assisting Timorese communities to rebuild their lives after the violence of the occupation. For instance, alongside customary mortuary rituals, Catholic priests are often called upon by families to organise special masses to remember and bless the dead. Faith-based actors are also working to assist some of the hundreds of thousands of East Timorese who, after the 1999 referendum, were displaced across the border into neighbouring West Timor, to reconcile with their families and, in some cases, to return to East Timor.

One prominent faith-based actor is Maria Lourdes (or Mana Lou as she is popularly known) who, since 1989, has run a Secular Catholic Institute known as ISMAIK (*Institutu Maun Alin Iha Kristu*; brothers and sisters in Christ), based in Dare, in the hills behind Dili, that is dedicated to working with the poor and the marginalised.⁶ Since the 1999 referendum,

5 Interview with Oldericho Coimbra, Los Palos, July 2017.

6 A Secular Catholic Institute is an Institute of Consecrated Life in which men and women live as lay people in the world and seek to provide an example of Christian living.

Mana Lou has been engaged in efforts aimed at reconciling East Timorese families living on different sides of the border, which she describes as spiritually informed. She intensified these efforts after 2012, when she had a vision of Christ on the cross during a mass at Timor-Leste's 10-year independence celebrations. Since then, she has been visiting West Timor every month to provide spiritual companionship to displaced East Timorese, working with the leaders of the refugees (many of them former militia leaders) to pray and reflect. She also offers support and encouragement to those seeking to return to Timor-Leste.⁷

Faith-based actors such as Mana Lou command enormous respect among the communities in which they work. This respect is a legacy, in part, of the Indonesian occupation, when Catholic leaders took on an increasingly activist role and churches became 'safe havens' for resistance fighters and those seeking sanctuary from persecution (McGreggor et al. 2012, 1134–1135). Catholic doctrines also provided a source of solace and strength to those who were suffering. Moreover, the church's decision to use Tetum as the language of the church and its preparedness to tolerate the coexistence of animist beliefs and practices allowed Catholicism to become interwoven, over time, with local cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices. Significant rituals – such as those surrounding burials of the dead – often incorporate both Catholic and animist components (Grenfell 2012).

But more than this, the respect commanded by faith-based actors such as Mana Lou is grounded in their long-term relationships with specific local communities. Indeed, Mana Lou is at pains to stress that ISMAIK is not an NGO, and that she never does 'proposals' for her activities because, regardless of whether funding is available, she is committed to ongoing accompaniment of the poor and marginalised. Perhaps most importantly, in comparison to the transitional justice activities promoted by CSOs, which are grounded in a liberal rights framework and are directed towards building a nationwide victim constituency capable of directing rights claims to the state, the activities undertaken by faith-based actors such as Mana Lou implicitly recognise that, for those for whom the state is often a remote presence, the ongoing rebuilding of highly localised community and family relationships (including with the dead) is essential to viable social life.

7 Interview with Mana Lou, July 2016.

Conclusion

What I have drawn out in this chapter is that a great deal of the activity taking place in Timor-Leste, as families and communities seek to negotiate the legacies of the Indonesian occupation, bears little resemblance to the liberal transitional justice strategies promoted by CSO activists. This activity often occurs with little or no connection to the work of CSO activists, including the victims' association. Much of this activity is being undertaken by families and kinship groups with little external support. All of this suggests that, while CSOs may be facing difficulties cultivating a certain *kind* of civil society transitional justice activity in Timor-Leste, there is a lot of this activity going on if both 'civil society' and 'transitional justice' are viewed through a wider lens.

To be clear, I do not wish to argue that the strategies pursued by CSOs are fundamentally flawed or misguided. Over the long term, it may prove attractive, or empowering, to some East Timorese to identify as victims of the conflict and to elevate aspects of their identity associated with liberal conceptions of human rights over others, such as resistance credentials or kinship. My argument is simply that, at this point in time, there is a need for careful and critical reflection on the form of 'victim-centredness' that is currently being promoted by CSOs in Timor-Leste, and the extent to which it accords with prevalent understandings of subjectivity and people's immediate and everyday needs. In a context where families, clan and ancestors are intricately linked through blood, spirit and ties to the land, the victims' rights agenda – with its assumptions about individual victimhood and rights that should be upheld by the state – cannot, for ordinary East Timorese, necessarily be taken for granted as natural or self-evident (Robins 2015, 188). Moreover, investing in the victims' rights agenda requires a considerable leap of faith (not to mention time and resources) in a context where the state's presence in most of the country is remote, intermittent or in name only, and where basic issues of survival are paramount. In this context, there is little evidence that the victims' rights agenda will be transformative.

At a broader level, the Timor-Leste experience provokes reflection on how conceptions of both 'civil society' and 'victim-centredness' are constructed within a transitional justice field that has become increasingly prescriptive. Specifically, it raises questions about the kinds of activities and practices that current imaginings of transitional justice render visible and invisible, and how these imaginings connect to broader relations of power.

That there are significant power differentials at work in Timor-Leste is evident in the fact that local CSOs are required to navigate declining levels of donor funding, a state that has little interest in a victims' rights agenda and an international transitional justice industry that demands increased professionalisation and standardisation. This context inevitably provides incentives for CSOs to focus on certain issues, and detracts from their efforts to incorporate 'local knowledges' and develop creative, community-based approaches (Nesiah 2016, 29). It also leads to the neglect of everyday practices and strategies of social repair, due to their foreignness to the liberal transitional justice template. Greater attention to these practices might help to imagine more pluralistic, locally resonant, ways of addressing legacies of mass harm.

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