



East-Timorese Identity Reconstruction



"It is true that we have not come up yet with a holistic view of what constitutes the identity of an East Timorese. A daunting task, but a rewarding one. ..."
 Bishop C.X. Belo, Nobel Price laureate 1996

The stoneman test



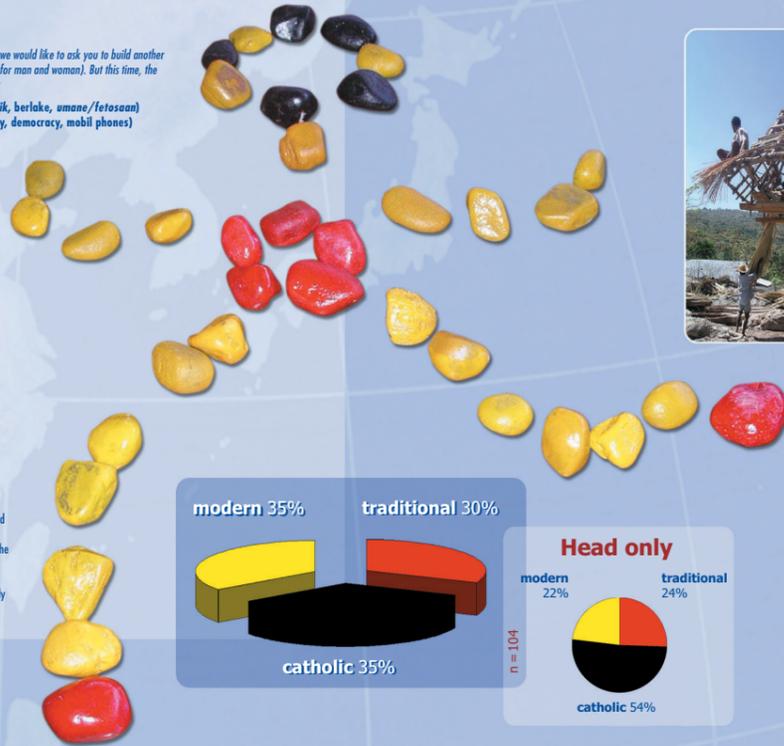
For the stoneman test a Timorese team of local investigators prepared 100 stones in the colors of the Timorese National flag: 33 red, 33 yellow and 33 black plus one neutral. Subjects are first checked in a pretest, if they understand the representation of the world in pictures, formed by stones (recognizing a uma, house). Second, they are asked to "make a man" with stones. If their stoneman looks somehow human, the investigators ask a few standardized questions about the image and then the participants get the actual instruction:

Instruction

"In the third part of the experiment we would like to ask you to build another 'ema' (neutral expression in Tetum for man and woman). But this time, the colors of the stones have a meaning:

- Red: tradition (like uma lulik, berlake, amana/fetसान)
- Yellow: modern (like electricity, democracy, mobil phones)
- Black: catholic

You can use again as much stones as you like. But this time we ask you to build not any stoneman, but this time please make a stoneman that is yourself!"



The process including the following narrative interview about the stoneman and the individual meaning of significant aspects (e.g.: "What does it mean that your head totally black and the stomach red?" or "You used only 8 stones, why?") is filmed, documented and descriptive analyzed.

The sample (n=104) is balanced in terms of gender and age distribution. The experiments are partly conducted in a special setting in the Teachers Research and Resource Centre, Baucaux; other stonemen are from the field, where the following interviews mostly end up in small group discussions with extended families (action research).

Results:

- Calculating all of the valid data, we found surprisingly that in the year 2004 the three dimensions are nearly equally strong. (traditional: 30%, catholic: 35%, modern: 35%) (The hypothesis of the Timorese researcher team at the ICP was that the people are currently three times more modern than traditional; the anthropological literature claimed the opposite. Since we had also several sisters from religious congregations in the sample, the author predicted that Catholicism would be stronger). Interestingly, Catholicism is with 52% the dominant dimension, if only the stones used in the head of the stoneman are calculated.
- Relating the stoneman findings to socio-demographic data: There is a slight indication that women express themselves as less traditional. Students chose more black (catholic) stones; a middle aged group had yellow (modern) stones highest ranking. Surprisingly an age group of 50 and above (the so called *katusas* and *ferik*) used less red (traditional) stones. We interpret this as an effect resulting from the data cleaning procedures that only stonemen entered the sample, where the Timorese researchers were sure that the subjects definitely understand the instruction. Most of the students fulfilled these criteria, while several *katusas* and *ferik* had problems with the representation.
- Nobody was mono-colored (but 5,95% bi-colored). The only exception, which would be considered as an "error" in a statistical sense, is for action research a source of additional information: An old woman, who is currently in mourning – and therefore dressed according to a cultural code totally in black – represented herself only in black stones. An interview about her biography followed.

Timor Loro Sa'e

The "land of the rising sun" (East Timor, officially: Timor Leste) is situated on the eastern part of the island of Timor. It is the easternmost of the Lesser Sunda Islands in the Indonesian Archipelago. 500 km south across the Timor Sea, in which huge oil fields are meanwhile exploited, is Australia. In the north lies the Savu Sea and the Strait of Wetar. More than 20 languages are spoken by a total population of only 780.000 inhabitants

In the 16th century the Portuguese established trade with the sandalwood rich island and stayed there until the carnation revolution in Lisbon in 1974. After a short civil war East Timor was invaded by the Indonesian military in December 1975 and occupied for the next 24 years. The change of leadership in Indonesia in 1998 led the way to a United Nations supervised referendum in August 1999.

The people of East Timor voted overwhelmingly with a 78.5% majority in favour of independence. From 1999 to May 2002 East Timor was ruled by the United Nations Transitional Administration (UNTAET) established by the United Nations Security Council. East Timor finally achieved independence and statehood in May 2002.

When East Timor became independent, it took its place as one of the twenty poorest countries in the world. With a gross domestic product per capita of only US\$ 478 and a Human Development Index with a value of 0.421, its development rating is placed in the same category as countries like Angola, Bangladesh or Guinea-Bissau. Nearly half the population lives on less than 0.55 cents per day. (UNDP, 2002)



It became evident that at least three dimensions explain the majority of the variance in Timorese identity.

- Each East Timorese has to integrate:
- to be rooted in a specific, centuries old and change resistant tradition
 - to be – at least nominal and in 84% of the cases – catholic
 - to find oneself since 2002 in a modern state, economically linked to a globalized world system. (Recent phenomena, like the fragmentation of the Youth in the Capital Dili, have even post-modern character)

3 Identity dimensions

Dimension 1: traditional

The classical anthropological literature about East Timor – from early missionaries up to recent publications (see Barthe, 2001) – explains what comes to Timorese minds even nowadays, when they are asked who they are and how they live. The old Timorese are obsessively concerned with their marriage-alliances between wife-giver and wife taker families (*umane/fetसान*), bride-wealth (*berlake*), death (*mote*) affairs and their houses (*uma*).



Everyone can trace his origin to a sacred house (*uma lulik*). Belonging to the same *uma lulik* establishes relationships, which imply binding obligations and responsibilities to one another. Origin and *uma lulik* membership are traced patrilineally. Through proper marriages, kaben houses are connected and create interdependency, which is quite common for collectivistic cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The alliances between wife-giver and wife taker are reaffirmed at various occasions (for example death of a lineage member). People exchange buffaloes and goats and rearrange the complex relationship between ancestors and the living. The souls of the dead continue to live in the *uma lulik*.



The traditional mode of identity reconstruction

Most significant for the traditional mode of identity reconstruction is that the symbols of traditional Timorese identity are physically reconstructed. Sacred houses, which were burnt by the Indonesian army, are all over East Timor currently being re-built. After 1999 it took some time to start this – as nobody reconstructs identity overnight. Communities first have to reconcile and huge amounts of sacrificial buffaloes and pigs have to be stocked, etc. Reconstructing houses is reconstructing social and cosmic order. Doing that with all community members together reinforces the functioning parts of collective traditional identity.



Dimension 2: catholic



As early as 1556 Portuguese Dominicans claimed their first converts on Flores and Timor. Today only a small minority of 16% of East Timor's population is not Catholic. In 1975 this figure was much higher; the Indonesian religion-politic forced every passport owner to choose a book religion. "Animism" officially did not exist. Thus, Catholicism was the nearest option and rationally the best choice.

The Catholic Church played a major role during the resistance and continues to do so during reconstruction. Prominent figures like the Nobel Peace Laureate (1996), Bishop Belo, had a crucial role in strengthening the Catholic Church to preserve the moral and social values of the Timorese society.



The catholic mode of identity reconstruction



With more than 120 priests, 330 sisters and 30 religious congregations, the Catholic Church in East Timor has extended personal and financial resources plus operational structures, which survived the violence of 1999 and before. The question "Who am I?" is answered every Sunday: *Maramak*, god, is great and we are his children. During Eucharistic rituals Catholic doctrines are incorporated and reinforced; people celebrate a mystery, which reassures them that all suffering has a meaning and leads finally to salvation.

But for the Catholic identity reconstruction mode, the most significant factor is not theological, but pragmatic. It is the functioning omnipresence of the church: The better clinics are run by sisters; the better schools in the country are operated by the church. Being Catholic, for most subsistence farmers the care of all self-related actions, is often in the hand of priests. Existential human needs are linked to spirituality, for example providing medicine and praying together in the clinic. Being Catholic, dealing with daily hassles and finally survive are cognitively and emotionally entangled.



Summary

Identity, defined as the answer to the question "Who am I?", is under individual and collective reconstruction since independence (2002) in the world's newest nation, East-Timor.

The old traditional culture – symbolized in *uma luliks* (sacral houses) and perpetuated by *berlake* (marriage alliances and exchanges) – is increasingly questioned and being transformed rapidly. The Catholic Church, after 500 years of Portuguese missionary work, faces new challenges from a (post)modern youth.

Using a participatory approach for illiterate subjects (*stoneman* test), the question – to which extend Timorese perceive currently their traditional, catholic or modern identity dimensions is answered.

18 month of extended field research, in depth interviews and participant observation provided evidence of how according to this three dimensions, collective modes of reconstruction are established. Traditional systems rebuild physical manifestations of meaningful units (e.g. *uma luliks*), the omnipresent church provides models for identification (e.g. the Bishops) and the modern sector established discourses for redefining post conflict identities (e.g. in the truth-, reception- & reconciliation-commission, CAVR).



Identity Reconstruction

The Timorese, who were exposed 24 years to Indonesian education, 500 years Portuguese colonial rule and recently international peace keeping forces as new role models, struggle since independence with their identity.

For this study we follow Weisreich (2003) and other identity structure analysts in the definition of identity as the totality on one's self construed and operationalized as the answer to the question "Who am I?" (Ziller, 1990: 34)

It is a universal phenomenon that people relate to themselves and others, and it is culture specific, how they define themselves. (Taylor, 1997)

Talking about "deconstruction" and "reconstruction" in East Timor, one must understand the impact of the recent history towards current physical and psychological developments.

The human cost of the Indonesian invasion 1974 and subsequent resistance by the Timorese was extensive. A quarter of the population died and there were widespread human rights violations.

Until the arrival of the UN INTERFET peacekeeping forces in October 1999, three-quarters of the country's infrastructure and housing were destroyed by hard-liners in the Indonesian army and militia. They killed over 1000 Timorese. An estimated 250,000 people were displaced to West Timor. Social networks and traditional social structures were disrupted and sometimes shattered.

Action research Methods

The process of identity reconstruction in East Timor is a complex phenomenon. The construction and reorganization of social networks, systems of meaning, the answer to the question "Who am I?" and the integration of past experiences in individual biographies can only be understood in their interface with a set of historical, psychological and cultural conditions and recent post-conflict political developments. The answers come into focus only if we are willing to examine the intertwining strands from a wide-angled lens.

The approach of this explorative investigation is mainly qualitative and action oriented. 18 months of participant observation in different settings (villages, workshops, public hearings, trainings for counselors etc.) by the author are the primary database. Additionally narrative interviews, critical incident analysis together with a participatory semi-experimental design (stoneman test) were used.

For many Timorese, the atrocities committed in '99 were another page in a long chapter of physical and psychological violations inflicted by Indonesian military and paramilitary forces. It was a brutal reign of terror, well documented by Amnesty International but hardly mentioned in the international news media – including disappearances, torture and genocide. An IRI study in 1999 found that – according to the criteria of Post Traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – 92% of the East Timorese population have been exposed to a traumatic event that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or other (Madrug, 2000)

Identity and ways of living are constructed during early stages of socialization and they were subsequently de-constructed during the Indonesian occupation. Forced sterilization for example, or language policies to use only Bahasa Indonesia try to de-construct a culture. However, after 1999 not only burned buildings were physically re-constructed, but identities and worldviews undergo now a process of re-construction.

- Two questions are to be discussed in this context:
- the identity aspect: How is recent Timorese identity configured? (> Timorese Identity dimensions)
 - the reconstruction aspect: Which institution and dynamics shape the processes of its reconstruction? (> Identity reconstruction modes)

Conclusion & further research

- Identity reconstruction is a complex cultural phenomenon, which can only be understood in East Timor, with regard to traditional, Catholic and modern dimensions.
- With stoneman experiments, illiterate subjects can express their interrelationship of identity dimensions. It would be interesting to replicate this action research method comparatively in other cultural contexts.
- In a post conflict society the processes of identity reconstruction can be actively shaped by institutions like CAVR, the church or psycho-educative programs. Further research is needed to investigate the competitive dynamics between Governments, church and traditional leaders about the identities of the next generation. The current (2004) tendency in East Timor seems to be that traditional, Catholic and modern identity dimensions – and their related modes of identity reconstruction – are equally strong forces.



a CAVR community reconciliation (2003) – integrating traditional, Catholic and modern identity reconstruction modes

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