

Plus ça change: (Post)Colonial Timor-Leste as a Return to (Pre)Colonial Realities in the Novels of Luís Cardoso

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Abstract: This article examines the novels of the East Timorese writer Luís Cardoso, and argues that their representations of a colonial past should not be simply interpreted as memorializations of Timor-Leste's suffering at the hands of foreign aggressors. It proposes that underlying their revisiting of the past is a call for acknowledgement of the agency of East Timorese in the history of violent conflict that has troubled the nation, and that only this can guarantee true reconciliation, justice and national independence.

Keywords: Luís Cardoso; conflict; transitional justice; reconciliation.

The past, far from being a foreign country, is at times all too familiar in the visions of Timor-Leste created by the East Timorese novelist, Luís Cardoso. The principal characters moving across the pages of his four published novels may change, but they enact similar roles within a central narrative that is inextricably bound up in a history that appears to prevent the emergence of a different story.¹ The repetition of what, over the course of the novels, become well-worn themes (exile, revenge, the exercise of power, racial and cultural miscegenation, among others) against a changing temporal (and, in some cases, geographical) background cannot disguise the tragicomic monotony of what is being played out, and those in the past appear to have done things little differently from how they are done in the present. Within Cardoso's fictional timeframes, moreover,

the diegetic present can itself become a past in relation to both his novel's narrators and to the reader. The latter is ultimately the addressee of the narrators' exposition of the past as shaping the fictional present but, as this essay will argue, the reader with knowledge of contemporary East Timorese realities can also be projected into a concrete present that needs to be freed from an equally concrete history.

Despite appearances to the contrary, however, Cardoso's representations of a present imitative of the past do not lack originality and the ability to engage the reader. Each novel functions as the possibility of a new beginning and, thus, of a new outcome, just as their principal characters are poised between the pursuit of a self-made destiny and one inherited from others; to choose the former is to reject the latter and to face the concomitant loss of a shared identity derived from the sense of a common history – and an imagined common future. Authorial will is also bound to this choice, as references are made to the strains of competing opinions as to a writer's purpose when faced with a struggle seen as of paramount importance to his fellow countrymen. There is a demand for the creative act to serve the social good which, in the East Timorese case, is national independence, whereas the narrator/ author (specifically in *A Última Morte do Coronel Santiago*) resists such impositions in attempts to mark out a *literary* independence. These attempts, and the anguish they cause, can be read as yet another form of temporal break, since they represent a distancing from an East Timorese literary tradition born in the 1970s that was intimately allied to an anti-colonial struggle.² It is Cardoso's ability to translate the tensions resulting from these choices and their consequences that sustains narratives seemingly willing but ultimately unable to break a temporal barrier and propel themselves into a different (hi)story – one not bound up with a colonial past made (ever)present, which is itself suggested as containing continuities with pre-colonial Timor.³ However, before beginning an analysis of Cardoso's representations of the last decades of Portuguese colonial rule, which will lead to a proposal that his fictional past can be seen as a disruptive mirror on East Timorese contemporary realities, it is important to make a distinction between an *imagined* past and post-conflict memory as an element in the search for justice.

Although historical periods of violent and deadly conflict in Timor-Leste are repeatedly evoked and can form a central thread in Luís Cardoso's narratives, their presence should not be readily interpreted as a contemporary literary contribution to the ongoing search for a resolution to the crimes that took place on East Timorese soil – in other words, as performing a transparent social function. Countless East Timorese families continue to seek some sort of justice for the crimes that were committed by the Indonesians during their 24-year occupation, and particularly during the 1999 referendum that clearly voiced the desire for independence, but many feel that political expediency will deny them the opportunity of seeing those who were responsible face prosecution. As Lia Kent notes,

Conscious of the new nation's geopolitical constraints, East Timorese leaders have promoted an agenda of reconciliation as “forgiveness and forgetting.” This narrative [...] embodied the leadership's outright rejection of a prosecutorial approach and the promotion of a nationbuilding agenda that stressed moving on from the past and building diplomatic relations with Indonesia. (440)

Reminders from the East Timorese who suffered at the hands of the Indonesians that they desire justice are consequently seen by the political elite as unwanted obstacles on the path to the consolidation of the country's independence, resulting in the existence of two principal strands of “transitional justice” in postcolonial, post-conflict Timor-Leste.

The “official” approach to transitional justice, which to some extent is informed by international views of what this entails (especially as articulated by the United Nations), strives for a clear demarcation between the past and the future. “Invoking Enlightenment values of ‘reason, progress, improvement and redemption,’” as Kent remarks, “transitional justice discourse is built upon the notion of ‘breaking with the past’ and establishes a definitive sense of ‘now’ and ‘then,’ so that “individuals and postconflict societies will be assisted to ‘come to terms’ with the violent past and states will make the transition to peaceful, stable, liberal democracies” (437).⁴ With the establishment by the United Nations

of the *Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação* during the period of UN administration (1999-2002), and of the Commission for Truth and Friendship by the post-independence East Timorese government in conjunction with the Republic of Indonesia, that progression to a stable democracy is regarded by the political elites as having been achieved, even if the findings of both commissions did not lead to any high-level prosecutions. In this light, the insistence on further examinations of the past is denotative of an irrational refusal to move into a modern present where such remembering serves no useful purpose. The question, according to W. James Booth, is whether it “might not be better [...] to let go of the past, to invest our energy and time in building a future rather than dwelling in the evils of an irreversible past?” (777) Memory of conflict in a post-conflict context can thus be viewed as “archaic, irrational, even dangerous” when it demands to become part of a public discourse resolved to consolidate and normalise the nation’s independent status (Booth 777).

Notwithstanding the political elite’s desire to move firmly ahead into the postcolonial future, the other strand of transitional justice movements in Timor-Leste persists in its “desire to keep the memory of the past alive [and to] unsettle ‘official’ attempts to mark a clear break between the past and the future” (Kent 436). Functioning at a local level, “unofficial” memory practices are simultaneously aimed at seeking judicial recognition of the suffering inflicted upon East Timorese populations (which entails prosecution of offenders and, in many cases, compensation for their victims),⁵ and properly honouring and respecting the dead. In doing so, however, local memory practices disrupt another current of the “official” approach to dealing with the past that relates to the inside rather than the outside. Whereas much concern is given to ensuring that past conflict does not threaten post-independence Timor-Leste’s relations with neighbouring states, principally Indonesia, there is also a perceived preoccupation amongst the political elite to sanction a specific vision of the past, “a heroic and triumphal story that elevates ideas of sacrifice, national unity and liberation” (Kent 440), and one that pays tribute to the role of the East Timorese resistance to the Indonesian occupation, and particularly to the FALINTIL (*Forças Armadas para a Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste*) to which many of the leading figures in the nation’s contemporary political

landscape belonged. As a result, there are those within the general population who, with no formal links to the resistance, feel that their own suffering has been neglected in favour of those with a more prominent role in the conflict and that, therefore, they are being ignored when it comes to compensation (or reward).⁶ Furthermore, local memory practices are not only engaged in promoting an idea of victimhood (or the “democratisation” of victimhood) that can encompass “ordinary” civilians caught up in the events of 1975-1999, but they also seek to include within it those East Timorese who suffered not at the hands of the Indonesians, but at those of the resistance itself. By remembering the victims of East Timorese political violence, local memory practices “have sought to challenge the [post-independence] leadership’s invocation of a united, heroic struggle that silences some less palatable truths” (Kent 453).

In their evocation not only of a past of conflict involving foreign occupiers, but also on several occasions of the violence stemming from internal political conflict, Luís Cardoso’s novels could therefore be seen as a literary memory practice that seeks to disrupt official approaches to the past, and to claim a place for those whose victimhood is perceived as not having been duly recognised; they would prevent the imposition of a neat separation between a “now” of assured nationhood that must be lived, and a “then” of colonial conflict that must be overcome, but a separation that denies justice to many ordinary East Timorese.⁷ However, as I have already outlined and will now argue in detail, this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, to some extent Luís Cardoso’s narratives appear to chime with “official” views of the proper place of the past, which is not in the present, and rather than promoting a more encompassing idea of East Timorese victimhood, with its corollary claim to compensation, they focus instead on the notion of East Timorese agency – not only in the context of “heroic” resistance, but also of “collaboration” and of the origins of violence. In other words, there is no place in Cardoso’s novels for a simplistic interpretation of Timor-Leste as a land populated by victims of external aggression, all sharing in a passive innocence that allows us to easily distinguish the active foreign wrongdoers. Even where such an interpretation appears legitimate, it is possible to question the extent to which East Timorese with leadership roles are responsible for allowing the victimisation of their fellow countrymen and

women and, in turn, the degree to which the latter have allowed themselves to be placed in such a position.

In the concluding dialogue to Luís Cardoso's third novel, *A Última Morte do Coronel Santiago*, one of the characters, Beatriz, declares: "O passado acabou, acabando connosco, acaba de vez" (292). Such a conclusive statement is perhaps suitable to a narrative that marks the end of a trilogy that began with Cardoso's 1997 debut novel, *Crónica de Uma Travessia. A Época do Ai-Dik-Funam*, which begins with the words: "Era uma quinta-feira quente, aquele dia do mês de Junho de 1990. Como fazia todas as manhãs, atravessei o rio de barco" (11). As if to underline its purpose as the end of a cycle that began with a crossing of the river Tejo in Lisbon, *A Última Morte's* last line, printed in bold type, reads: "O Fim da Travessia" (293). By imposing an end that in some respects quarantines what has gone before, *A Última Morte* seems to reflect "official" East Timorese approaches to the memory of conflict, whereby the past should not infect the present. Despite Beatriz's declaration that "o passado acabou," the past, however, *never* seems to be over in the context of Cardoso's trilogy, reflecting the way in which it continually appears to haunt present realities in Timor-Leste. As attempts are made to consolidate an idea of a shared East Timorese national identity that can take its place in the ranks of independent nations, and to shed the heavy burden of a colonial past, Derrida's assertion that "there is no nationalism without some ghost" (5) could certainly be applied to both contemporary realities in Timor-Leste and to Luís Cardoso's narratives. In the case of the latter the colonial past insists on resurfacing even when Cardoso's characters are moving in a postcolonial present, and in respect of the former political authority in the present is often asserted through claims to a prominent role in anti-colonial resistance;⁸ whatever their presumed intentions, neither demonstrates a contemporaneity that is not to some extent symbiotically reliant on the past for its decipherability.

Consequently, it is with a degree of suspicion that we must interpret the air of finality of *A Última Morte*, as if it were marking a line in the sand on one side of which stands Cardoso's trilogy, and on the other a fictional imaginary that is distinctive from what has preceded it. All of Cardoso's novels are explorations of an East Timorese past marked by the passage of Portuguese

colonialism, which has bequeathed a complex legacy that some in postcolonial Timor-Leste may want to elide, whilst others see it as an essential element of their national identity that must be given its due prominence.⁹ There is perhaps nothing new in the debate over the place of a Portuguese flavour to Timor-Leste's contemporary identity, since it has taken place to differing degrees in all of Portugal's former colonies, including Brazil. What may be different is that whereas Brazil broke away from the Portuguese empire in 1822, and Portugal's African colonies achieved their independence in the wake of the 1974 revolution, Timor-Leste had to endure another period of colonization before its own eventual independence in 2002, fighting an anti-colonial war of resistance that had long ended in the rest of the former Portuguese overseas possessions. The East Timorese colonial past, therefore, is temporally much closer than that of Portugal's other colonies, making it perhaps a more arduous task to distance it from the postcolonial present.

That task is made all the more difficult given that Portugal's abandonment of Timor-Leste was not followed by a transition to guaranteed independence, even if the existence of the República Democrática de Timor-Leste was unilaterally declared on 28 November 1975. Indeed, although Cardoso's novels touch upon the violence of the 24-year Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste that followed a few days later, and its postcolonial aftermath, it is the violence and divisions within East Timorese society during Portuguese colonial rule that form the core of his fictional world, as if this literary present feels the proximity of Indonesia's rule as excessive – so close that it insists on inhabiting the “now” and impedes Timor-Leste's self-assured assumption of nationhood and, by extension, of the rise of an East Timorese literary tradition. The divisions that precede the Indonesian presence and the violence they engender are apt to be read as the result of a colonial strategy that sought to consolidate Portugal's presence by exploiting indigenous rivalries, rewarding particular groups willing to quell native resistance to the colonial authorities. This reading, which lays the blame for internecine violence on the Portuguese colonizers, appears to be supported thematically by Cardoso's first three novels. All three make repeated references to the role played by one East Timorese kingdom in quashing a violent revolt against the Portuguese by another, and how

that opposition impinges on a present that was borne out of a colonizing process of “pacification”.

In Cardoso’s debut novel, the opposing kingdoms are those of Manufahi, whose ruler was D. Boaventura, and Lacló, ruled by D. Luís dos Reis de Noronha. In line with the rest of *Crónica*, both the places and people named are real, and the revolt of the *liurai* D. Boaventura against the Portuguese colonial authorities, which was violently quashed in 1912, has become an important element of East Timorese history and cultural identity.¹⁰ The opposing kingdoms in *Olhos de Coruja*, *Olhos de Gato Bravo* – Cardoso’s second novel – as well as in *A Última Morte*, are those of the fictional Manumera and Manumasin, with Manumera reappearing in Cardoso’s most recent novel, *Requiem para o Navegador Solitário*, which does not form part of the trilogy, and deals with the Japanese invasion of 1941. However, as I suggested earlier, the border in Cardoso’s fiction represented by *A Última Morte*, is a porous one, not only due to the presence of the kingdom of Manumera in *Requiem*, but also because of the references to the Japanese occupation in all three of his previous novels; the fictional world(s) of the first three cross over into that of the last.

The Japanese invasion is evoked in *Crónica* through the figure of the narrator’s father, a man suffering from amnesia, who has come to Portugal to receive medical treatment. His son, who left Timor before the 1975 Indonesian invasion, longs to know of his father’s experience of this harsh period, but when he asks, his father “atravessava ainda mais o tempo, fugindo das minhas perguntas e falava da guerra contra os Japoneses misturada com a guerra de Manufahi” (146). This act of remembering is illustrative of a past that repeats itself under various guises, but all of them possessing underlying constants whose repetitive nature perhaps allows a period that cannot yet be faced without pain to be understood through reference to an earlier time. The narrator’s father refuses to speak to his son of the war of resistance against the Indonesians, opting instead to remember the war against the Japanese in the 1940s, and the revolt against the Portuguese at the beginning of the twentieth century. In these conflicts, the foreign enemy was different, but those fighting them were East Timorese – this is an obvious constant. Another one that all of Cardoso’s novels allude to is perhaps not so obvious, and that is the fact that East

Timorese always appeared on both sides of any conflict – and not necessarily always as unwilling servants of their colonial masters. In *Crónica*, the narrator's father is visited in Lisbon by an old friend, and their memories return to a time when their respective families were in opposing camps:

De repente falavam ao mesmo tempo de histórias antigas e diferentes. Só se acertavam quando falavam da guerra de Manufahi. Um, o mestre Alberto, do reino de Lacló, fiel às autoridades coloniais, e o meu pai, originário de Manufahi, fiel a D. Boaventura. [...] Era como se se quisessem reconciliar novamente da guerra que deu como definitivas as campanhas de pacificação. [...] Eles, os dois, com antepassados em barricadas diferentes. (145)

It seems at first as if these two older men's disconnected memories find synchronicity in recalling a moment of division, and the reference to reconciliation – or a *renewal* of reconciliation – could be suggestive of a present in which there is the possibility of harmony. However, I would suggest that this note of optimism carries with it a sense of fragility as the descendants of those who fought on opposing sides are not only enacting another moment of reconciliation over an event that occurred almost eighty years earlier, but it takes place not in Timor-Leste, but in the capital of the former metropole, hence it is both temporally and geographically distant from the origin of division. Arguably such distance provides the appropriate space for reconciliation to be assured, yet it does so only for the individuals concerned and not their communities, since the latter are not present to witness the act or to participate in its realisation and are thus liable to perpetuate the conflict.¹¹

Moreover, the real Manufahi revolt which lies at the origin of the divisions the two men are recalling was quashed by the Portuguese not only with the help of loyal East Timorese, but also Mozambicans who were “utilizados como cães de guerra e pacificadores das revoltas nativas” (*Crónica* 20). The presence of a “foreign” element additional to the Portuguese serves to illustrate a characteristic of the East Timorese colonial past, where other colonized peoples were brought into the service of the colonizing power to pacify unruly regions of the empire; to my mind, however, it also points to the circumstances

of postcolonial Timor-Leste, where international involvement in the form of development may simultaneously serve to assist and to hinder. Foreign interference, whether in its aggressive colonial form or in its apparently benign post(neo?)colonial incarnation, provides another source of fragility to the resolution of conflict that I believe is implicit in Cardoso's fiction. Without in any way seeking to diminish the predatory and vicious nature of the colonial presence in Timor-Leste, his novels suggest that conflict resolution based on a remembering of past divisions in which the external element holds primacy in terms of culpability is ultimately doomed to failure.

Foreign involvement in East Timorese affairs and, specifically, in internal conflicts, does not ultimately disguise the fact that East Timorese are usually pitted against each other. The period of the Japanese occupation during the Second World War is often remembered as a time when thousands of East Timorese heroically sacrificed their lives in assisting the Australian troops that had landed – some argue – in a pre-emptive attempt to defend the island from Japan. However, as the character of Pedro Santiago remembers in *A Última Morte*, the East Timorese “foram-se dispersando consoante as promessas que ouviam de um lado e de outro das forças beligerantes. Morriam em trincheiras opostas sem saberem por que o fizeram” (30). Just as had occurred during the revolt of the *liurai*, D. Boaventura, East Timorese become involved in a violent struggle in which thousands of them lose their lives ignorant of the processes that led them to their deaths, and Pedro Santiago sheds an uncomfortable light on the part played by the East Timorese themselves. Often cast as yet another external presence in Timor-Leste, the *colunas negras*, although organised and armed by the Japanese in West Timor, were in fact not entirely devoid of East Timorese who brought death with them to Timor-Leste, hence Pedro Santiago's reference to East Timorese dying in opposing trenches – some fighting for the Allied forces, principally composed of Australians, and others fighting for the Japanese invaders (Gunn 9).

The possibility of future benefits may drive East Timorese in to one or other of those trenches, but Cardoso's narratives repeatedly sow seeds of doubt as to which East Timorese will profit the most. Great conflicts like those of World War II and the D. Boaventura uprising are events occasioned by the

powerful, bringing destruction to the common folk whose direct involvement is often brought about by the promises of their leaders or through notions of clan loyalty. In *Olhos de Coruja, Olhos de Gato Bravo*, the power of the *liurais* is exemplified on several occasions, as when the *liurai* of the doubly fictional kingdom of Manumasin, who is described as one of the “novos aristocratas sem cadastro nem passado e inventados pelas autoridades administrativas” (95), determines to display his influence:

Não tiveram tempo para falar de outras coisas porque entretanto o régulo de Manumasin os convidara para o acampamento dele. Fora fazer a visita natalícia ao seu filho Natalino que o haveria de suceder na condução do reino. Juntara também os filhos de súbditos não fossem eles fugir do seu controlo. Mandara matar um búfalo e exibia os chifres do mesmo para dizer quão grande fora o animal. Que era seu dever alimentar o seu povo. Alimentar em grande como ele o fazia. E fazendo tomava conta também dos filhos dos súbditos provavelmente para reivindicar favores mais tarde. (93)

The ruler of Manumasin, created by the Portuguese colonial authorities to take charge of a kingdom that is also of their invention, is contrasted with the *liurai* of Manumera, a fictional allusion to D. Boaventura's kingdom of Manufahi. The *liurai* of Manumera is Benvindo, wanted by the Portuguese, and whose kingdom is no longer recognised by the colonizers since it had revolted against them in earlier times. Although Benvindo, as the narrator remarks, “oficialmente não fosse o dono de nada, o medo que tinham dele o fizera dono de tudo” (105). His renegade actions are decried by the Portuguese and bring misery to some ordinary East Timorese, whilst engendering or demanding loyalty from others:

Acusava[-o] pela apropriação de bens do estado que ele convertera em seu próprio proveito dando-lhe o surpreendente nome retirado duma passagem da bíblia de Fazenda Bem-Aventura, pelas propriedades comunais retiradas ao povo, pela colecta indevida de impostos, pelos raptos de ado-

lescentes que ele dizia serem seus filhos, pelos maus tratos provocados pelo seu exército privado contra gente anónima. (107-8)

The personalities may change, but the situation does not. Power and the potential wealth it brings is secured and maintained through the distribution of beneficence and the promise of protection to those who are thereby bound to loyalty and, consequently, to follow their benefactor and leader into whichever potential trench he sees as the most likely to increase his political and economic status. In Cardoso's latest novel, *Requiem para o Navegador Solitário*, the kingdom of Manumera also haunts the present, and is claimed by a man called Malisera. Like Benvindo in *Olhos de Coruja*, Malisera is wanted by the Portuguese, and the character of Indian Jones, a shady East Timorese personality, is told to capture the pretender to the once rebellious kingdom:

Havia[m]-lhe encomendado, a troco de uma boa recompensa, que trouxesse a cabeça do [...] Malisera numa bandeja. Indian Jones não tinha conseguido realizar os seus intentos. Ou porque tendo lá ido nunca o encontrou, ou porque nunca lá entrou com medo de que fosse o foragido de Manumera a apresentar a sua cabeça ao capitão do porto, a troco de nada. Inquirido sobre a sua missão, apenas disse que o procurado não existia. Uma lenda como outra qualquer. Uma história inventada pelas pessoas da sua tribo para alimentar esperanças vãs sobre o regresso do mítico reino de Manumera. (*Requiem* 54)

Malisera's position is nurtured by the common people's desire for protection from the hardships caused by Portuguese colonial rule, and the manifestation of that desire is the kingdom of Manumera.

Dispossessed *liurais* like Benvindo and Malisera are perhaps guilty of feeding on the hopes of ordinary East Timorese, taking advantage of their positions as potential saviours in order to achieve their own self-interested ends. For many people, however, they are heroes, refusing to acknowledge the authority of the Portuguese. But whereas Benvindo and Malisera are fictional, in *Crónica* the narrator ponders upon a real leader of East Timorese resistance to colonialism, news of whose feats against the Indonesians reaches him in Portugal:

Falaram-me dele como sendo bravo e possuidor do *matam-élic*, feitiço que lhe permitia transfigurar-se em diferentes animais para iludir a perseguição dos militares. [...] Era ele o tal Xanana Gusmão que comandava a guerrilha e incendiava os corações nas montanhas e as almas dos jovens na praças. Já tinha visto fotografias suas com o rosto de Che Guevara e pose de profeta. (146)

The narrator, however, is conscious of the potential dangers arising from Xanana's elevation as saviour of the East Timorese:

Temia que o aparecimento dum novo iluminado pudesse conduzir o povo para um extermínio colectivo. Como aqueles profetas que vão até ao fim no seu encantamento, arrastando uma multidão de desesperados. Nunca morrem sozinhos. (146-47)

The desire of the people for salvation risks endowing individuals such as Xanana with a belief that they are possessed of powers beyond those conceded to mere mortals, to such an extent that, instead of rescuing their followers, they lead them to their destruction. But Cardoso also suggests in his novels that such individuals may be forced into these roles involuntarily, as the East Timorese continually look for someone from the present to take up the reins of leadership left by their predecessors. By insisting that the past live on in the present, the democratisation of victimhood becomes problematic as followers are made responsible – even if to a differing extent – for perpetuating a situation that leaves them vulnerable to the excesses of their leaders. In *A Última Morte*, Lucas Santiago returns to a *postcolonial* Timor after spending several years in Portugal, and finds himself being divested by his clan of his original identity, to be replaced with that of his dead father:

Sem ele dar por isso alguém fez o obséquo de lhe mudar a roupa enquanto dormia. Quando acordou estava vestido com o velho fato do coronel Pedro Santiago. Isto lembrou-lhe quando se mudavam os fatos aos mortos para serem enterrados. Desta vez fizeram o contrário. Vestiram o fato de um morto a um vivo enquanto dormia. [...] Primeiro viu nos olhos dos presen-

tes uma estupefacção. Depois um profundo respeito e contenção. Foram-se aproximando dele, curvavam-se e beijavam-lhe a mão que desta vez não recusou, para sua surpresa. (255)

What surprises Lucas – now Pedro – Santiago is the fact that he overcomes his own initial reluctance to accept his new-found and unsought position of leadership. The meanderings of a history that seems to be given a cyclical nature by the East Timorese have proffered Lucas powers over a community that he hardly knows. Along with those powers, however, Lucas also inherits the animosity of a rival clan and their desire for revenge over past crimes.

The search for revenge, with its long memory, is starkly summarised in *Crónica*:

Também se contavam histórias de vinganças seculares como a daquela mulher que um dia se apresentou no posto administrativo com a cabeça do marido, dizendo que o fizera para saldar uma dívida antiga, pois que um antepassado seu fora morto pela família do esposo decapitado. (56)

It is sometimes under the cover of what appear to be conflicts of great political or ideological import that personal slights are avenged. To illustrate this Cardoso uses the example of the brief but bloody civil war between the two main East Timorese political parties, which took place in 1975, opposing FRETILIN, who sought independence, against the UDT, who desired a federation with Portugal. *A Última Morte* describes the civil war as “Rixas entre familiares que se acantonaram em facções opostas para ajustarem contas antigas que tinham mais a ver com as posses das terras e as desavenças familiares do que com as perturbações de ordem política ou partidárias” (37). The leaders of this conflict, as in previous conflicts, may believe they are engaged in a worthy struggle, but those who have allowed – or even, as Cardoso’s novels appear to suggest, *ensured* – that those leaders have assumed such positions of power, are at times fighting for less worthy causes.

When Beatriz declares in *A Última Morte* that “o passado acabou”, she is voicing the aspiration that the cyclical nature of East Timorese history is

terminated, and to a certain extent echoing the contemporary political elite's approach to transitional justice, which is to separate the past from the present. Her own end and that of Lucas Santiago could be interpreted as an act of class-suicide, as envisioned by Amílcar Cabral, or an act of temporal suicide, becoming the agents of their own deaths, and putting to an end the divisions that shaped their ancestors' histories:

Eram cinco horas da manhã do último dia de Agosto do ano 2001 quando deram o alarme. A Pousada estava em chamas e iluminava as montanhas que circundavam o morro sagrado e pareciam mais azuis do que nunca. Encontraram num dos quartos dois corpos irreconhecíveis. Era o primeiro dia depois das eleições para a Assembleia Constituinte. O sol fazia-se anunciar.

O Fim da Travessia. (*A Última Morte* 292-93)

A new day, however, has not necessarily always meant a new beginning in independent Timor-Leste. The conflicts of the past have at times re-emerged in different guises, with individuals claiming to be the defenders of the disadvantaged or disempowered, promising that they will provide them what they deserve as victims of others' abuses, only to lead them into another bloody battle, with the violent events of 2006 serving as a prime example. Cardoso's fiction could therefore be read as a warning to the East Timorese, reminding them to be wary of those they choose to lead them, and to be fully aware of the reasons they select those leaders. Cardoso's work also asks them not to ignore that responsibility in the pursuit of justice for the grave offences they suffered at the hands of foreign oppressors; the leaders they elect or otherwise place in positions of power in postcolonial Timor-Leste always have the potential to become "profetas que vão até ao fim no seu encantamento, arrastando uma multidão de desesperados." Ultimately, it is in the hands of the East Timorese to truly liberate themselves by assuming an agency that is not simply enacted in the choice of leaders to whom it is then entirely relinquished, and who may not have reached "O Fim da Travessia" that marks the passage from a colonial to a postcolonial reality. Only then, perhaps, can it be said that "o passado acabou" and a new chapter has begun.

Notes

¹ Luís Cardoso, *Crónica de Uma Travessia. A Época do Ai-Dik-Funam* (1997), *Olhos de Coruja, Olhos de Gato Bravo* (2001). *A Última Morte do Coronel Santiago* (2003), *Requiem para o Navegador Solitário* (2006). For the sake of brevity, these novels will hereafter be referred to as *Crónica*, *Olhos*, *A Última Morte* and *Requiem*.

² See Soares, “Liberating” and “National Identity.”

³ This is suggested for example in *Crónica*, when the narrator’s grandfather shows him his sword, which is described in the following terms: “Parecia ter sido arrancado das pedras à montanha. Era verde e antigo” (48).

⁴ See also Colvin and Nagy.

⁵ For an analysis of compensation in local East Timorese customs, see Traube.

⁶ Indeed, Joanne Wallis raises concerns as to “how the sense of [East Timorese] national identity articulated in the Constitution has created a perception that certain Timorese are ‘victors’, whereas others are ‘villains’, depending on their role in their resistance to the Indonesian occupation” (2).

⁷ It would be legitimate to also think of Cardoso’s work in the light of discussions over East Timorese historiography and the wider debate regarding constructions of narratives explicating national identity in relation to the past. See, for example, Michael Leach, “History Teaching” and “Surveying.”

⁸ See Hohe.

⁹ For contrasting interpretations on the place of a Portuguese legacy in the formation of East Timorese national identity, see Soares, “Western Blood,” and Kingsbury.

¹⁰ For assessments of the importance of the D. Boaventura revolt, see Hull and Gunn.

¹¹ Traditional forms of East Timorese justice are based on its enactment being a public affair in order that the resolution of grievances is not simply witnessed, but affirmed by the community in a process of dialogue. See Babo Soares.

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