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Seeing, Hearing and Feeling Belonging: The Case of East Timorese Youth

Angie Bexley

This paper explores the politics of belonging for a young generation of East Timorese, known as the Geração Foun (Tetum, young/new generation), illustrated through the eyes of Osme, a youth who is wrestling to find his place in independent East Timor from afar, in Australia. Through a range of bodily engaged phenomena such as singing and performance I came to understand the affective experiences of young Timorese 'being in the world' but was challenged in representing these registers of belonging in the conventional ethnographic writing mode. The strength of using an integrated sound–image–text construction is mutually complementary and assists in my quest to convey the sensory and emotional registers of belonging.

Keywords: East Timor; Independence; Belonging; Rasa; Embodiment; Cultural production; Visual anthropology

Osme walks into my house. He is transfixed at the sight of a ceremonial weaving that is hanging on my wall. The cloth, known as *tais*, was a gift from a family in Los Palos—Osme's hometown in East Timor. He walks over and takes the *tais* down from the wall and wraps it around the top half of his body. He seems transformed by this simple bodily act of being enveloped in the cloth. His body moves differently now—it moves with purpose. We step outside into the glare and blue sky and sit in my emerging spring garden. In suburban Canberra, Osme begins to talk about his childhood in Los Palos switching between public and private selves and between the languages of Fataluku, Indonesian and Tetum. This was typical of my encounters with Osme who expresses through speech, song and bodily movements the postcolonial

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predicament that many younger East Timorese face in regard to belonging in independent East Timor.

The main binding characteristic of the *Geração Foun*, or young generation, is that they grew up during the Indonesian period of occupation (1975–1999). Many were members of the clandestine student front and their identities as young Timorese were formed during this period of high politicisation. At Independence, the governing elite felt it imperative to construct Portugal as the legitimate and authentic root of the East Timorese national imaginary. However, many East Timorese youth found this an irreconcilable disjuncture. Furthermore, many experienced the period of early Independence (during which the United Nations held sovereign authority from 1999–2002) non-inclusive and disenfranchising.

Upon Independence in 2002, a generational schism emerged between the younger *Geração Foun* and the Portuguese-speaking '75 Generation (many members of the older generation were involved in the anti-colonial movement of 1975). The older generation became the governing elite and many young Timorese felt they were being sidelined because of their 'inexperience' in decision-making arenas (largely due to the militarised hierarchical system of command within the clandestine movement leaving students with very little 'debating' power). The *Geração Foun* were pejoratively dubbed the *Generasi Supermi* (the Supermi Generation) by the older generation of leaders. Supermi is an iconic Indonesian brand of instant noodles and the metaphorical label suggests that they are soft like noodles; they lack strength and wisdom; they have an '*instan*' attitude toward life; and do not possess strong morals or leadership qualities to take part in high-level decision-making. The negative marking of the younger generation's link to Indonesia, through their fluency in its language and cultures, questions their legitimacy as subjects of national belonging. In order to verify their legitimacy, a certain morality highlighting suffering and sadness became central to the construction of the identity of 'Timorese youth'. This is commonly expressed through performances of bodily suffering.

Visualising East Timor

The properties of visual systems have been identified as the first agenda in visual anthropology (Banks & Morphy 1997). My research concerns the variety of forms of cultural production (text and non-text) in which the East Timorese youth are involved. This has increased since Independence in rural and urban East Timor. Some of this cultural production began during the Independence movement when many students were studying in Indonesia. The Timorese magazine, *Talitakum*, was initially published by students involved in the clandestine student movement in conjunction with pro-democracy media activists on Java in 1998. *Talitakum* moved to Dili, East Timor's capital upon Independence and continues to publish periodically. After Independence, an indigenous East Timorese film production scene sprang to life, facilitated by access to international funds, with various groups making their own films on issues ranging from international justice to homegrown karaoke videos (see

Bexley 2007). Dance, theatre and music in rural and urban Timor have also blossomed since Independence, suggesting that these young East Timorese are invested in visually representing themselves to the world around them.

The mediums of performance express the interrelation between the body, emotions and the complexities of belonging to a larger entity, that of the nation-state and likewise, the role of the nation-state in transforming subjectivities and emotional landscapes (Boellstorff & Lindquist 2004). The registers of Osme's belonging are not limited to a flag, passport or an address. The ways he feels and communicates his unique and multi-layered sense of belonging are embodied: through vision, voice, sound and touch. The creative practices of singing and performance are not merely representations of a past world. Instead, practices, especially synaesthetic practices, involving music, rhythm and powerful narratives can keep the relationships to other worlds, without disappearing into a distant memory. As noted by Ram (2005, p. 143), performances can evoke certain structures of feeling, certain styles of intimate and primary relationships, providing a sense of continuity for those involved. Through this negotiation of Timorese visual life, I encountered a challenge concerning the second agenda (Banks & Morphy 1997) of visual anthropology; how are my understandings of these processes best communicated to an academic audience?

The *Rasa* of Belonging

Since the works of Geertz (1973) and Michelle Rosaldo (1984), the study of emotions within the context of cultural analysis has led to Southeast Asia becoming a key area of anthropological discussions of bodily and emotional engagement. However, both Rosaldo and Geertz grounded their studies in contexts where culture, ethnicity and language were seen as one whole (Boellstorff & Lindquist 2004). Since their works, there has been growing scholarly attention to globalisation and transnational processes that has led to the problematisation of the relationship between 'culture' and 'place' (Gupta & Ferguson 1997; Boellstorff 2005). Anderson's (1983) influential work alerted us to the ways in which affect is organised through spheres beyond 'the local' (see also Barker 1998). Emotion and power (Abu-Lughod 1990; Scheper-Hughes 1992) are central elements within contemporary East Timor where inter-generation struggles for recognition are played out on both personal and national levels.

The inter-generational struggle initially circled around language, whereby Portuguese was chosen as one of the official languages despite the low fluency rates among young Timorese (Jones 2000). Many young East Timorese choose between three or more languages to make meaning in their lives in Independent East Timor although Portuguese rarely features as one of them. In a discussion where there are different monolingual participants, young East Timorese will change casually between languages to communicate with all involved. Language is also closely related to identity formation processes. In the film clip that accompanies this paper, Osme uses Fataluku and Indonesian. He communicates what he views as his emotional

attachment to the East Timorese nation, via his native tongue of Fataluku. Osme continues to explain, in Indonesian, that Fataluku culture is not just his place of origin in the geographical sense but is the foci of his embodied sense of self. At the same time, he is worried about his fluency in Indonesian, as he jokingly suggests at the end of the clip: 'Is ... is my Indonesian right?!' When he feels certain emotions, he chooses to express this in Fataluku and through his music. Fataluku, as indicated by Osme, is an incredibly resourceful language in conveying felt sentiment. Osme explains:

Osme: About the use of Fataluku in my songs ... I can feel it. I can really feel it. Actually, if Fataluku is translated into Indonesian, the feeling isn't there ... Translated into Tetum, the feeling isn't there. Fataluku is great, so why not just use Fataluku? So, up until now, I'll be truthful, I haven't written any songs in Tetum yet. I just take ... I make songs in Fataluku ...

Interviewer: And your poetry?

Osme: Yeah, I take my poetry ... I take it from Fataluku. And then I translate it to Tetum. ... And I can feel it. ... Even though it's not good Tetum ... I can touch it ...

Osme uses the Indonesian word '*ambil*' (to take) when he's discussing which language he writes his songs in. He does not say, 'I write' (*menulis*) or 'I use' (*memakai*), he says, 'I *take* it' from Fataluku, implying that the concepts of what he wishes to convey is held within the language itself. He needs only to 'take it' and put it into sung word. Language is particularly important when Osme is talking about 'feelings'. Osme chooses the Indonesian word, *rasa* to describe a sense of embodied belonging. He regards these homely feelings towards East Timor as 'refined feelings' (*perasaan halus*).

The word '*rasa*' is richly tactile. According to such a phenomenological account such as that offered by Geertz (1973), *rasa* incorporates three different senses: taste on the tongue, touch on the body and emotional 'feeling within the heart'. Rangacharya (1996) explains further that 'meaning which touches the heart creates *rasa*: the entire body feels the *rasa* like fire consuming a dry stick' (1996, p. 65). Here, I understand *rasa* as the essence of emotions, feeling and meaning, fundamental to the embodied state of being in the world. *Rasa* bridges both bodily and conceptual domains and highlights the everydayness embedded within its meaning and uses. Osme uses *rasa* to convey not so much one particular emotion but a primarily lived experience. Theories of embodiment begin with the premise that bodies are not passive objects 'inscribed' with meaning but are sources of meaning themselves (Csordas 1994, p. 7). Osme points out his own understanding of belonging beginning as an intensely bodily experience, he says:

My yearning for Timor is expressed through my feelings. ... Refined feelings and I have to express this through song. ... Yeah, songs that I can feel myself. ... Actually, my songs aren't for anybody else, but so I can feel [a sense of belonging].

Figure 1 Stills from the film clip *Osme* which can be viewed on *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* website (www.informaworld.com/tapja).

The emotion held within the song is a personal experience linked to the collective reiterated by the fact that he uses Fataluku to connect with the nation-state, and not Tetum (the national language) or Portuguese (the official language). From this intensely personal and bodily experience comes *Osme*'s connection with East Timor, and as Ahmed (2005) suggests, emotions play a crucial role in the 'surfacing' of individual and collective bodies through affective encounters. The social nature of

musical experience is intertwined in a highly significant way with its personal, individual character. If music has the potential to 'speak' socially as well as individually, then its sounds may turn out to be potent icons of social practice as well as of personal experience (Qureshi 2000). Music becomes as much a political tool as it is a language of feelings. 'Feelingful' habits, then, are individual 'structures of feeling' (Williams 1977); as performative, embodied practices they key cultural memories through the medium of voice and sound (Stoller 1994).

The body is a source not just of individual but of cultural memory. Osme explains that the Fataluku lyrics in his recreation of an origin song,¹ along with complex rhythms within the body recreate his own sense of belonging and cultural aesthetics (Morphy 2006) as a young Timorese. Osme says:

- Osme: When I write songs, first I have to feel and first I have to remember what I experienced in Timor.
- Angie: So, you haven't written any songs about your experiences in Australia?
- Osme: No, not yet. My songs are about my life in Timor. Even though I'm writing them here. They're about my experiences in Timor.

The song and the touch of the *tais* trigger memories of Osme's life in East Timor and wrapping the *tais* around his body links his emotion and his body to a wider entity of the nation of Timor, in which the memory of bodily suffering is intrinsically bound.

This relationship between feeling and the body dispels a dichotomy between mind/body and an understanding of the socialised and socially situated body. This relationship is imbued in the Tetum word for describing emotions '*isin laran*' which translates to 'the bodies' insides'. The relationship between meaning and feeling and the body also offers an understanding of the agency of the body. As Lyon (1995, p. 256) suggests, 'an understanding of the agency of the body in society comes through its intercommunicative and active functions'.

Emotions are not simply signs to be 'read', but are organised and mediated through systems of signs which enable a translation between meaning and feeling possible (Leavitt 1996). Through an examination of how Osme's articulation of music, visual forms and sense of belonging are related, we can witness how the affective economy aligns bodily space with social space. And we begin to understand how sensory elements or the affective experiences of being in the world are at once intensely bodily *and* communicative social performances. Emotions are about attachments and connections. The relationship between movement and attachment is instructive. What moves us makes us feel, and is also that which holds us in place or gives us a 'dwelling place' (Ahmed 2004). In this light, the body can be seen as more of a lived reality than merely a symbolic construct. Osme expresses his melancholy over being in Australia, and sadness and grief for the suffering of his compatriots and this legitimates his belonging to the entity of the Timorese nation state. This is

understood through the emotion within the performance of the song, the use of the cloth and bodily comportment as well as language and vocabulary.

Multiple Sensed Ethnography

David MacDougall suggests in his recent book (2006) that visual imagery is strongest when conveying the senses: 'text and image not only tell us things differently but they also tell us different things' (MacDougall 2006, p. 220). He elaborates how visual media allow us, as the viewer, to activate the senses through a form of knowing he describes as 'acquaintance' rather than 'description' (2006, p. 220). The images of Osme wrapped in the *tais*, sounds of him singing and speaking of his melancholy, acquaint us with his embodied notions of belonging. We understand these forms of belonging just as we comprehend the world at large through more than one medium (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Through multimedia representation, we acknowledge the existential immediacy of culture and the limitations of language (Thomas & Ahmed 2004). Sound and image are ambient as well as textual. The sound in this film clip of Osme singing an origin song in his native tongue of Fataluku draws the viewer into a shared space. While Osme says, 'I can feel it, I can touch it', we too are involved in an experience of embodied spectatorship. We experience first hand the powerful sounds, rhythms and silences that are not only having an affect on Osme's body, but on our *own* bodies, kinesthetically, as viewers. This 'haptic visuality' (Marks 2000) allows us to experience, in a variety of ways, Osme's own sense of belonging through not only what is seen, but what is heard and felt. By watching Osme sing, we can see and hear the sense of sadness in his voice. The shadows that fall across his face as the sun fades compound the complexities of Osme's situation and the displacement he feels is magnified by his surroundings, the starkness of a Canberra spring sky and the suburban realities that are so obviously not Timor. Through both language and visuals we gain a fuller understanding of Osme's attempts to recreate the aesthetics of his belonging.

The use of text, images and sound presented here can be thought of as a constant movement between evocation and representation. The camera can provide a context and sense of 'being in the world' (Jackson 1995) for recording the embodied registers of individuals because its focus is centered on cultural immediacy. This effect is intensified in the film clip with the use of a hand-held camera (not on a tripod) and the recording of a discussion taking place between myself and Osme, rather than a recorded fixed narrative. I view the strength of using an integrated sound-image-text construction as mutually complementary and reinforcing in my quest to convey the sensory and emotional registers of belonging.

My case study illustrates a synthesis of text and audiovisual material to convey ethnographic understanding. The dialectic that emerges between these modes of representation and analysis offer gateways toward transcultural and inter-subjective phenomena relating to cultural understandings of embodied senses of belonging. Through language, vision and sound, the expression and representation of the

sensuous which are related to ways of being, seeing and feeling, illuminate the perspective of Timorese youth in an environment of ongoing flux and uncertainty.

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Note

- [1] There are a number of different versions of the origin song 'Si Foi Sa Foi' relating to the area of Aselainu, Baucau District. One of the versions is about two dogs, Si Foi and Sa Foi, who act as guard dogs to the area of Cai Qehry and the surrounding plantations. One day, when the dogs' owner was out retrieving *tuak* from a coconut tree, two large wild ferocious pigs waited for the owner to descend the tree. The owner called to the dogs, Si Foi and Sa Foi, from Cai Qehry, but they arrived too late and the owner had been eaten by the pigs. Despite this, the dogs must be respected and are taken as representatives of the ancestors of Cai Qehry.

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