Heroes or Perpetrators? Transitional Justice and Memories of Resistance

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This paper looks at how human rights and transitional justice have shaped memories of resistance to Indonesian rule in post-independent East Timor. In 1983, with Timor under Indonesian occupation, Timorese from the village of Kraras revolted, killing 14 Indonesian army engineers. Fieldwork on memories of this event has revealed that it is undervalorized, particularly compared with acts of nonviolent resistance undertaken by Timorese during the Indonesian occupation. There is a perception, albeit unspoken, that those who initiated the uprising are not heroes – or at least not only heroes – but also perpetrators, who were wrong in killing unarmed Indonesians, even as an act of resistance. I argue that this perception is in large part a result of the discourses of transitional justice, human rights and reconciliation which have circulated in Timor post-independence. These discourses emphasize the suffering of the victims of violence – and the accompanying wrongdoing or blameworthiness of the authors of violence – on *both* sides of Timor's struggle for independence. In Timor, at least, an "apolitical" human rights has expanded the category of perpetrator to at least partially include those who, in a time before transitional justice, might have been unambiguously celebrated as heroes.

Primary References:

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*To fit under the rubric "memory, culture and identity" (although it could fit under the rubric of "humanitarianism" in that I am analyzing the results of a human rights which has become more humanitarianism in character)