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Timor-Leste's gangs confront brutal past

Gang members in country formed after 24-year conflict try to come to terms with legacy of violence

Kate Hodal in Dili

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Former gang member Atoy (standing, centre) teaching art therapy to other former gang members at Ba Futuru, which means "to the future". Photograph: Kate Hodal for the Guardian

By the time he was 17, Da Costa – the name he is "comfortable" with – had stabbed three people to death. Within the next few years, he would go on to kill another three, serve a jail sentence, head a gang, teach members how to fight, and spend evenings with them roaming around this dusty capital, drunk and looking for a fight. "I didn't think about whether violence was good or bad, or right or wrong," he says. "Back then, all that mattered was whether you were an enemy. And for me the enemy was anyone who didn't want independence from [Indonesia](#)."

It is 10 years since [Timor-Leste](#), a small island nation in the South Pacific, won its right to self-rule, after a bloody, 24-year conflict that killed a third of its population due to famine, violence and disease. Now the country is fighting just to meet its basic needs: regular law and order, steady employment and food security. But [Timor-Leste](#) is still awash with gangs – from martial arts groups and politically-linked clans to spiritual organisations and neighbourhood street boys – comprising an estimated 90,000 members, or just under one-tenth of the population.

Only some, like Da Costa, now 30, have chosen to leave "the brotherhood" for good. Two years ago, Da Costa traded in his knives and swords to work as a community outreach officer at a local charity, [Ba Futuru](#), teaching conflict resolution to many of the gang members with whom he once fought both against and alongside. He admits that he had

to be convinced there was life beyond violence. "I grew up watching militias killing people and fights breaking out on the street," he says. "Conflict was normal. I remember sitting in these classes talking about other ways to solve problems, thinking, 'What's the point?'. I would get up and walk out."

Ba Futura's co-founder, American-born Sierra James, says that the volume of violence witnessed and experienced by Timorese society over the past few decades makes conflict resolution integral to the future health of the nation. "We're dealing with people who have seen rape and murder, had their houses looted and burned, watched their fathers beat their mothers – the cycle of violence just goes on and on," she says. "But even halfway through a single day of training, you can see a light bulb go on in [participants'] heads. They start asking questions and thinking differently about issues they always took for granted."

Every afternoon here at Ba Futuru – meaning "to the future" in the local Tetum language – young Timorese crowd the concrete classrooms spray-painted with psychedelic swirls and peace signs. At one end of the sprawling compound there are English lessons and drama workshops; at the other, volunteers teach graphic design in the computer training centre, Spanish guitar wafts out of a music workshop, and an oil-painting class is starting in the studio next door.

Former gang member Atoy, 25, teaches conflict resolution through music and art therapy to other former gang members - some of whom he personally invited from the streets of Dili - while studying human rights at the local university. He reels off his memories with a studied calm: he was nine when he watched his uncle being tortured by Indonesian troops; at 12 he witnessed a series of militia murders; then his cousin was slashed to death right next to him by sword-wielding rival gang members. "When you see that kind of violence and blood, it makes you feel nervous and angry inside," he says. "I didn't know what to do, so I lived to drink and fight."

The government – and the many aid groups working in Timor-Leste – are quick to stress that the nation has the lowest per-capita violence rate in south-east Asia. But with youth unemployment hovering around 70%, a gang's promise of camaraderie, protection and purpose is often a prospect too good to ignore. "Everyone in my village belongs to my gang, and we protect each other from rivals in other villages," says JC, 25, an active member of one of Timor-Leste's largest gangs. "A lot of people [my age] have no money, no job and no prospect of a job. So it's easy to want to get involved." Members don't always join a gang voluntarily. Some are plied with drugs and alcohol; others are threatened with violence, or promised work as armed security officers, particularly when political violence kicks off, as it did in 2006.

Academics attribute gangs' popularity to various factors, among them long-running ethnic clashes, land disputes and family or political rivalries.

According to Australian researcher James Scambary, who wrote a 2009 paper on armed violence in Timor-Leste, "these groups [once] protected their communities from Indonesian security forces and the latter's proxies". Now, he says, "they protect their communities from one another".

Human rights groups estimate that a significant proportion of Timorese are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and have pushed the government to investigate past crimes. But the government has been loth to "rehash the past", as some ministers call it, and has instead promoted reconciliation, in some cases resulting in presidential pardons. According to the prime minister, Xanana Gusmao, it is not just Indonesia who should be held accountable. "Timorese died from bombs and arms that did not come from Indonesia," he said. "The US made the planes and bombs. Germany sold

[Indonesia] tanks and munitions. And the UK, the arms. The international community must also be held responsible; if not, they cannot speak of impunity."

For those that have been able – and want – to change their ways, it is not laying down their weapons that can prove the hardest task. "I've been stabbed, shot at, dumped in a ditch and left for dead, and I've had to learn how to forgive," says Da Costa. "What helps is that people see the change in me, and that makes them want to change too."

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