Political reconciliation in Timor Leste, Solomon Islands and Bougainville: the dark side of hybridity

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**ABSTRACT**

In recent years, the study and practice of political reconciliation has experienced a turn to hybridity. This turn has been defined by the increased rate at which liberal international and local peacebuilding practices, and their underlying ideas, have become merged, integrated or co-located in time and space. While hybrid approaches to reconciliation have been praised as an effective means of engaging local populations in peacebuilding operations, little attention has been paid to examining whether or not they also bring unintended negative consequences. Drawing on the cases of Timor Leste, Solomon Islands and Bougainville, this article examines the potentially dark side of hybridity. It demonstrates that, in each of these cases, hybrid approaches to political reconciliation have brought both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side of the equation, hybridity has seen imported international approaches to reconciliation adapted to meet local demands and ensure resonance with local populations. On the negative side, however, the misappropriation and instrumentalisation of local practices within hybrid approaches has served to damage their legitimacy and to jeopardise their contributions to reconciliation. The article thus concludes that the existence and extent of this dark side necessitates a re-evaluation of how hybrid approaches to political reconciliation are planned and implemented.

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Political reconciliation, it is commonly assumed, provides a practical way for states to restore fractured communities and rebuild stable societies in the aftermath of violent conflict. Drawing on the well-established idea that unresolved resentments, underlying tensions and simmering hostilities have the potential to precipitate further conflict (Biggar 2003, 5), proponents argue that political reconciliation has implications that extend well beyond the relations of formerly hostile individuals, groups, communities and even states. In short, reconciliation is conceived not only as a panacea for past wrongs, but also as a form of social inoculation against a future return to violence.

While debates about political reconciliation have traditionally focused on formal ‘top-down, “structural” processes’, which typically take place within established state institutions or derive their legitimacy from them, in the past decade more attention has
been paid to informal ‘bottom-up, “cultural” reconciliation processes’, such as those that ‘operate at the small-scale interpersonal and/or grassroots level’ (Shaw and Waldorf 2010, 4). As support for these processes has grown, so too has the claim that reconciliation strategies pursued at the local level, using pre-existing social practices, are often more successful in establishing lasting peace (Menkhaus 1996, 42). Termed the ‘turn to hybridity’ (Laffey and Nadarajah 2012), this trend has seen policymakers and practitioners increasingly argue that employing ‘combinations of state, private sector, faith-based, traditional, and community structures for service delivery’ during post-conflict processes produces better outcomes than those achieved when top-down processes are implemented in isolation (World Bank 2011, 106). Contrary to older models of peacebuilding that cast top-down (liberal/international) processes in diametric opposition to bottom-up (local) processes, hybridity emphasises processes of peacebuilding that merge, integrate or syncretise formal and informal practices (Mac Ginty 2012; Richmond 2009), or at least acknowledge their coexistence.

Support for hybridity has been largely driven by the assumption that the integration of local, grass-roots, indigenous and customary models of conflict resolution into formal, state-based, ‘liberal’ processes renders political reconciliation more legitimate, culturally appropriate and effective (Bleiker and Brigg 2011; Mac Ginty 2008; Richmond 2011). Despite increasing support for these claims, however, very few analysts have considered whether hybrid approaches to reconciliation also generate unintended negative consequences, which may even promote a return to conflict (Millar 2014)—that is, few scholars have considered the potentially dark side of hybridity. Those who have note the potential for ‘violent and oppressive social practices’ enacted in local communities to ‘become embedded in officially recognised’ processes, and thus achieve legitimation (Meagher, De Herdt, and Titeca 2014, 5). Others note that the practice of hybridity can render local practices ‘subject to instrumentalisation by more powerful national or international actors against the interests of local justice and security’ (Meagher 2012, 1096), and see traditional practices misappropriated or co-opted to fulfil functions for which they were never intended (Finnstrom 2010, 141, 155). In cases where the instrumentalisation, misappropriation and co-option of local practices contributes to instability and oppression, exacerbates existing grievances or sparks renewed violence, it would seem that hybridity has the potential to cause the precise types of outcomes it was originally intended to overcome and avoid.

This article examines the contributions that hybrid approaches to political reconciliation have made in three post-conflict societies in the Asia-Pacific: Timor Leste, Solomon Islands and Bougainville, an autonomous region of Papua New Guinea. It details the nature and forms of hybrid reconciliation practices in each case, from attempts to establish formal truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs) adapted to meet local cultural demands in Timor Leste and Solomon Islands, to the overt politicisation of customary reconciliation practices in all three cases. The article begins by introducing the concepts of political reconciliation and hybridity, the relationship between them, and key debates surrounding hybrid approaches to processes of political reconciliation. Drawing on Millar’s (2014) disaggregated theory of hybridity, it highlights the key arguments and assumptions that have led scholars and practitioners alike not only to advocate for the merits of hybrid approaches to political reconciliation, but also to overlook their unintended negative consequences. It then turns to the cases of Solomon Islands, Timor
Leste and Bougainville, and demonstrates that, in each of these cases, the institution of prescriptive hybrid political reconciliation processes was a double-edged sword that caused as many problems as it purported to solve. The article thus concludes by arguing that, despite the merits of engaging with local concepts, beliefs, practices and ideas, hybridity has a dark side that emerges when informal reconciliation practices are used instrumentally, and has the potential to derail processes of political reconciliation and jeopardise the pursuit of lasting peace and security.

**Hybrid approaches to political reconciliation**

Reconciliation is a contested, fluid and dynamic concept both in theory and in practice. Conceived as an outcome, reconciliation is ‘a relatively amicable relationship typically established after a rupture in relations involving one sided or mutual infliction of extreme injury’ (Kriesberg 1998, 351), and is commonly associated with the achievement of ‘negative peace’ (Galtung 1990). As a process, however, reconciliation is viewed as ‘the process of addressing conflictual and fractured relationships’ (Hamber and Kelly 2004, 3). It is an ‘adaptive’ set of practices ‘aimed at building and healing’ relationships and societies, and, ultimately, achieving ‘positive peace’ (Lederach 2001, 842). In less ambitious terms, reconciliation can also be conceived ‘not in terms of permanent peace or harmony’, but as a social project marked by a ‘departure from violence’ (Borneman 2002, 282). In reality, however, reconciliation is all of these: a multifaceted process aimed at healing ruptured relationships, the intended outcome of that process, a means of pursuing lasting peace, and a commitment to social change.

Like its interpersonal variant, political reconciliation is fundamentally concerned with ‘rebuilding political relationships’ (Murphy 2010, 8). It seeks to overcome the ‘presence of pervasive and widespread negative attitudes’, to rebuild trust within a polity by reinforcing normative expectations, or to reconstitute a political community (Murphy 2010, 10, 13, 20). Political reconciliation thus stands apart from interpersonal reconciliation, which aims at the restoration of a right relationship between the perpetrator and victim of a non-political harm—for example, a simple act of theft or domestic violence. This is not to say that interpersonal reconciliation has no part to play in processes of political reconciliation, but to note that the emphasis, scope and intended outcomes of political reconciliation differ markedly from those associated with interpersonal reconciliation. In particular, in the post-conflict context, political reconciliation commonly addresses wrongs, including human rights violations, committed by agents of the state, members of opposition or separatist movements, militias and warring factions. As such, it is increasingly considered to be an indispensible component of comprehensive peacebuilding strategies.

In large part, comprehensive approaches to peacebuilding emerged in response to a growing and profound sense of anxiety over the legitimacy of the liberal peace project (Nadarajah and Rampton 2015, 4). Alongside ideological concerns over the validity of imposing liberal international modes of peacebuilding on post-conflict states (including assumptions about the importance of liberal democracy, institution-building and an open market economy) is a series of more practical worries about their effectiveness. In particular, the existence of an ‘institutional/experiential disconnect’ between internationally conceived peacebuilding programs and local experiences of them is seen as a
significant impediment to the achievement of lasting peace and stability (Richmond and Franks 2008). Where political reconciliation is concerned, critics of the liberal peace project question the extent to which ‘top-down’ processes, such as state-level reconciliation ceremonies dominated by official actors and formal institutions such as TRCs, are capable of generating the required legitimacy that would enable them to resonate with ordinary people. In contrast to the liberal approach, which assumes that grass-roots reconciliation practices serve as impediments to formally constituted state-based processes (Menkhaus 1996), they argue that political reconciliation practised by civil society actors and in local communities is often more effective than top-down processes because it is locally ‘owned’ and therefore perceived as more legitimate. This, in turn, fosters a more sustainable peace.

Proponents of hybrid peacebuilding thus maintain that diverse formal and informal sociopolitical practices and institutions, including those associated with the practice of political reconciliation, can ‘co-exist, overlap, interact, and intertwine’ (Boege et al. 2009b, 17). Rather than viewing formal and informal practices as being in necessary tension with one another, supporters of hybridity seek to replace the dichotomous relationship between top-down and bottom-up processes with an approach that actively combines local practices and formal processes (Heathershaw 2013). The precise level of that engagement varies between supporters of hybridity: at one end of the spectrum are those who suggest that the coexistence of a range of liberal and local practices is itself evidence of hybridity, while at the other are those who argue, more stringently, that, to be hybrid, practices must merge, integrate or syncretise into a ‘fusion policy’ (Mac Ginty 2010, 406).

These different positions are, in turn, reflected in the two main approaches to hybridity that can be identified in the peacebuilding literature. The first, descriptive, approach sees hybridity as providing a ‘window on complexity and a way of questioning the fixity of categories and boundaries’ (Richmond and Mac Ginty 2015, 184). This article focuses on the second, prescriptive or instrumental, approach, which is driven by the idea that ‘international agents can design hybridity into projects in an instrumental fashion’ (Millar 2014, 503). Known as ‘hybrid programming’ (Peterson 2012, 10), this approach maintains that hybridity can be engineered by ensuring that international and state-based approaches take local practices and ideas into account. Key arguments in support of hybrid programming suggest that the inclusion of bottom-up approaches serves as a corrective to the common criticisms levelled at technocratic, top-down processes which are focused on the achievement of negative peace, security and stability (Mac Ginty 2008). By contrast, proponents argue that the hybrid approach is capable of generating both negative and positive hybrid peace, in which ‘broader political and social injustices are ... addressed, across local and international scales’, in processes that are rooted in the social and cultural contexts in which they take place (Richmond 2014, 2)—that is, driving prescriptive hybridity is the assumption that ‘combining individuals or processes from the local with the international will foster more positive and peace-promoting experiencing’ of peacebuilding (Millar 2014, 504).

The dark side of hybridity

Despite the promise of hybrid approaches for the practice of peacebuilding, even its proponents warn of the pitfalls associated with its conception and implementation. In
theoretical terms, Dirlik (2000, 184) argues that the concept of hybridity ‘reduces all complexity to a “statement of mixture”, as if the specific character of what is being mixed did not really matter’. In particular, he raises concerns over the assumption not only that the ‘mixing’ of any form is good, but that it is inherently better than bounded liberal approaches—that is, he highlights that, in order to be effective, ‘hybridity’ needs to entail more than mixing a little bit of this with a little bit of that.\textsuperscript{1} In the absence of this sort of precision, the concept of hybridity is less illuminating than it is obfuscating.

The view that hybridity entails a simple ‘mixing’ may also work to mask the power differentials that exist in the peacebuilding context, including between international actors and recipients of interventions, and within the ‘local’ sphere. Richmond (2009), for instance, cautions against romanticising local or indigenous peacebuilding practices, which can be deeply conservative and favour particular groups within society (men, powerful families) over others, including women, youth and ethnic or religious minorities. Hybrid approaches to peacebuilding may thus help foster (and obscure) unequal power relationships, inequalities and abusive practices by providing legitimacy and resources to those in positions of power. They may also overlook the fact that ‘not all actors will be in the same position or have the same ability to engage international actors in the same way’ (Peterson 2012, 14).

The inclusion of local peacebuilding practices in formal processes also runs the risk of reifying cultural practices that are not ‘static’, but which evolve in response to changing contexts, circumstances and dynamics (Brown 2009, 155). What is more, attempts to achieve hybridity between informal/local and formal/liberal approaches may also result in mere ‘co-option’ rather than syncretism, ‘given the power and structural biases of Western, internationally supported forms of peace-making’ (Mac Ginty 2008, 158). This, in turn, runs the risk of undermining or distorting the very local practices that hybrid approaches seek to adopt. As Vella (2014, 5) notes: ‘[w]hen mimicked or replicated, the original intention and meaning can be easily lost or mistranslated’, resulting in local processes which are ‘carried out in name only’ and fail to resonate with their target populations.

In a recent attempt to understand the limitations of hybrid peacebuilding strategies, Millar (2014, 501) notes that underlying all prescriptive approaches to hybridity is an assumption that a predictable relationship can be forged between ‘the administration of hybrid institutions … and the provision of peace-promoting local experiences of those institutions’. He argues that this assumption has persisted, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, because proponents have considered hybridity to be a single phenomenon or category of peacebuilding. According to Millar, however, not all hybridity is the same: some forms are more prone to misappropriation and domination by international/liberal actors and ideas than others.

Millar thus disaggregates hybridity into four main interrelated types: institutional, practical, ritual and conceptual hybridity. Institutional hybridity involves ‘the mixing or combination of different institutional forms from two or more different sites’ (Millar 2014, 505). Practical hybridity is generated through ‘organic, everyday citizen action’ (Mac Ginty 2012, 87), and is influenced by the ‘incentivisation’ from above of some practices, as well as norms from below (Millar 2014, 505). Ritual hybridity, by contrast, involves the ‘mixing of symbol and ceremony to form new ritual forms or the appropriation and deployment of existing ritual for new purposes’ (ibid.). Finally, conceptual hybridity is the ‘mixing and melding of ideas and beliefs about the world in the minds
of individuals’ (ibid.). While this form of hybridity occurs at all times and is inherently resistant to purposeful influence, what is key is that ‘concepts are foundational to experiences of all institutions, practices, and rituals’ (Millar 2014, 506). This suggests, according to Millar, that while institutional and practical forms of hybridity are more ‘open to international agency and amenable to planning and administration’, successful hybridity requires that administered institutions, practices and rituals be ‘consistent with concepts already existing and internalised—and themselves always already hybrid—by local individuals and communities’ (Millar 2014, 510). That is, the genuine integration of local practices and ideas at every level is required for hybrid institutions and processes to resonate successfully with concepts that underpin local understandings and experiences of the world. Given that peacebuilders tend only to have a shallow grasp of local conceptual frameworks (which, in any case, do not tend to be explicitly articulated and are constantly evolving), ‘successful’ externally planned and administered hybridity is inherently difficult to achieve, especially within the short-term timescales of peacebuilding interventions. All of this means that prescriptive hybrid reconciliation efforts tend to result in unpredictable experiences and outcomes (Millar 2014, 510).

Using Millar’s disaggregated understanding of hybridity as a starting point, this article examines the consequences of hybridity in one facet of peacebuilding—political reconciliation—in three hitherto unexamined cases: Solomon Islands, Timor Leste and Bougainville.

**Solomon Islands**

In 1998, Solomon Islands was plunged into a civil conflict known as ‘The Tensions’. A low-intensity conflict, The Tensions were sparked by ‘a complex web of grievances, injustices, ethnic tensions, and economic insecurities’, and resulted in the death of around 200 people. In addition, more than 11,000 people were displaced from their homes and some 5700 human rights violations were committed (TRC Report 2012, 736–737). After numerous failed peace agreements, the conflict was finally ended in 2003 with the intervention of the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) at the invitation of the then prime minister of Solomon Islands, Sir Allan Kemakeza.

Despite its pidgin operational name (Operation Helpem Fren), RAMSI’s focus was on a liberal state-building agenda. This meant that it deliberately stayed out of the national reconciliation process, at least in an official organisational capacity. However, other international and local actors, such as foreign governments, non-governmental organisations, civil society groups and the Solomon Islands government (SIG), pursued hybrid modes of political reconciliation. The three most prominent of these processes—the pursuit of national reconciliation through the provision of compensation, the establishment of the Solomon Islands TRC, and the enactment of *solovisu* ceremonies—map neatly onto Millar’s (2014) practical, institutional and ritual forms of hybridity. As this section demonstrates, the dark side of hybridity was amply revealed during early attempts at practical and institutional hybrid political reconciliation in Solomon Islands. Not only did the misappropriation of local practices bring unintended negative consequences, but hybridised reconciliation processes also failed to resonate with ordinary Solomon Islanders. More recently, however, moves towards ritualised political reconciliation processes seem to
have avoided some of the worst criticisms levelled at earlier attempts at reconciliation, demonstrating that hybridity can be successful in some contexts.

In the case of Solomon Islands, as in the field of peacebuilding more generally, hybridity emerged as a direct response to the liberal peacebuilding project instituted by RAMSI. However, neither the practice of reconciliation nor the concept of hybridity was new to Solomon Islands in the aftermath of The Tensions. Indeed, the peoples of Solomon Islands have long possessed well-established ‘methods of dispute resolution’ (Moore 2005, 63) based on kastom. Kastom is the set of social rules, rituals, norms and expectations that guides relations between wantoks, kinsfolk and clans in Solomon Islands. Although ordinary Solomon Islanders do not use the term, kastom is itself a ‘hybrid’ form. It is a dynamic phenomenon, capable of adapting to suit particular political contexts and being used instrumentally to achieve particular sets of political outcomes.

Within kastom, reconciliation is usually conceived as an ongoing process that aims at the restoration of relations between conflicting parties. It involves a range of practices, including the tendering of apologies, forgiveness and the provision of compensation, which is paid to all sides in a dispute, customarily in the form of shell money, food and pigs. When it ‘comes to brokering peace’ in Solomon Islands, ‘reconciliation and compensation are inseparable’ (Maebuta and Spence 2009, 15). As Fifi’i explains: ‘When compensation is paid, in shell money or whatever, then the two sides are joined together again. Both sides are satisfied and nobody is angry afterward’ (quoted in Goodenough 2006) —that is, the payment of compensation signifies that reconciliation has been achieved and a right relationship has been restored, and that the matter is no longer to be spoken of.

In the aftermath of The Tensions, this sense of finality proved attractive to both the SIG and its international donor partners, who hoped to use local practices to effect a rapid process of political reconciliation. Unfortunately, however, the instrumental implementation of local practices did not contribute to meaningful reconciliation, but unwittingly gave rise to allegations of corruption and sparked conflict between its beneficiaries and others. Between November 2000 and May 2001, the Ministry of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace made a total of 269 compensation payments (Fraenkel 2004, 122). While some of these payments went to the victims of conflict-related crimes and to organisations such as the Peace Monitoring Council, the monetisation of customary compensation practices allowed those in positions of power to make fraudulent compensation claims and misappropriate funds. As well as Members of Parliament, ministers and members of the provincial governments, several ‘notorious convicted criminals’ were also granted ‘compensation’, with up to SB$40 million being awarded to ‘bogus claimants’ (ibid.). With the economy in tatters, the SIG soon ran out of money to fund compensation claims and turned to international donors. Playing off Taiwanese interests against Chinese influence in the Pacific, the SIG secured a loan of US$25 million from the Taiwanese-state-owned Export-Import Bank. Rather than providing much-needed funds for genuine claimants, however, this influx of cash resulted in ‘vicious scrambles’ over the money, which reignited the original animosities of The Tensions (SMH (Sydney Morning Herald) 2006). Large compensation payments also served to bolster members of the political elite: Kemakeza received US$164,754, while his Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace pocketed US$145,200. Both were sacked from their positions for embezzlement (Fraenkel 2004, 125).
Alongside the fraud, corruption and embezzlement that accompanied it, the monetisation of compensation also brought other serious negative consequences. As kastom dictates that both parties to an injustice are awarded compensation, the monetisation of compensation now literally meant that crime paid. With the advent of ‘compensation by demand’ (Fraenkel 2004, 52), the very purpose and idea of compensation as part of reconciliation lost its intended meaning. Compensation was no longer an instrument of reconciliation but had become a ‘primary driver’ of crime, conflict and insecurity (Droogan and Waldek 2015, 292).

By misappropriating a local practice, the hybrid approach to reconciliation through compensation also failed to resonate with the local population—that is, hybridity produced the same outcome commonly associated with the liberal approach it intended to avoid. Rather than being underpinned by conceptual hybridity, the hybrid reconciliation process was driven by two incommensurate understandings of the role played by compensation in achieving reconciliation: a liberal understanding of compensation as a monetary payment to the victim of a wrong, and a local understanding of compensation as a symbolic offering made by the actual parties to an injustice. In most instances, the need for reconciliation in the aftermath of The Tensions was between particular individuals and groups, not between the SIG and Solomon Islanders. SIG compensation payments thus removed the element of exchange between parties in need of reconciliation from the equation, and therefore were not conceived as a means of reconciliation for the general population. Not only this, but by equating compensation directly with reconciliation, the hybrid compensation-for-reconciliation process neglected the other elements of reconciliation that kastom requires, and thus institutionalised ‘compensation without resolving the underlying’ causes of conflict (ibid.).

A more overt attempt at institutional hybridity came with the establishment of the Solomon Islands TRC. Driven by local civil society actors, in particular the Solomon Islands Christian Association, the TRC ‘began with [the] potential to be “hybridised”’ (Vella 2014, 14). It was to be a TRC modelled on the South African experience but adapted to suit Solomon Islands kastom. Its steering committee explicitly sought to design a process that was sensitive to ‘traditional and grassroots practices’, and to embed these practices in an institution capable of achieving meaningful and sustainable post-conflict reconciliation (TRCSC 2008, 14). In the end, however, few genuine adaptations were achieved. As in other cases like Sierra Leone, rather than the achievement of conceptual hybridity, a disjuncture occurred between the ideas of reconciliation promoted by the TRC, the SIG and the international community, on the one hand, and local understandings, on the other. While the dominant international discourse adopted by the TRC maintained that ‘truth-telling is cathartic and leads to reconciliation, justice and peace’, locals were resistant to ‘truth-telling for its own sake’, criticised the absence of compensation in the TRC process, and argued that discussing the conflict was ‘incongruent with local kastom’, which prohibits talking about old conflicts and—one of particular relevance to women who had suffered sexual violence—events of a personal nature (Vella 2014, 9–10). In the end, the TRC managed to uncover much of the truth about what took place during The Tensions, but, where hybridity was concerned, achieved only a ‘veneer of adaptation’ (Vella 2014, 14).

In line with Millar’s (2014) findings, the form of hybrid reconciliation pursued in Solomon Islands that has been least susceptible to unmet expectations, domination by
liberal actors (state or international) and unintended negative consequences has been ‘ritual’ in nature, and thus resonated with existing local concepts and beliefs. In late 2013 and early 2014, a series of solovisu ceremonies specifically intended to contribute to political reconciliation took place in the Weathercoast region of Guadalcanal. These traditional ‘calling back’ ceremonies were conceived as ‘the launch pad of [the] healing and reconciliation process between’ the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) and the local community (PM&C 2014), and were funded by the SIG. Present at the ceremonies were representatives of the Ministry of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace, RAMSI and the RSIPF, as well as members of the local communities in which they took place. As is customary, a significant part of the ceremonies entailed the exchange of shell money and local and imported food as forms of compensation.

Unlike previous reconciliation ceremonies that have been branded ‘staged kastom reconciliation spectacles’, conjured via the ‘manipulation’ of kastom (Fraenkel 2004, 7), the solovisus have faced far less criticism. One women’s representative summed it up by saying that, although the program has been confronted by numerous challenges, solovisus ‘must be done in order to mend our broken relationship’ with the RSIPF (SIG Press Release 2014). Thus, despite being adapted to meet the demands of broader political reconciliation, the meaning of solovisu ceremonies continued to resonate with the local population—that is, this form of ritualised hybrid reconciliation was underpinned by a hybrid concept of solovisu as a means of reconciliation common to both liberal and local actors. As the RAMSI Special Coordinator, Justine Braithwaite, said during one ceremony:

The solovisu ceremony is the beginning of a long process, which will culminate in the reconciliation between your communities and … the RSIPF … I fully appreciate and understand the enormous challenges ahead of you as you move forward towards the final settlement and reconciliation, especially for the victims who will be required to say to those who committed acts of violence against them, Yes I accept your apology and I forgive you … I am optimistic and confident that despite the many challenges ahead, you can overcome them if you have the will, the drive, and the commitment to reach your goal of making this nation Solomon Islands united, peaceful and prosperous (PINA 2013).

Time will tell whether the initial outcomes of the solovisu program can be translated into wider political reconciliation in Solomon Islands. In the meantime, what seems clear is that it has managed to avoid causing the sorts of negative outcomes associated with other hybrid approaches to political reconciliation in Solomon Islands.

**Timor Leste**

On August 30, 1999, a referendum on self-determination, sponsored by the United Nations (UN), ushered in Timor Leste’s transition to independent nationhood. The referendum brought to an end the repressive 24-year Indonesian occupation of the territory of East Timor (as it was then known) and the 400 years of Portuguese colonisation that preceded it. As the Indonesian military and the East Timorese militia groups it had armed and trained beat a destructive retreat from the territory, around 1500 people were killed, adding to the total death toll during the Indonesian occupation, which has been estimated at between 102,800 and 183,000 (out of a pre-occupation population of less than 800,000) (CAVR 2005). Up to 400,000 people were also displaced, many to neighbouring West
Timor; around 70 percent of East Timor’s infrastructure was destroyed; and the territory was left without any functioning state institutions (Chopra, Ranheim, and Nixon 2011, 131). In response, the UN Security Council established the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), which would administer the territory for two and a half years until formal independence was declared on May 20, 2002.

UNTAET represented one of the most ambitious state-building projects ever undertaken by the UN. With ‘overall responsibility for the administration of East Timor’, the mission had the power to ‘exercise all legislative and executive authority, including the administration of justice’ (UNSC 1999). In line with liberal peace prescriptions, UNTAET made little attempt to experiment with hybrid peacebuilding or reconciliation in the early stages of the mission, Indeed, it was only after UNTAET had been operating for two years that it established a TRC, known as the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR), which attempted a nationwide community reconciliation process (CRP) that drew on local dispute resolution practices. As this section demonstrates, while aspects of this attempt at prescriptive hybridity resonated amongst ordinary East Timorese in part because they successfully tapped into already-existing conceptual frameworks others did not, highlighting the unpredictable ways in which planned hybridity can be experienced. Notwithstanding its uneven impact, the CRP has arguably influenced a range of more recent hybrid peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts in Timor Leste.

As in Solomon Islands, external interveners in Timor Leste encountered a society where there were pre-existing practices of conflict resolution. While the term ‘reconciliation’ may have been new to many East Timorese, during the Indonesian and Portuguese periods local dispute resolution practices had been widespread, in part due to communities’ distrust of, and remoteness from, the state judicial system. These practices, which are sometimes referred to as nahe biti (‘stretching the mat’), vary in form and are dynamic and evolving. They nonetheless commonly revolve around the idea of meeting and discussion in order to reach consensus amongst opposing parties. In the immediate aftermath of the referendum, practices of nahe biti had been integral to the efforts of many East Timorese communities to reintegrate those returning from West Timor, some of whom were believed to have been associated with militia groups.

As in Solomon Islands, East Timorese dispute resolution practices are widely understood to be based on an underlying system of social rules. In Timor Leste, this system—known as lisan (‘custom’)—is described as the ‘order or set of rules that is prescribed and inherited from the ancestors’ (Hohe and Nixon 2003, 16). Transgressing lisan is thought to contravene this order, and likely to have disturbed the spirit world, leading to an ‘imbalance’. In this context, the aim of nahe biti is not only to resolve a community dispute, but to re-establish the social order of the community (which includes the spirit world). Wrongdoing is conceptualised as a community rather than an individual problem, and ‘justice’ is largely understood as a collective, restorative practice aimed at returning to a harmonious society (Nixon 2008, 328). Until this is achieved, it is stressed that bad relations and acrimony will continue to fester and be passed down to subsequent generations.

Given its liberal state-building agenda, and its tendency to treat Timor Leste as a tabula rasa, UNTAET’s initial attempts to promote accountability and reconciliation focused almost exclusively on the formal judicial system. UNTAET established a serious crimes
process that consisted of an internationalised or ‘hybrid’ serious crimes tribunal attached to the Dili District Court and an investigations unit. The tribunal was mandated to hear cases of ‘serious crimes’, which were defined as genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and torture, in addition to murder and sexual offences committed between January 1 and October 25, 1999.

It was not until 2002 that UNTAET formally recognised the value of local dispute resolution practices. Following community consultations around the country, it sponsored the establishment of the CAVR, which, following Timor Leste’s independence, was formally recognised in the national constitution as an independent statutory body. A key component of the CAVR’s work involved support for the reception and reintegration of individuals who had caused harm to their communities through an innovative CRP. The CRP was designed to complement the formal justice system; specifically, it aimed to resolve some of the thousands of cases of ‘less serious’ crimes committed during 1999, including cases of theft, minor assault, killing of livestock, arson and the destruction of crops, which, it was increasingly acknowledged the overstretched judicial system would have no hope of tackling.

In some respects, the CRP can be regarded as a success in prescriptive hybrid reconciliation. The local reconciliation hearings reintegrated 1400 perpetrators of minor crimes into their communities (CAVR 2005, 23) and garnered high levels of community participation—it is thought that 30,000 people attended the reconciliation hearings which were held at suco (‘village’) or aldeia (‘hamlet’) level (Zifcak 2005). By incorporating important conceptual and ritual elements of nahe biti into community reconciliation hearings—for instance, the symbolic unrolling and rolling up of the biti, the chewing of the betel nut, the sacrifice of animals and a reintegrative feast—and by allocating roles to customary and local community leaders, the CRP was widely perceived as a familiar and hence legitimate means for resolving low-level crimes committed in 1999.

Yet the CRP has also been criticised for its overwhelming focus on perpetrator integration, which overshadowed victims’ interests (Larke 2009, 665). Indeed, victims had a limited role in the community reconciliation hearings, and had no legal right to object to the perpetrator (known as the ‘deponent’) being declared ‘reconciled’ and therefore immune from future prosecution. Moreover, most victims did not receive compensation for the harms they suffered. This latter oversight in particular—which represented a departure from local dispute resolution practice, in which the payment of compensation is a critical component—left some victims dissatisfied (Hohe and Nixon 2003, 18–21).

The CRP also suffered from being tethered to the CAVR’s short-term mandate, which itself was linked to the overarching peacebuilding time frame. Building community awareness of and trust in the CRP was slow and, by the time the CAVR began to wind up its work after two years of operation, there were thousands of people waiting to take part in reconciliation hearings who were unable to do so. Other factors have compounded the sense of ‘unfinished business’ left by the CRP. One is that, in communities where not all those who fled to West Timor after the referendum have returned, it is often argued that a ‘full’ accounting for the past and ‘full’ reconciliation cannot yet take place (see, for example, Leong and Lee 2006). Another is that the pace of prosecutions through the serious crimes process has been slow and hampered by the court’s inability to prosecute those living in Indonesia, among them senior members of the Indonesian
military. This has fostered perceptions that only the ‘small fish’, rather than the ‘big fish’, have had to atone for their crimes (Larke 2009).

Some of the local dissatisfaction with the CRP appears, then, to reflect its conceptualisation as part of a prescriptive and short-term national program with the specific goal of reintegrating perpetrators of minor crimes committed in 1999. Despite the laudable efforts by CRP staff to build on pre-existing practices, rituals and concepts, the program’s lack of flexibility ultimately constrained these efforts and meant that, while some aspects of the CRP as an institution, practice and ritual resonated with concepts that are important to ordinary East Timorese, others did not. Other expressions of local dissatisfaction appear to have more to do with failures of the serious crimes process than with the CRP, suggesting that while the East Timorese may express a preference for local dispute resolution practices to address many matters, this does not preclude a desire for formal legal justice to address cases that are deemed to be the most serious. These dynamics suggest that local conceptual frameworks should not only be equated with ‘custom’—as they are inflected by a range of evolving and intertwined locally derived and non-local norms, practices and ideas—and that local experiences of ‘hybridity’ are inevitably influenced by the constraints of broader peacebuilding interventions. All of this underscores the extent to which the outcomes of planned hybridity cannot ‘be predicted from an advance audit of pre-existing cultural practice’ (Hughes 2015, 910), as there are many other factors at play.

Its uneven results aside, the CRP has arguably influenced a range of more recent reconciliation and peacebuilding initiatives that have sought to engage with local sociopolitical practices. Adding further impetus to these efforts was the internal violence that erupted in Timor Leste in 2006–2007, less than four years after the nation gained independence, which caused the displacement of 150,000 people and the deaths of over 1000, and resulted in the redeployment of foreign police and military forces. The renewed interest in hybridity suggests, perhaps, that by contributing to the unravelling of the narrative of UN post-conflict peacebuilding success in Timor Leste, the ‘crisis’ (as it is known) also prompted a search for new peacebuilding approaches beyond the standard liberal template (Wallis 2012, 752).

One hybrid peacebuilding effort initiated by the Timor Leste government after the crisis (with assistance from the United Nations Development Programme) involved the mediation of local disputes and the preparation of communities for the repatriation of those who had been internally displaced, and drew on the CRP model (Braithwaite, Charlesworth, and de Jesus Soares 2012, 224–225). The government also organised a series of high-level dialogues and peacebuilding ceremonies that sought to utilise local sociopolitical practices and culminated in a national ceremony in front of the Palácio do Governo (ibid.). Many of these initiatives have been criticised as lacking in legitimacy, due to the lack of consultation with local communities or because they were not conducted in accordance with customary requirements (or involved the right customary leaders). The national ceremony in particular has been described as an ‘empty cultural show’.4 Despite these flaws, some have argued that the very decision to draw on local sociopolitical practices suggests an emerging recognition amongst Timor Leste’s political elite of their continuing resonance and unifying influence (Wallis 2012, 752–753). It remains to be seen whether future state or non-governmental-organisation-sponsored peacebuilding efforts will build on these hybrid experiments in ways that more successfully tap into local conceptual frameworks, and hence are perceived as more legitimate.
Meanwhile, within many local communities, the gradual reintegration of a slow trickle of people returning from West Timor continues to place quietly and with, suggesting that local reconciliation needs might inevitably exceed the mandates and temporal parameters of formal reconciliation processes. That these ‘bottom-up’ reconciliation efforts continue underscores Millar’s point that conceptual hybridity is inevitably constrained by, and rarely accomplished within, the timescales of liberal peacebuilding.

**Bougainville**

Between 1989 and 1997, the Bougainville region of Papua New Guinea endured a complex secessionist war. What made the conflict especially complicated were two main facts: first, neither of the two main Bougainville factions was a cohesive, unitary actor and, second, a range of ‘inter-communal customary sub- or mini-wars between traditional societal entities’, related to economic inequality, access to land, criminality and traditional disputes, ran concurrently with the broader conflict (Boege 2009, 32). The war ended with ‘light’ international intervention, in which near neighbours Australia and New Zealand provided small, unarmed truce and peace-monitoring teams, and the UN sent a minute observer mission (Regan 2010). Australia and New Zealand hosted a number of peace talks and reconciliation events that culminated in a peace agreement in August 2001. This agreement contained three main elements: Bougainville was granted extensive autonomy; Bougainvilleans were guaranteed a referendum on Bougainville’s future political status (to be held between 2015 and 2020, provided that certain conditions are met); and a weapons-disposal process. A constitution-making process was conducted between 2002 and 2004, and in 2005 Bougainvilleans established the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG).

Underlying this high-level formal political reconciliation was extensive informal reconciliation at the local level. These formal and informal processes ‘operated in a symbiotic fashion, each making space for, and reinforcing, the other’ (Braithwaite, Charlesworth, Reddy and Dunn 2010, 1). While these reconciliation activities were relatively successful, since autonomy there has been greater engagement between formal and informal reconciliation processes, including the increasingly instrumental use of hybrid approaches to reconciliation. Consequently, since autonomy the institutional and practical forms of hybridity evident at the formal level have increasingly permeated the informal level. As this section demonstrates, the instrumental use of hybridity since autonomy highlights the potential dark side of hybridity, as it has generated negative consequences that may undermine the sustainability of peace.

Reconciliation is critical to the sustainability of peace in Bougainville, as the cultural concept of ‘collective responsibility’ means that clan lineages are responsible for the acts of their individual members. If wrongdoings are not reconciled, they remain a source of tension, even after the wrongdoer has died. The concept of hybridity is familiar to Bougainvilleans (although not the terminology, which is a recent invention). As in Solomon Islands and Timor Leste, since colonial contact they have negotiated syncretism between local customary, Christian and liberal sociopolitical practices and institutions.

During the peace process, institutional and practical forms of hybrid reconciliation took place, sponsored by international actors. Recognising that a range of actors claim legitimate authority in Bougainvillean society, these formal events involved the Papua New
Guinea and Bougainville governments, representatives of the Bougainville armed groups, civil society and local customary leaders. International actors provided a ‘security umbrella’ for warring groups to begin conversations aimed at reconciliation (Braithwaite, Charlesworth, Reddy and Dunn 2010, 1). These events also involved ritual hybridity, as they combined formal political negotiations with local customary reconciliation practices. For example, time was provided for the customary practice of \textit{taraut} (‘vomiting’), which involves speakers venting their pent-up frustration and anger (Wolfers 2006).

Alongside these formal reconciliation events, hundreds—possibly thousands—of informal reconciliations were held to ‘weave … together’ formerly opposing parties (Sirivi 2004, 176). These reconciliation efforts did ‘more to consolidate popular commitment to peace than any other aspect of the process’ (Regan 2001, 15). These activities involved ritual and conceptual hybridity, as they drew on a combination of practices: first, traditional practices dictated by the principle of balanced reciprocity, which requires reconciliation and compensation, including the exchange of gifts, in order to restore balance within the community; second, Christian principles and practices, such as church services and prayers, which the Catholic and Methodist churches have syncretised or ‘interwoven’ with Bougainvillean culture (Tanis 2002); and, third, liberal practices such as local ‘peace committees’ and ‘peace treaties’ (Boege 2012). Women’s groups also played a significant role in achieving reconciliation. As most language and cultural groups are matrilineal, women were able to use their ‘high status’ to help negotiate peace in their communities, facilitate discussions between the warring parties, and influence high-level decision-making. This combination of institutional, practical and ritual forms of hybridity at the formal level, and ritual and conceptual forms of hybridity at the informal level was very successful during the peace process; peace was achieved and sustained through the constitution-making process and the establishment of the ABG.

Since autonomy, the ABG, led by the Ministry of Peace and Reconciliation, has combined negotiations of formal reconciliation instruments such as memoranda of understanding relating to the provision of government services and participation in weapons disposal as incentives for reconciliation, with customary reconciliation practices involving inclusiveness and reciprocity. The ABG, Papua New Guinea government and donors (including Australia) have also funded reconciliation events, including the provision of customary ‘compensation’ payments. In a possible example of the dark side of hybridity, there is a suggestion that involving these actors in funding reconciliation efforts has had the perverse consequence of giving groups an incentive to refuse to reconcile until they secure what they view as adequate funding, or even to keep conflicts alive in the hope of securing more funding. Groups have also engaged in further violence or threatening behaviour in order to access funding; armed groups have set up roadblocks to support their demands, while others have held ABG vehicles to ransom. Other groups have demanded ‘payment’ for the ‘services’ they claim to have performed providing ‘security’ during and after the war. This illustrates a potential unintended consequence of combining institutional, practical and ritual forms of hybridity to promote reconciliation.

Customary reconciliation ceremonies generally involve the exchange of goods (usually pigs and ceremonial shell money, although sometimes small amounts of cash), in line with the customary requirement of reciprocity, in order to express sorrow for spilt blood, rather than as reparation. Hybrid reconciliation ceremonies encouraged or organised by the ABG or donors are increasingly seeing the ‘commercialisation of
reconciliations’, including demands for the exchange of large amounts of cash, or escalating amounts of cash to purchase goods to exchange (Braithwaite, Charlesworth, Reddy and Dunn 2010, 72). This escalating demand for the exchange of large amounts of ‘compensation’ is contrary to Bougainvillean custom, which characterises the exchange of goods as a ‘gift to wash away the tears’, rather than ‘a payment for the loss incurred’ (Howley n.d.).

The ABG has made no moves to establish transitional justice mechanisms or a TRC to prosecute crimes and other human rights abuses committed throughout the war. This is in part because of a lack of enthusiasm amongst the political leadership for such an approach, as some claim that a TRC would be ‘contrary to custom’ and could inhibit weapons disposal (BCC 2004, 114–115). As a result, these crimes and abuses have been ‘hardly discussed’ during the informal reconciliation process (Sister Lorraine Garasu speaking in Thompson 2002). Indeed, while many informal reconciliation events have been ‘inclusive affairs’ that have ‘brought entire communities together’, they have often ‘failed … to address the need for truth telling and justice for deeper healing’, instead encouraging a ‘forgive and forget’ approach to past wrongs (BHRC 2011). There has also been ‘no mechanism to ensure compliance’ with customary reparation agreements and other reciprocal arrangements agreed on during reconciliation ceremonies (BHRC 2011, ).

As a result, there is evidence that a culture of impunity has developed, compounded by the provision of amnesties and pardons for certain crimes that occurred during the war, again as incentives for reconciliation and weapons disposal, which has ‘given the impression to the general population that there is [sic] no consequences for abusing the rights of others’ (BHRC 2011, ). During consultations on the constitution, Bougainvillean were ‘generally supportive’ of the amnesty and pardon provisions included in the peace agreement (BCC 2004, 251), and consequently the constitution reiterates them (ABG 2004, Section 187 and Schedules 6.1 and 6.2), recognises that human rights ‘issues’ occurred during the war, and requires the ABG to formulate a policy for dealing with them and for effecting reconciliation that utilises Bougainville ‘customs and practices … so far as is possible’ (ABG 2004, Section 187) . This has meant that some Bougainvillean are ‘confused as to their rights to pursue justice in individual cases of severe abuse’ (BHRC 2011). In the face of this perceived impunity, the families of victims are engaging in increasingly violent forms of ‘local justice’, including ‘horrific tortures and executions’ as ‘payback’ (BHRC 2011 ), which represents a distortion of the customary practice of reciprocity. This is having a detrimental effect on law and order and the rule of law. This suggests that there might be circumstances in which there is insufficient hybridity; an approach to transitional justice that utilised institutional or practical hybridity may have helped to embed the rule of law in Bougainville.

Therefore, while significant progress has been made to advance reconciliation in Bougainville, there are emerging questions about the way in which some reconciliation events have been conducted, with evidence that the combination of institutional, practical and ritual forms of hybridity at the formal level has blurred the distinction between the formal and informal levels, and potentially undermined informal customary reconciliation processes, which may themselves be insufficient to embed peace. In particular, the provision of ABG or donor funding for reconciliation events has led to their monetisation, which may have undermined their customary legitimacy. The monetisation of reconciliation events has also become an incentive for certain groups to refuse to reconcile, or to
engage in violence or threatening behaviour in order to access reconciliation incentives. There is also evidence that, by focusing on customary reconciliation rather than on transitional justice or truth and reconciliation approaches, the ABG has helped to inculcate a culture of impunity, which may have long-term implications for the sustainability of peace, particularly as the referendum on Bougainville’s political future approaches.

**Conclusion**

Despite the promise of more effective reconciliation being achieved by bringing together local and liberal approaches, hybridity—particularly prescriptive hybridity—has a demonstrable dark side. This dark side, as Millar (2014, 506) demonstrates, often results when ‘administered institutions, practices, and rituals are not consistent with already accepted and internalised concepts’. In these cases, they can produce unpredictable results. In order to be effective, institutional, practical and ritual forms of hybridity thus need to be compatible with practices and ideas that are familiar to and viewed as legitimate by local populations. When they are not, the potential for hybrid approaches to have unintended negative consequences is very real. In the cases of Timor Leste, Solomon Islands and Bougainville, the dark side of prescriptive hybridity is readily apparent. Each of these cases reveals the potential for local practices to become instrumentalised in the service of broader reconciliation efforts in ways that undercut their local legitimacy and potentially undermine peace. Exacerbating this are the facts that local conceptual frameworks are not always clearly articulated, and are dynamic and evolving, and that outsiders often possess only a shallow grasp of them. All of this means that they tend not to be amenable to purposeful planning.

Moreover, extending Millar’s framework, the cases of Solomon Islands and Bougainville also demonstrate the extent to which the institution of formal reconciliation processes has the potential to stifle more organic, locally grounded initiatives and distort the meanings of ‘custom’. What also seems to emerge from the Timor Leste case is that formal reconciliation efforts—even those that manage to draw on local conceptual frameworks with some degree of success—are nonetheless also constrained by their short-term mandates. In Timor Leste, it is evident that the reconciliation needs of local communities inevitably exceeded the temporal parameters of the formal reconciliation process and, in any case, were more effectively addressed locally.

In part, these findings underscore just how difficult it is to implement planned, prescriptive hybridity as part of top-down, nationally or internationally devised reconciliation programs, which are themselves also located within, and constrained by, liberal peacebuilding tenants and timetables. As all of our cases reveal, in these instances it is very easy for local institutions, rituals and practices to be ‘instrumentalised’ and, as a result, lose their transformative power. This seems to suggest that peacebuilders would be better served by focusing their energies on understanding existing approaches to reconciliation and approaching hybridity as a bottom-up practice, rather than continuing to devise top-down national programs. In order to achieve this end, it is incumbent on scholars of hybridity to likewise turn from formulating prescriptive models of hybridity to providing more detailed, nuanced and sensitive descriptive accounts of bottom-up processes.

These findings are not, however, to suggest that hybridity only has a dark side. On the contrary, continuing experiments in hybrid peacebuilding in Timor Leste, Solomon
Islands and Bougainville are positive signs of the dedication with which local, national and international actors are attempting to work with local sociopolitical practices and conceptual frameworks as part of attempts at reconciliation and peacebuilding. Despite the many flaws of these processes, the very fact that political elites and international actors have recognised the importance of engaging with local practices signals a significant shift in peacebuilding practice. Specifically, it suggests that there is a growing awareness of the extent to which, in societies bound by strong kinship ties and networks of familial obligations, local practices may resonate more strongly with the general population than those that are perceived as imported and imposed—that is, it signifies growing recognition of the importance of ensuring that post-conflict reconciliation practices are meaningful not just for political elites, but for ordinary people too.

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**Notes**

1. We thank the anonymous reviewer for clarifying this point.
2. Interview with Ben Larke, former adviser to the CRP, Dili, Timor Leste, July 20, 2015.
3. Interviews conducted in Timor Leste, July 2015.
4. Interview with a Timorese intellectual, Dili, May 12, 2010 (cited in Wallis 2012, 752).
5. Interview with a Bougainvillean women’s leader, January 25, 2011; interview with a Bougainvillean women’s leader, February 2, 2010.
6. Personal communication from a village chief and prominent traditional peacemaker, January 27, 2011.

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