

Ninjas in the night: fear, the state and the Catholic church in Timor Leste

Leong Kar Yen¹

Timorese dreams, visions and reality

When I arrived in the month of March 2006, I was expecting to see a country, a society well on the path to reconciling with itself and with its violent past.² Thus it was inevitable that I went through a period of ‘cognitive dissonance’ when almost after a few weeks of having arrived in ‘Eden’ the country was torn asunder. Reconciliation had given way to widespread skepticism and disillusionment, even as we saw the Timorese leadership reopening old fault lines from the days of the resistance. If the leaders themselves could not bury the hatchet what hopes were there for the rest of the country? From the leadership the fissures grew and the boiling point came when in April the Palacio was attacked, plunging the entire country into chaos. The then president Xanana Gusmao declared a state of emergency, trying to placate different groups on one hand, while returning to the ‘reconciliation’ formula in trying to close the ever growing ‘East-West’ divide. The result was a mass exodus of refugees, internally displaced Timorese seeking sanctuary in the mountaintops surrounding Dili, churches and the outlying areas. International observers and pundits, in trying analyse the reasons for what had happened in Timor, began adopting the ‘failed state’ paradigm. The Australian media too began looking at Timor as a ‘failed state’ therefore justifying its intervention and presence in the half-island nation. But was it necessarily a ‘failed state’? A failed state scenario, widely discussed in international relations theory, usually occurs when a smaller nation undergoes a period of instability thus threatening the established international order. In the past unstable countries were susceptible to communist ‘infiltration and influence’ giving rise to a ‘Cuba’ type situation. In the context of today’s world, all one needs to do is to remove the communist label and replace it with ‘terrorist’ and one would see a somewhat similar principle at work. No larger neighboring, more powerful country would like to have less secure and powerful countries fall into an ‘arc of instability’ as this would inevitably endanger the hegemon’s interests. The ‘failed state’ paradigm then offers no long term understanding nor solution to the problems of Timor as it fails to take into context, a more localized perspective and only serves to prioritize a skewed emphasis on the interests of larger actors.

To understand the current state of Timorese affairs on the other hand is to navigate a minefield of nuances, fluid and ever changing. The notion of a unified Timorese state only saw its genesis in the mid-70’s and in opposition to Portuguese and Indonesian colonialism. In the absence of a significant ‘Other’, the new Timorese nation saw itself becoming a battlefield for different kinds of ‘dreams and visions’. The spectrum of these visions range from Timor becoming a monarchical state, to Timor becoming a Christian republic. On a more local level, the ordinary people of Timor became embroiled in nightmares, reflecting the precarious nature of life in a volatile and unstable country. Ninjas appeared and witches manifested themselves, not only in the far flung *aldeias* and *sucos* of Timor’s 13 districts but also in Dili. There was a palpable feeling of loss, of fear and of uncertainty. Phantasms became constant companions of the Timorese, all part of potent mix of paranoia and skepticism. But in a overwhelmingly Catholic nation, the church and indigenous beliefs inevitably become involved in things temporal as well. Many flocked to churches for sanctuary as did those in 1999. Many also fled to the mountains, long seen as abodes of ancestors, for protection as did refugees in 1999. There are ample examples that one can draw upon to provide for a comparative analysis between the *krize* of 2006 and the post-referendum violence of

¹ PhD Candidate, Southeast Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore

² Most of the information contained within this paper was collected during the months of March til October 2006. During that time I was mainly in the districts of Dili, Ainaro and Manufahi

1999. What differed this time was the 'internal' nature of the situation; which caused some of my Timorese friends to question the very nature of democracy and the neo-liberal project the UN embarked on in Timor. Some felt that they had been cheated, left all alone again to fend for themselves as the rest of the region looked away. The Timorese however are a resilient people, attributed by the fact that despite the long hard years of colonialism, their culture still endures. Even during the darkest days of the '*krize*' the Timorese were more than well equipped to weather it all, given the rich cultural tapestries that they could always rely on in times of trouble. At the same time we should not romanticize the nature of Timorese culture or rather 'cultures'. There are within it, deep recesses and places which allow for endemic violence to continue against more vulnerable segments of society ie. women and children. This paper, therefore is part of my efforts to understand the nightmares that inhabit the Timorese cosmology, of fleshing out phantasms conjured by a nation in the throes of finding a vision or a dream that everyone can share.

The Crisis

The Crisis, or *krize* in Portuguese marked a crucial point in Timor's nation-building project. In January of 2006, a group of soldiers, predominantly from the western parts of Timor, has sent a petition to their superiors and also the Timorese government detailing instances where compatriots of theirs were overlooked for promotion whereas those from the Eastern regions were looked upon more highly for such opportunities. The Timorese Defence Forces of the FDTL were staffed with officers from the East, as most guerilla fighters were from that region and were later absorbed into the new FDTL. The 593 petitioners grew increasingly agitated and in April 2006, together with other soldiers and youths proceeded to demonstrate in front of the main government building in Dili. The demonstration grew increasingly violent and order restored much later through the intervention of the FDTL itself. Later another group led by Major Alfredo Reinado, left their barracks and armed themselves, pledging their allegiance to the petitioners whom were unarmed. This created schisms within the police and the army itself, leading to firefights between the two security forces and forcing groups of internally displaced persons into various parts of Dili and her outskirts. Reinado's group later made attempts on the life of present president Jose Ramos Horta as well as the prime minister Xanana Gusmao. Some semblance of stability was returned to the country only at Reinado's death at the hands of Australian peacekeepers. However, observers have remarked that much of the unrest and stability during that two-year period could also be attributed to the political wranglings amongst the elites. (Arnold 2009)

Failed States

The crisis set off a chain of events that had been unparalleled in the young nation's history. For a lot of observers, it had become an accepted kind of wisdom that it was only natural for Timor to undergo these events, as after all it was a nation set in a violent landscape of colonization and oppression. However the events set in motion during that week tore the young nation asunder.

70,000 people became refugees within their own country and the Timorese were reduced to having to rely on armies from various nations to maintain security within their own country. The press, especially the Australia media, began to label Timor as a failed state, a badge of dishonour which in the past had been pinned on countries such as Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan etc. Some of these Australian broadsheets even went as far as saying that it probably would have been better for Timor to have remained a province than to suffer the pangs of independence, of becoming a failed state.

Nevertheless the notion of 'failed states' raises many questions. What exactly is the state? Scholars have clearly defined a state to be an entity endowed with a population, a defined territory, recognised by a community of nations, and possessing a bureaucracy imbued with the legitimate means to violence. What then is a failed state? According to the Fund for Peace, a failed state has to fulfill these criterias.

"A state that is failing has several attributes. One of the most common is the loss of physical control of its territory or a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Other attributes of state failure include the erosion of legitimate authority to make collective decisions, an inability to

provide reasonable public services, and the inability to interact with other states as a full member of the international community.” (Fund for Peace 2007)

Do these terms apply to Timor during the *krize*? Well, certain parts of it do but of course but then a lot of these conditions would apply even to some more established states in Southeast Asia.³ However, despite all these conditions, Timor maintained control over its territory while its bureaucracy continued with its duties. But then again Timor is no normal state either. Right after voting overwhelmingly for independence from Indonesia it essentially became a state under the auspices of the United Nations. Laws, administration, bureaucracy and the recruitment of security elements were all done under UN authority.

Immediately after the *krize* erupted in March 2006 the UN mission chief hastily put together a press conference where he began to list out the many things he thought were elements of the *krize*. Corruption, nepotism, collusion were all part and parcel of how Timor had failed. When I returned to report my colleagues at the human rights organization I was volunteering, they sneered and snapped back at me saying, “How come these UN people never blamed themselves for the shit we are in now?”

Jarat Chopra, a former UN administrator in East Timor, less explicitly echoed the same view. He accused the UN of using inappropriate lessons learnt from vastly different settings like Afghanistan and Somalia, importing their experiences directly to Timor. He also, in no uncertain terms accused the UN of treating Timor, like a ‘terra nullius’ and the UN administrators of not consulting the people of Timor, imposing a ‘liberal state’ blueprint onto the Timorese landscape through elections and the idea of a liberal democracy. (Chopra, 2000)

While the ‘failed state’ concept was a popular part of the international relations lexicon in the 1990’s, many authors have since critiqued and debunked the notion that states could ‘fail’ and thus necessitate UN intervention. In a article written by proponents of the failed state concept, the authors also placed a heavy emphasis on the need to identify ‘failed states’ to avoid disorder in the international system. (Ratner and Helman: 1999). Therefore the goal is not so much to address the issues affecting the state but rather to ensure that the internal mechanisms are strengthened so that a ‘failed state’ does not threaten international order. However, a strong state does not necessarily ensure that that the rights of its citizens will be respected. The presence of peace and order does not necessarily show an inclusive government. (Call:2008) The ‘failed state’ thesis is also further hampered by its cookie cutter approach to the many different and varied cultures in governments all over the world. Proponents are also often accused of pushing a neo-liberal agenda that originated from the West. The failed state theory does not take into consideration, or is incapable of, linking colonialism to the causes behind ‘failed state’. Transplanting an idyll into Timor beginning through a Truth and Reconciliation commission, followed by other neo-liberal policy prescriptions, it seemed that UN wished to free the Timorese from anger, reconcile enemies and letting it become a promised land to take its place amongst a community of ‘normal’ countries. However, what the UN failed to take into consideration is the presence of other contesting ‘visions’ some of which were markedly different from its neo-liberal policies.

Visions

For a good quarter of a century, the single unifying Timorese vision was one of freedom from the Indonesian occupation. Immediately after the 1999 referendum, Timorese society was split due to the violence perpetrated by Pro-Jakarta local militias. The violence then still continues to reverberate through the Timorese imaginary and during the period of the *krize*, the events of *noventa novi*⁴ continues to haunt them.

³ For instance, Zimbabwe is reported to suffering from record levels of inflation and its economy is in a state of ruin. However the state apparatus continues to exact authoritarian control over its people. In Burma and in the Democratic Republic of North Korea, the government of these nations are considered to be failed states by the rest of the international community, but their respective regimes continue to control the means to violence and maintain their borders.

⁴ *Noventa Novi* means 99 in Portuguese a figure often used to refer to the events after the 1999 referendum for Timor Leste’s independence from Indonesia

However the Timorese political spectrum which is home to a varied and diverse set of other characters with their own vision for Timor. Southeast Asianist Douglas Kammen introduced an entire gamut of leaders and characters dreaming also of what the state and nation in Timor should be. Describing one such vision in a poster, inspired perhaps by the then president Xanana Gusmao, Dili is depicted standing great and magnificent as Timor's shining city on a hill. (Kammen; 2008:387) In Kammen's article he draws out examples of monarchists and 'traditionalists' who claim that the ancient tribal leaders of the past should be given their rightful place in the Timor. One such proponent of the traditionalist view was a well known political leader I managed to meet and interview. Amongst other things this particular political leader claimed that he a detachable penis was armed with a bar of plutonium in his head to enable communication with the Kennedy clan in the US and his aunt, Elizabeth, at the Buckingham Palace. He also claims to own the World Bank and knows of God's whereabouts. While his claims may seem laughable, Jakob Xavier's *Partidu Povu Timor* nonetheless garnered at least 9000 votes earning his party two seats in the 2001 elections. Kammen points out how elites in a nation, poor and resource starved reaches out to the electorates, beguiling them with wonderful visions of paradise. Utopia and dreams is part and parcel of the Timorese landscape. The *krize* in 2006 on the other hand was no dream. So did the dreams of reconciliation come to naught, was there no promised land. What then did take form? What kinds of nightmares would these dreams evolve into?

Ninjas

One night, during the *krize*, at a particularly large church called the in the outskirts of Dili, I accompanied a friend, whom was part of a relief effort handing out food supplies and other sundry items to the refugees. At the height of the *krize* there were 100,000 internally displaced peoples all over Dili as well as outside in outlying areas. (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNMIT 2007) Finding some respite and rest time from helping my friend, I began speaking to some of the people living there. "The sisters here are good to us and the church here is good to us because they let us stay here. But the government on the other hand, the government we do not trust at all. Look at what they have done to us. If we die we would rather die with sisters." The government began to realize that if they did not quickly address the problems of the refugees, these places would become fertile ground for anti-establishment and anti-government sentiments.

The state began to recede as people began seeking once again a sense of certainty and security in sanctified places such as mountains and churches. There were even such stories that the ninjas were made to appear in these places so that they could somehow frighten people to return to their own homes. Speaking again to some of the refugees at a church located in a Dili suburb, I was told that one night that a group dressed like 'ninjas' had made a visitation to the church and had acted threateningly. As the sisters within the church compound came out, the shadowy figures retreated into the darkness. They were unable to come in ostensibly, due to the protective powers of the church. This, however did not stop the refugees from forming groups within the church that patrolled the church grounds.

The 'ninja' serves to show much of these refugees that the walls of the church served to protect them from these ninjas, usually omens of death and disorder. Speaking to the refugees there was an increasing sense of disconnect between the state and the people. The breakdown of the police and armed forces followed by the arrival of foreign peacekeepers only further exhibited to the people of Timor Leste that their own government was incapable of maintaining law and order. Another refugee, revealed that "...we have fought so long for independence and fought so hard but when we have our own government we only want to kill ourselves. What is the point of this all?" Ninjas have figured prominently throughout the Timorese landscape and they have followed the Timorese, like ghosts, throughout periods of uncertainty. Even as recent as the run-ups to the 2007 presidential elections, ninjas had been sighted, "...appearing in the night and making explicit threats, these tactics were derived from the Indonesian occupation, when such 'ninjas' were harbingers of death ...when the population was so traumatized that threats alone became an effective method of compelling compliance." (Kingsbury: 2007)

During the Indonesian occupation many scholars have described these shadowy forms as just being another part of the Indonesian states' arsenal of coercive measures; a legacy of the violence which has been exported to places like Timor Leste. But like Timor Leste, 'ninja' narratives and other such phantasms (witches, monsters etc) have also appeared in times of uncertainty in Indonesian. Just like in Timor, these shadowy figures appear at times when the state seems to recede from the lives of ordinary

people. These 'ninja' figures manifested specifically during the period of Suharto's downfall in the 90's, when the Indonesian landscape was replete with stories of religious figures and traditional healers were being murdered by 'figures covered from head to toe in black.'⁵

Since 2000, at the zenith of Timor's nation-building project, the Timorese press began publishing reports of masked men terrorizing communities and committing crimes. While these criminals may have been using ninja-like costumes to hide their identity, there was little doubt that their appearance caused a great deal of fear amongst the local populace. For instance, there were reports of a community in Ermera, that were living in fear of a group of men dressed in black carrying out unknown activities in the night.⁶ Whilst some groups have used this disguise to carry out criminal activities such as theft, some other cases have been more ominous, with rumours of these group kidnapping children.⁷

There have also been many stories in the local press of women and sometimes children being tortured and then murdered as they had been suspected of witchcraft. The stories more often than not occur in districts far from Dili, places typically referred to as being marginal, due to their relative distance and lack of communication, far from the reaches of the state. (Suara Timor Lorosae: 2008, 2006, 2003). The police, usually the frontline agents of the state are usually absent from these remote areas in Timor. According to a foreign police officer serving under the UN, "...some of the sub-villages in the region have never been visited by the police and other would have had one visit in the past two years." (Moor, Herald Sun: 2002).

The absence of the state in these areas is indicative of its limitation in enforcing laws and being the sole legitimate entity with means of violence. The people whom live in these 'marginal' and 'peripheral' areas often resort to the use of 'black magic' to adjudicate relations amongst the people whom live in these areas. Describing her journey deep into the Timorese interior, a police officer described her destination as being the 'centre of black magic'. (2002) Many times, during my fieldwork, when moving from one village to another one deeper into the interior, I would be told to refrain from drinking the water from these remote villages failing which I would become cursed and would never return. Therefore the more remote an area is from modernity and the reaches of the state (read: Dili) the stronger the label of 'black magic' applied to the area becomes. Describing the Meratus Dayaks in Indonesia, Anna Tsing posits that their position as 'primitives' belies their geographical and imaginary distance, 'displaced' as she explains, from the more Jakarta centric Indonesian discourse of development. However, Tsing adds, despite being brushed aside, the Meratus Dayaks, have relied on their culture and practises for continued survival outside of the Jakarta framework. (Tsing: 1993) The Timorese too continue to believe in the efficacy of 'black magic' or 'sorcery' to provide remedies to injured bodies and that bane of all developing countries, malaria. Whilst these attempts often end in tragedy, the people living in these remote areas continue engage in these practises. (Toohey: 2007).

In Indonesia during the political upheavals of 1998, ninjas and sorcerers also began to capture the public imagination. In the throes of revolution, ninjas, or men dressed in black were blamed for a spate of disappearances and murders which coincided with the killings of suspected sorcerers. According to James Siegel, "...*Javanese thus had to take on the enchanting power of these aggressive dead themselves, once the state was though no longer to be there to keep them at bay. The ninja killers...were that embodiment.*" (Siegel, 2006:165) Fadjar Thufail further adds that this 'unravelling' of the Indonesian state was also accompanied by high levels of anxiety arising from this tension, "...of what they perceived as 'order' and 'disorder' and that they sought to, "...to revisit the past in order to make sense of present experience that remains clouded in ambiguity and uncertainty. The narratives themselves remains ambiguous, caught between the certainty of order and the confusion of disorder, between the hope of the present and the contested memory of the past..." (Thufail; 2006: 152)

In the rites and rituals practiced by the many groups in Timor, phantasms only appear when a taboo has been breached. This would often involve cases of improperly carrying proper funeral rites or something as simple as not paying homage to a spirit house to commemorate a deceased ancestor. Ancestors and the spirits of those deceased represent a fragment of the past that the present generation is

⁵ For local accounts of the ninja phenomenon, please see Nicholas Herriman's description and analysis of events in "*Fear and Uncertainty: Local Perceptions of the Sorcerer and the State in an Indonesian Witch-hunt*" in the *Asian Journal of Social Sciences* 34(3): 360-87.

⁶ "Populasaun Lahakmatek Tamba Grupu Deskonhesidu," *Suara Timor Lorosae*, 10 March 2003

⁷ "Ninja Liquica Empata Atividade Estudante, *Labarik Rua Lakon," *Suara Timor Lorosae*, 8 April 2008;

duty bound to honour. Not doing this would set off a chain of events disrupting the Timorese time scape thus allowing disembodied spirits to wreak havoc in the human world. David Hicks, in his research on the southern Tetum people, describes elaborate funerary rituals that need to be fulfilled failing which, the spirit of the deceased would return, signifying an imbalance in the world. (Hicks: 1987)

Perhaps the issues of the past have yet to be resolved therefore allowing malevolent forces to again roam Timorese earth. Perhaps this is an indication that the Timorese nation has yet to reconcile itself with the past, thereby enabling some sort of balance to be restored.

Contesting visions

Much like the 'dreaming' origins myth spoken of by Australian aborigines, the Timorese nation is an amorphous mass still being shaped by different dreams and nightmares. The precarious nature of the state in Timor and the uncertainties which continue to plague its landscape colours both relations between the state and its people. Therefore in order to cope, nightmares and ninja-ghouls inhabit not only the imagination of those living in the far-flung districts but also haunt the more metropolitan area of Dili. These ghouls have come to represent the uncertainties which surrounds life in Timor-Leste. Not unlike the other Southeast Asian countries which had also undergone similar post-colonial birth pangs, Timor-Leste exists in a state of flux, being shaped by visions, dreams and nightmares.

Many scholars and even some leaders in Timor have continuously claimed the Timorese are living in a collective state of trauma, so perhaps these 'visions' are but one way of making sense of their lives.

According to Tony Day, the state in Southeast Asia, is not something solid but rather iron in fluid form. (Day, 2002) The Timorese state may not be iron but it is still in the throes of formation itself shaping and being shaped by differing forces and influences within. And in turn the people themselves are being shaped.

Timor's case is a challenging one both theoretically and in terms of data gathering. If we were to imagine Timor, we will soon come to realize that it is amalgam of many narratives put together and also at the same time contesting with each other. Nonetheless the study of Timor will no doubt yield new inroads not just for Southeast Asian studies for but also comparatively for the study of 'transitional' societies. Much of the literature on Timor-Leste has places a great amount of emphasis on the UN administration and the impact of its 'rule' in the small half-island nation. By focusing on phenomenon such as ninjas and ghouls perhaps researchers maybe able to recalibrate the focus and emphasis and how the Timorese people themselves see their ever changing world and why as opposed to how the UN is changing the world for them.

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