

## National Identity in Timor-Leste: A Brief Comparative Study

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In 2006, Timor-Leste was on the brink of collapse and its people were widely understood as divided between those who identified with the ‘east’ and those who identified with the ‘west’. A division within the military and between the military and the police, communal rioting, the rise of gang culture and, importantly, a divide that occurred across approximate linguistic boundaries, all brought the state to the brink of collapse. The linguistic division was identified as approximating to the broad distinction between Papuan language group speakers (*firaku*) and Austronesian language speakers (*kaladi*)<sup>1</sup> which, while simplistic, quickly came to assume a reality that had not existed during the Indonesian occupation. This division had serious implications for the fledgling country’s attempts at building a cohesive national identity, to serve as the basis for its future development.

Viqueque and Bobonaro exemplified Timor-Leste’s claimed ‘east-west’ divide. Viqueque is arguably Timor-Leste’s most ‘traditional’ district, and identified with the ‘eastern’ cause. Bobonaro is arguably most externally exposed district (apart from the capital, Dili), and which most closely associated with the ‘western’ cause. It is from these case studies that this paper attempts to assess challenges to and opportunities for national cohesion in Timor-Leste.

National identity in Timor-Leste began to form in response to Portugal’s decolonisation and, more importantly, resistance to Indonesia’s occupation. Despite this resistance, the use of the Indonesian language across the territory from 1975 allowed new opportunities for common communication. This communication helped create new bonds and, ironically, enhanced resistance. From 1981, the use of the previously somewhat limited Tetum in Catholic liturgy further enhanced common communication and hence resistance (see Anderson 2001:238). Yet since 1999, Timor-Leste has not faced a common enemy, language policy has become complex and divisive, and religious bonding has reduced relevance.

### Consecration: Formal and Traditional

At the consecration of a church at the village of Loi-Huno, 10 kilometers north of Viqueque, cultural signifiers included head scarves of batik<sup>2</sup>, fronted by a stylised bronze buffalo horn or crescent (symbolising female, cold, passive, fertile, ritual power) of the new moon (Tetum: *kaibauk*, Nauete: *wula soru*). Around the elder’s neck over his *tais* (hand woven cloth) sash and skirt he wore a traditional bronze disc, symbolising the (hot, male, active, security, political authority of the) sun (Tetum: *belak*). The sun and moon symbols contain elements of each other to ensure harmony and balance<sup>3</sup>, or what has been termed ‘recursive complementarity’ (Fox 1989:46).

These symbols and dress are common across Timor, with variations of *tais* reflecting the language groups and smaller communities from which they originate. The influences from the wider Indonesian archipelago are various and widespread, and embedded in local culture in ways that reflect both the period of Timor-Leste’s occupation as well as its more general proximity (See Askland and Dibley 2009). Ancient and battered Portuguese swords used in this ceremony were less weapons and more *lulic* (sacred item).

<sup>1</sup> The terms *firaku* and *kaladi* are used here rather than the terms *lorosae* and *loromonu* which, while meaning where the sun rises and where the sun sets (equating to east and west) confuses these terms with the original Tetum meanings of referring to the eastern and western halves of the island. In particular, Timor-Leste was widely referred to as Timor Lorosae by the Timorese resistance during the period of Indonesian occupation.

<sup>2</sup> Batik is common throughout the archipelago, but most used in Java. The batik of these head-dresses was Javanese in origin.

<sup>3</sup> Information courtesy of a resident of Utao Lari.

The women, wearing tais and kebaya<sup>4</sup>, beat out a quick rhythm on babadok (small drums) and butaki (bronze gongs), dancing a version of the likurai, a form common across Timor-Leste. Following the formalities of the consecration, the festivities began, notable for which was the slaughtering of three buffalo, traditionally the highest mark of occasional available in the lives of East Timorese. In a tradition that is found across East Timor, the horns of the buffalo were removed to be affixed to a totem pole in front of the church. Buffalo horns are symbolic of the importance of an event, as well as an indicator of the continuing legacy of animist beliefs which tie the people of Timor-Leste to the land in which the spirits of their ancestors reside (see Kingham 2006:21-3).

### **That Which Divides**

Despite much commonality, there has also been claimed much that distinguishes Viqueque from Bobonaro. Most Viqueque residents speak (Papuan) Makassae as their first language, which is distinct to the (Austronesian) Tetum and Kemak spoken by most of the residents of Bobonaro (although noting that the Papuan Bunak is also spoken in Bobonaro). The political orientation of the residents of Viqueque follows the previous Fretilin government's line on being the 'party of liberationality, there has also been claimed much that distinguishes Viqueque from Bobonaro: the incarnation of Fretilin was not that of the party of resistance<sup>5</sup>, and that political allegiances were better served by a variety of political actors.

While Viqueque district is largely Makassae speaking, sections of the coastal area, around Luca, speak (Southern) Tetum Terik<sup>6</sup>, and Uato Lari and Uato Carbou speak Nauete. In that there was a focus on identity in Viqueque, it was first the village, then language. What this tended to indicate was that in the lives of most people, their concerns were local and specific, and that their thoughts tended to be less focused on regional enmities. More negatively, though, when confronted with difference or roused to defence, the more inwardly focused the world-view of inhabitants of Viqueque the greater the tendency towards division and conflict.

At the nearly the furthest point of the country from Viqueque, a few days after the consecration, the people of Balibo were attending church, in this case mass to celebrate Ash Wednesday. This event included every resident of Balibo and, just a few kilometres from Indonesian Timor where Protestantism is the dominant religion, marked Balibo as deeply ingrained in the wider culture of Timor-Leste.

There had long been a claim by easterners that westerners were less committed to the independence struggle and that they more readily identified and sided with Indonesia. However, one resident of Bobonaro noted that resident of Balibo and, just a few ki the clandestine (resistance) movement, such as in Renetil. ... Konis Santana, the late commander of Falintil, escaped and stayed with the Kemak community. ... the same happened to other commanders during the resistance. They took refuge in Bobonaro area when they were under pressure by TNI in the eastern part.'

Because of the proximity of the western districts to West Timor, Bobonaro in particular bore the brunt of Indonesia's initial attempts to invade Timor-Leste, and because of the active resistance to Indonesian occupation, Bobonaro and Cova Lima to the south also bore the brunt of the killing and destruction following the referendum on independence in 1999. However, in 1975, the anti-colonial liurai of Kemak-speaking Atsabe in neighboring Ermera district, Guilherme Goncalves, a key member of the pro-integrationist Apodeti party, signed the 'Balibo Declaration' marking Timor Lorosae's incorporation into Indonesia, and was appointed first governor of Indonesian occupied Timor Lorosae. Given his extensive traditional alliances with groups reaching as far as the northern Tetun and Bunak ethnic groups on both sides of the Portuguese-Indonesian Timor border, this tainted them with his own pro-Indonesia activities.

Despite being subjected to a high degree of displacement and loss of life from 1975 onwards, by the mid-1980s, life in Bobonaro resumed in much the same manner as it had under the Portuguese, in which the colonial occupiers were harsh but inconsistent and external relations extended along linguistic lines to the west as well as to the east. A number of residents of Balibo noted that even after independence, the links across the border remained strong. These, however, were primarily family and

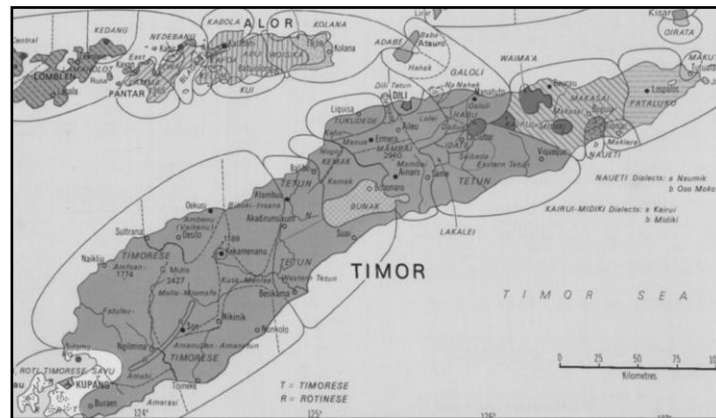
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<sup>4</sup> The *kebaya* is a traditional, originally a courtly, Javanese women's blouse, which is popular throughout the archipelago, including across Timor-Leste.

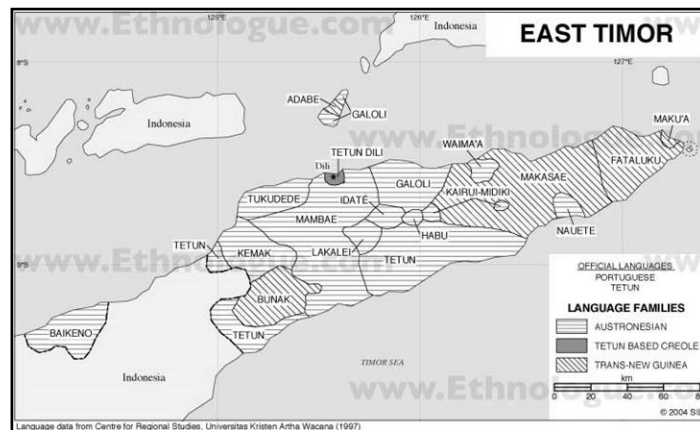
<sup>5</sup> Based in numerous conversations with residents of Bobonaro, especially in Maliana, between 2002 and 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Tetum Terik is divided between Southern and Northern dialects.

linguistic, rather than political, connections. An overlay of the political map on a linguistic map shows that the border between Timor-Leste and Indonesia arbitrarily divided such communities with, for example, about equal numbers of Bunak speakers on either side of the border (Voegelin and Voegelin 1977).



Source: Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative 2009



In Bobonaro generally and the Balibo sub-district in particular, there remains a patchwork of languages. Indonesian remains the common language between indigenous language groups, followed by Tetum Praca. Within the Balibo sub-district, the linguistic patch work includes (Northern) Tetum Terik being spoken at Cova near the Indonesian border, Tetum Praca at Batu Gade on the coast, and Tetum Praca and some (Northern) Tetum Terik as well as Kemak being spoken in and around Balibo. About seven kilometres south of Balibo, off the main road in a deep valley, the people of the village of Leohitu speak *Belu*<sup>7</sup> (known externally as *Becais*), an Austronesian language of about 3,000 speakers. The villages of Leolima and Nunara speak Kemak, while in the sub-district of Maliana the languages of Tetum Praca (with minor variations), Kemak and (the Papuan) Bunak are spoken. However, within the trading town of Maliana itself, Indonesian remained dominant: ‘It is the language of business’, said a main-street shopkeeper. Near Maliana, the border villages of Tapo Memo, Sebura, Holsa and Oromau all speak Bunak. Pro-independence sentiment in the village of memo, on the banks of the Malibaca River that demarcates the border with Indonesia, had been pronounced.

Based on field research, in Balibo and Viqueque the first allegiance was generally to family, then village, and then to primary language group. In Bobonaro, as with Viqueque, the lesser the level of external influence, it appeared that there was a greater extent of a localised, parochial identity. Conversely, the greater the level of exposure to external influence, it appeared to be that there was a greater sense of a larger, more cohesive identity (see also MacBride 2004:163). In Viqueque there had

<sup>7</sup> Although identified by some linguists as ‘Welaun’, a local speaker claimed that ‘Belu’ was the correct name, corresponding to the name ‘Tetum Belu’ as used in Indonesian West Timor, or simply the Atoni (West Timorese) word ‘Belu’ to describe all ‘Tetum’ speakers. It would seem that ‘Belu’ is a Tetum dialect, influenced by Kemak.

been relatively little external influence, and traditional, local belief systems and customs remained strong. The major exposure to external influence, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was Indonesian brutal and for years unrelenting attacks on the region as the last fixed position of Falintil resistance.

The events that led to a near state collapse in 2006 produced a distinct hardening of oppositional positions within Timor-Leste. Notably in Bobonaro, there was a sense that the then Fretilin government was alien, in the sense that it was not of the people, and hence to be opposed<sup>8</sup>. This potential for social disorder was built upon a base of desperate poverty and increasingly violent confrontation between gangs in Dili over protection rackets and other turf wars. As Dili was repopulated after its wholesale emptying and destruction in 1999, communities tended to congregate in Dili's suburbs around their language groups. In this, there was increasing tension between western Bunak speakers and eastern Makassae speakers, that in turn reflected pre-colonial and colonial rivalries. Beyond this, there were also growing tensions between Fretilin in government, claiming the mantle of the party of the resistance, and opposition to it, in part comprised of parties that had initially favoured Indonesian occupation, but which had later joined the pro-independence 'national front' organisation, the National Council for Maubere Resistance (CNRM), later the National Council for Timorese Resistance (CNRT). In particular, there had been considerable bitterness between the leader of the CNRT, Xanana Gusmao, and the leader of Fretilin, Mari Alkatiri, whose personal rivalries and ambitions further fuelled tensions from the pre-independence period into the events of 2006 (see Kingsbury 2009:138-41, Niner 2007).

The results of the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2007 also showed a broad divide along east-west lines, although not in absolute terms. In the first-round presidential election, among the non-Fretilin candidates, Democratic Party head Fernando 'Lasama' de Araujo won a plurality of votes in Ermera, Bobonaro, Cova Lima and Oecussi (CNEa 2007:1), indicating stronger anti-Fretilin support in the west. Fretilin candidate Francisco 'Lu-Olo' Guterres won a plurality in Baucau, Lautem and Viqueque, indicating stronger pro-Fretilin support in the east. It was notable that Guterres only won about 29 per cent of the total vote, indicating a fall by more than half in Fretilin's support base from the 2001 Constituent Assembly elections. The second round of voting showed a similar vote for Fretilin.

It was therefore unsurprising that the parliamentary elections produced a similar outcome. Fretilin gathered just above 29 per cent of the total vote (based on a proportional representation list of candidates), with just over 70 per cent being divided between other parties (CNE 2007c:3, CNE 2007d:). In Viqueque, Fretilin gathered just under 60 per cent of the vote with Council for Timorese National Reconstruction (CNRT) taking 12.6 per cent and PD under four per cent (CNE 2007d:13). In Bobonaro, however, Fretilin was reduced to 16 per cent, about equal with the Timorese Social Democratic Party-Democratic Socialist Party (ASDT-PSD)<sup>9</sup>, with CNRT polling just over 20 per cent and PD polling just under 20 per cent (CNE 2007d:4) (in neighbouring Cova Lima Fretilin did better, with about 29 per cent of the total vote, although still saw its overall vote cut in half and became a minority relative to the subsequent coalition of parties that ran against it).

Following the outcome of the elections, of the non-Fretilin parties, the CNRT, ASDT-PSD and the Democratic Party formed a coalition of that took government with 37 of the parliament's 65 seats. This change of government led to extensive rioting, notably by Fretilin supporters against anti-Fretilin strongholds in pro-Fretilin areas such as Uato Lari in Viqueque.

### **That which unites**

While language had traditionally acted as a key marker of division in Timor-Leste, the move towards a standardisation of language/s, initially Indonesian but more so Tetum, came to act as a unifier. Tetum in both its Praca and Terik variants had become increasingly accepted as the common language of communication across Timor-Leste. Tetum Praca was the language that was used, by preference, in the national parliament, rather than Portuguese, and there was an attempt to standardise the language's orthography (RDTL 2004). 86 per cent of the population had some capacity in either Tetum Praca or Tetum Terik (DNE 2006:68). As a result of increasing cohesion around Tetum, pressure on the weak points in national cohesion were reduced, and were thus less likely to split at the linguistic or territorial seams.

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<sup>8</sup> Based on personal conversations with residents of Bobonaro between 2005 and 2009.

<sup>9</sup> In part comprised in part of pro-Indonesia parties.

More traditionally, and related to Timor-Leste or Tetum Terik (DNE 2006:68). As a result of one day easing cohesion around Tetum, *pressu* (land), 'dust to dust' as the sacred mother is common to most Timorese, reflecting Durkheim's view that the bonding aspect of religion was its common social quality (Durkheim 1912:10). Common, too, is the Mambai story of Mau Terus (Suffering Mau)<sup>10</sup> who was killed but will reappear (see also Traube 2007 re Tat Felis), which corresponds to Catholicism's Jesus Christ. This conceptualization was enhanced by the spiritual centre of Timor further being understood as 'female' (also passive, accepting; Hicks 1976, esp. 108), which can be seen as corresponding to Christ's mother, Mary.

Similarly, the association with *rai* (land, understood as female), cosmological balance and interdependence between land and sky, sun and moon, male and female, belief in *lulic* and continuing commitment to ritual forms of exchange and obligation, decision-making, conflict resolution and traditional responses to hierarchy (in the Weberian sense of the term) all remained strong across Timor-Leste. Common, too, was Timor-Leste's creation myth, in which the island was a crocodile that (in one of the many minor variations of the story) returning a favour rose to save a boy in the ocean, thus creating the shape of the land<sup>11</sup>.

Myths have arisen around the status of resistance or independence fighters, from the ghosts of resistance fighters returning to lead to then outlaw Alfredo Reinado engaging in a ritual act in order to channel the spirit of anti-Portuguese leader Dom Boaventura. Official histories have been cultivated around the experiences of resistance-era leaders, and the state has moved to establish a formal history of the occupation, through the establishment of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation, which has documents Timor-Leste's ghosts of resistance fighters returning to lead to then outlaw Alfredo Reinado engaging in a ritual act in order to channel the spirit of anti-Portuguese leader Dom B Leach 2007).

A further significant element that worked in favour of unity in Timor-Leste was the relative easing of its economic problems and some progress on civil service reform, auditing and anti-corruption efforts (World Bank 2009:62). These changes reduced pressure on the government of Timor-Leste and, to some extent, on its people, providing them with a degree of confidence in the state as having a role in their personal well-being. Such increasing, if still limited, coherence around the state marked a transition away from the local towards the national based on perceived benefits and a growing commitment to state institutions.

The government took a transition away from the local towards the national based on perceived benefits and a growing commitment to state institutions. tion efforts (World Bank 2009:62). These changes reduce on 11 February 2008, the government negotiated for the petitioners to leave the army, with individual payouts of US\$8,000. With Reinado and the petitioners out of the way, the government then closed the 54 existing IDP camps, again including payments to families to rebuild their lost homes. A sense of normalcy was beginning to return.

That which also came through several discussions in Viqueque and Bobonaro was an overwhelming desire for peace. In short, the people of Timor-Leste had suffered too much under Indonesia and, with the high hopes of independence having been dashed by the events of 2006, they now simply wanted to get on with their lives. Local identity remained important, but not at the price of continuing conflict.

But perhaps the greatest identifier in Timor-Leste was the enthusiasm for which its people have turned out to vote, in the order of 98 per cent in the 1999 referendum on independence, and 90 per cent or above since then<sup>12</sup>. The three rounds of 2007 elections were conducted in a broadly free and fair manner. At one level the popular embrace of electoral politics could be seen as a consequence of external influence. In that external influences have been important, this is conventional in the spread of a more civic world view, complimenting a reduced sense of ethnic parochialism. Claims that the Timorese do not understand the meaning of elections and simply voted according to how they were told failed to account

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<sup>10</sup> Also known as *Mau Kiak* (Poor Mau).

<sup>11</sup> There are also more local creation myths that differ from place to place, usually associated with specific language groups and particular sites, such as mountains which are conceived of as joining the land and the sky.

<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that official electoral participation results have included registered voters who had died, double registrations (being registered with old and new identity cards although only being able to vote once) and the disallowal of overseas voters who had previously been registered.

for the massive shift in political support for political parties between 2001 and 2007, the relative sophistication of and distinction between party policies. In that there was a degree of hardening of party preference along regional or language lines, this reflected ideological political preferences based on state-wide candidate lists.

## Conclusion

If a sense of national identity is based on a series of commonalities across a largely contiguous area, then Timor-Leste had numerous challenges still to overcome. Yet given its divided history and more recent events which exacerbated rather than healed divisions, there was also much that bode well for Timor-Leste's national future. Viqueque and Bobonaro remained two distinct districts, with different histories and broad political orientations. However, both districts also shared similar pre-colonial cultures, had mixtures of Austronesian and Papuan languages, if in differing proportions, with Tetum being widely spoken either as a first language or increasingly as a lingua franca in both. In both, Catholicism played an important role, not least in the ways in which it also included pre-Christian animist beliefs and symbols that were common to both.

At one level, the state was relatively artificial in the lives of many residents of both Bobonaro and Viqueque, but it was also increasingly important as the provider of education and infrastructure. The state also defined the territorial reach of the nation, more important perhaps in Bobonaro than Viqueque, but which also gave a sense of belonging, if in some cases more strongly if misguidedly, in Viqueque, to some authentic 'nationalist' core. Finally, there was a growing sense of being Timorese was increasingly distinct not for how it defined or subsumed internal differences but for how it shaped the people of the territory in their relations with *malae* (foreigners) who provided a post-Indonesian 'other'. The modern world impacted in ways that increasingly unified both actions and reactions. Having come from the neglected periphery of among colonialism's first and last misadventures, in the short ten years since the vote for independence, Timor-Leste had begun to rediscover, develop, and invent a unity that many older, more established states still struggled to achieve.

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