

Belonging to the Streets: Street Art, Youth and Nation Building in Post-Independent Timor-Leste.

By Nicholas Bartlett

Introduction

This essay attempts to outline the role of street art in delineating identity for youth in post-independent Timor-Leste. Youth engagement in Timor-Leste is especially important considering the exclusion of youth from the nation building discourse. The absence of any sense of national belonging amongst Timorese youth underpins broader frustrations and related conflict and issues in the streets. The exclusion of Timorese youth from the nation building project is symbolic of their broader neglect by the Timorese government and the lack of sufficient youth engagement. This essay endeavours to address questions such as why is consensus round national identity in Timor-Leste so difficult? In what ways are Timorese youth excluded from the national discourse? And, what are the broader and, indeed interrelated, consequences of their exclusion? In addressing some of these questions, I hope to explain the constructive relationship between street art and identity in Timor-Leste. Since 2002, the legacies of the brutal Indonesian occupation have divided the population. The inability of the Timorese to reach a consensus around their national identity is rooted in the violence of the Indonesian occupation. It is, therefore, imperative to understand the historical context in order to comprehend the current situation in Timor-Leste. The unrest in Timor-Leste climaxed in 2006 when over 500 ex-Falintil resistance soldiers were disbanded from the national army (F-FDTL) and protests erupted across the country. Despite various initiatives taken by the Timorese government, very little has been done to engage Timorese youth and to assuage resentment towards the institutions of the government. This article details the role of street art in the lives of Timorese youth, outlining the capacity of art to engage youth in a meaningful manner which simultaneously reduces the potential for conflict and violence. In a broader context, it shows how murals and other forms of street art in Dili positively conflate various

conceptions of national identity to build towards a collective national consciousness which can be shared by all Timorese, irrespective of age and political affiliation. More specifically, this article documents the work of Timorese artist, Tony Amaral, in its discussion of identity.

The Historical Origins of Violence and Disunity

Independent Timor-Leste has a tumultuous, and indeed violent, relationship with its past. In April 1974, Portuguese colonial rule effectively came to an end after 450 years and political parties were legalised. After a brief civil war between the pro-independence party Fretilin and the two Indonesian backed political parties Apodeti and UDT, Fretilin declared an independent Timor-Leste on 28 November 1975. Despite its brevity, the civil war of August 1975 inculcated a deep mistrust amongst East Timorese and polarised existing political loyalties and hostilities. In December of the same year, Indonesian forces invaded. Although this was not before Indonesia had sought the approval of the United States, as evidenced by a memorandum for Henry Kissinger in March 1975 which outlined the pragmatic deliberation underpinning the acceptance of the invasion.¹ Thus, the decision to invade Timor-Leste was conceived in advance and the political manoeuvres made by Indonesia in the lead-up were based upon a predetermined objective.

The Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste not only resulted in the death of between 90,800 and 202,600 people, but it also created the conditions for the continuation of violence and division post-Independence.² Timorese guerrillas, known as the Fretilin guerrillas, retreated to the mountains where a violent insurgency campaign lasted for the next 24 years.³ Youth played a significant role in the resistance movement, and this was highlighted by the Santa Cruz Massacre in November 1991. British filmmaker and

¹ Donald Greenlees, "Files show complicity on Timor," *New York Times*, Dec 1, 2005.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/01/world/asia/files-show-complicity-on-timor.html>.

² The Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation, *Chega! The CAVR Report* (The Wayback Machine, May 13, 2012). <https://web.archive.org/web/20120513220045/http://www.cavr-timorleste.org/en/Brief.htm>.

³ Brad Simpson, *Briefing Book #682* (National Security Archive, Aug 28, 2019),

<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/indonesia/2019-08-28/us-sought-preserve-close-ties-indonesian-military-it-terrorized-east-timor-runup-1999-independence>.

journalist Max Stahl recorded the display of Indonesian troops firing on the 2,000 pro-independence supporters who had gathered peacefully at the Santa Cruz Cemetery to pay tribute to Sebastião Gomes who had been killed by Indonesian forces weeks earlier.⁴ After General Suharto's resignation in 1998 and an independence campaign led by East Timorese youth between July and September in the same year, newly elected Indonesian president BJ. Habibie announced that a referendum would be held in 1999. Despite this concession, a recently declassified CIA Intelligence Report noted that the strategy of the Indonesian armed forces was still 'to kill, drive out, or intimidate into silence independence activists and to cow the general population into accepting an East Timor under Jakarta's control.'⁵ Clearly, Indonesia supported the integration of Timor-Leste into its existing territories.

The independence vote itself and the Indonesian scare tactics and intimidation in the leadup entrenched a legacy of violence and division within Timor-Leste. In the period between Habibie's announcement of the referendum and the day of the vote itself, August 30, 1999, paramilitary organisations, supported by factions within the Indonesian military, incited fear and trepidation amongst the Timorese. After the vote returned a clear majority in favour of independence, Indonesian troops and paramilitary gangs killed approximately 1,400 Timorese and forced over 200,000 people into West Timor. Although the International Force for East Timor (INTERFET) brought the violence to an end in late September, a relative unease settled over the newly independent nation. Then, in April 2006, the dismissal of 600 resistance veterans from the national army caused widespread rioting in which five people were killed and over 20,000 fled their homes.⁶ The tension originated from the replacement of the old resistance army, the Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor (FALINTIL), with the new national army, the Defence Forces of Timor-Leste (F-FDTL). Veterans of the Falintil Force were embittered at their

⁴ Max Stahl, "East Timor Dili Santa Cruz Massacre, November 12th 1991," Feb 24, 2014, 2:25, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkxeYuGXCOM>.

⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, *Indonesia: Challenges Facing East Timor [Redacted]* (May 10, 1999), 4, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//dc.html?doc=6354089-National-Security-Archive-Doc-12-CIA>.

⁶ Jonathan Head, 'Analysis: East Timor's Security Woes,' *BBC News*, May 24, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/5012640.stm>.

disbandment. This period in Timorese history is often referred to as 'the Crisis.'⁷ It revealed fractures within East Timorese society on a number of levels. Firstly, it showed a weak sense of national identity and, secondly, it demonstrated the emergence of an east-west ethnic division. On another level, the Crisis gave birth to a number of resistance groups who marshalled the discontent of the veterans.

The history of Timor-Leste's violent past is important in explaining the context of its tumultuous political present. It has already been established that tensions and the potential for violence have continued to exist in Timorese society post-independence. One important issue is the existence of gangs and martial arts groups whose origins can be traced back to the use of gangs, known as 'Moradores,' as a tool of repression under Portuguese colonial rule as well as the role of militias during the Indonesian occupation.⁸ In contemporary Timor-Leste, large numbers of young, marginalised males have been attracted to the some 15 to 20 martial arts groups across the country. The number of registered members is estimated at around 20,000. The alignment of some of these groups with political factions and their infiltration into the security forces has escalated the violence in Timor-Leste.⁹ Although the violence between April 2006 and April 2008 was primarily caused by divisions within the army and the political sphere, the violence itself was largely confined to street violence involving youth.¹⁰ The number of young people involved in the groups is a reflection of the lack of youth engagement in the country more broadly. Scholar Mathew Arnold accounts for the challenges of policy design on behalf of the government in addressing the problem of youth in Timor-Leste.¹¹ He explains that membership in youth groups is facilitated by high unemployment rates, limited opportunities for education and a general disillusionment with the state.

⁷ James Scambary, 'Anatomy of a conflict: the 2006-2007 communal violence in East Timor,' *Conflict, Security and Development* 9, no. 2 (Jun 2009): 265

⁸ James Scambary, *A Survey of Gangs and Youth Groups in Dili, Timor-Leste* (Australia: Australia's Agency for International Development, 2006), 1.

⁹ *Ibid*, 2.

¹⁰ Mathew B Arnold, "'Who is My Friend, Who is My Enemy'? Youth and Statebuilding in Timor-Leste," *International Peacekeeping* 16, no. 3 (July 2009): 379.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 379.

Youth in Post-Independent Timor-Leste

Although the extent of violence in Timor is significantly less than in the period between April 2006 and April 2008, the issue of martial arts groups persists and there continues to be an absence of government policy directed towards engaging Timorese youth. Josh Trindade, a socio-cultural adviser for legislative and judicial reform to the East Timorese government, explained that governmental intervention has been inefficient and sporadic:

in 2000 I set up different youth centres in different parts of the country. And then when the country starts in 2002, I was arguing with the government saying we need to do something with the young people. But, of course, politics is more important than youth. There is very little problem for the young people. Then 2006 sprouted, and there was a lot of young people involved in the conflict. And everyone panicked. And you need to do something for the young people. But now its calm so we neglect the young people again.¹²

In November 2007 the *National Youth Policy of Timor-Leste* announced a program to engage youth through education, community service, job creation and civil participation.¹³ The Ministry of Youth and Sport also created a ‘supporting youth’ initiative which gave grants for various initiatives including, but not limited to, sporting events, concerts and youth centres.¹⁴ To address the problem of martial arts groups specifically, the government adopted a ‘martial arts law’ which encouraged groups to direct their time and energy into sports.¹⁵ The government’s Provedor’s Office, which is an agency tasked with reviewing government actions, claimed that the law failed to address the greater issues of unemployment and education.¹⁶ Although it is clear that an effort has been made

¹² Josh Trindade, interviewed by Nick Bartlett, Dili, December 19, 2019.

¹³ Secretariat of State for Youth and Sport, *National Youth Policy of Timor-Leste* (Dili, Nov 14, 2007) , 6.

¹⁴ Arnold, “Who is My Friend?,” 384.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 384.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 384.

to address the issue of youth engagement in Timor-Leste, the government is yet to implement its ideas and initiatives in a successful manner. Josh Trindade similarly affirmed the government's failure:

*if you support young people, you should have increased the quality of education, arts groups, proper sport. But, of course, we have state security for youth and sport but even I don't understand what they are doing. Of course, ideas are there. I can really see the ideas are there. But when it comes to implementation, they do not propose any real outcomes. This is the problem.*¹⁷

In the post-independence era, youth engagement is essential considering their exclusion from the nation building discourse. Before venturing into the analysis of the role of youth in the nation building project, it is first necessary to contextualise this project more broadly. Nation building can be explained as the set of cultural processes which form a political community.¹⁸ This process is particularly important in a country such as Timor-Leste where the birth of the nation itself is so recent. Moreover, this process holds significance for the Timorese since it is a matter of differentiation from the socio-cultural and political legacies of the Portuguese and Indonesian occupation. Notably, the national unity in Timor-Leste which was fostered during the collective resistance has broken down in the absence of a common enemy in the post-independence state.¹⁹ In wake of the independence vote, the competing visions of national identity can be loosely summarised according to the three generational categories outlined by scholar Marisa Ramos-Gonçalves: the 'generation of 1975,' who grew up during the Portuguese colonial period, the 'gerasaun foun' generation who grew up during the Indonesian occupation (1975-199) and the 'independence generation' who were born after the referendum.²⁰

¹⁷ Trindade, interview.

¹⁸ Michael Leach, "Longitudinal change in East Timorese tertiary student attitudes to national identity and nation building, 2002-2010," *Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 168, no. 2-3 (2012) : 220.

¹⁹ Catherine Elizabeth Arthur, "[Writing national identity on the wall: The Geração Foun, street art and language choices in Timor-Leste](#)," *Cadernos de Arte e Antropologia* 4, no. 1 (2015) : 1.

²⁰ Ramos Gonçalves, Marisa. 2012a. 'A Língua Portuguesa e o conflito intergeracional em TimorLeste.' in III SIMELP: A formação de novas gerações de falantes de português no mundo, ed. by R. Teixeira E Silva, Y. Qiarong, M. Espadinha & A. Leal. Macau: Universidade de Macau: 4.

After independence, the people of Timor-Leste found it difficult to arrive at a consensus concerning their national identity. The fact that President Xanana Gusmao's independence speech was delivered in four different languages, provides a small insight into the struggle of establishing a common identity in such an ethnically and linguistically diverse country.²¹ Importantly, it is not the issue of linguistic, generational and ethnic diversity which is the problem. The problem lies in the memory of these competing visions of independence and the priority which is given to some understandings of the resistance and independence above others. As the next paragraph will explain, the valorisation of the older generation and the Portuguese language immediately elevates the voice of older people above youth in society. Similarly, it diminishes the significance of local Timorese dialects in favour of the dominant, colonial Portuguese language. Therefore, when people think of Timorese nationality, it is possible that the inclusion of the Portuguese language will erode the relevance of any Timorese dialects. Here, the problem of consensus is revealed. A community cannot hope to embrace pluralism in its national identity, if there is not consensus surrounding the memory of how its independence came to be.

The Constitution of Timor-Leste contains two important clauses which create tensions in the discourse around national identity. Firstly, the 'valorisation of resistance' clause enshrines the role played by the resistance in the liberation of Timor-Leste, and, secondly, it prioritises the older generation of Portuguese speaking Timorese in its promise to maintain ties with countries whose official language is Portuguese.²² Hence, it is clear that the violence which escalated in 2006 amongst veterans and, the ongoing resentment of veterans, was rooted in the legitimate belief that they were at the forefront of the resistance movement and, as such, they should be at the forefront of the nation building project. Although veterans did play a crucial role in securing independence, this narrative is problematic in its failure to sufficiently account for the role of youth in the resistance movement. Such a narrative precludes youth from participating in the discourse around national identity, since they are not considered to have made an important enough contribution to warrant having a say in the matter. As Bexley and Tchailoro's article

²¹ Michael Leach, "Valorising the Resistance: National Identity and Collective Memory in East Timor's Constitution," *Social Alternatives* 21, no. 3 (2002) : 43.

²² *Ibid*, 43.

Consuming Youth has previously established, the Indonesian-educated, Geração Foun, played a central role in the Independence movement.²³ Whilst a small number of Geração Foun have transitioned into politics and government positions, the majority feel unsatisfied with Independence and they feel marginalised from the broader political processes.²⁴ Thus, tensions dating back to the Indonesian occupation prevent the different generations from agreeing upon a common national identity.

Street Art and National Identity

In this context of fractured consensus and disillusionment with the government, young people have taken to the streets to break into a national dialogue from which they have been consistently excluded. The space afforded to them by the streets has allowed young people to imagine themselves as part of the broader national community in whichever way they feel is appropriate. Benedict Anderson's seminal work *Imagined Communities* is a pertinent reflection on the origins of nationalism. It explains that the nation is a construct, imagined by those who consider themselves members of that community. It is imagined in the sense that members of that community will most likely never meet majority of the national population and it is limited to the extent that that the nation is constrained by its borders. Anderson emphasises the role of print capitalism in the emergence of national consciousness. He explains that the dissemination of print capitalist alerted people to the fact that other bodies of people shared their language and it also gave language a fixity around which national consciousness could be built.²⁵ Imagining a national community becomes problematic in Timor-Leste when there is conflicting imaginations of what the nation should look like. As Marisa Ramos-Gonçalves has already established, different generational groups view different events, peoples and values with varying degrees of

²³ Angie Bexley and Nuno Rodrigues Tchailoro, "Consuming Youth: Timorese in the Resistance Against Indonesian Occupation," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 14, no. 5 (2013) : 406.

²⁴ Ibid, 406; Andrew McWilliam and Angie Bexley, "Performing Politics: the 2007 parliamentary elections in Timor Leste," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 9, no. 1 (2008) : 78 (**check this page number**).

²⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006) , 6-45.

importance. Veterans of the Fretilin Resistance, for example, conceive of a national identity built fundamentally around the memory of the military resistance wing. Young people, on the other hand, feel that this narrative is exclusive and limiting. As such, it is difficult for the population of Timor to arrive at a consensus concerning their imagined national community.

In a system which neglects the voice of young people, the street offers an alternative platform through which youth can express their political dissatisfaction and their hopes for a collective national identity. Given the absence of widespread print-capitalism and the low rates of literacy in Timor-Leste, it is little surprise that national identity must find its expression through alternative methods.²⁶ Moreover, it is not so much an issue of affirmation of national identity as it is about constructing a commonly accepted national identity. In the absence of extensive print capitalism and media, and in a society where the channels between politicians and the public are largely insufficient, art, therefore exists as a medium, accessible to all. That is not to say that artists do not use the written word in their creations. Art is simply more accessible as a means of communication and expression to the general population. Young people use art to construct an identity for themselves amongst a much more dominant patchwork of existing ideas regarding Timorese nationality. The art which this article endeavours to analyse takes the form of street art or graffiti. Whilst street art has been defined as ‘any art developed in public spaces’ which incorporates a broad range of techniques, graffiti has been described in the contemporary era as ‘[the] writing or drawings scribbled, scratched, or sprayed illicitly on a wall or other surface in a public space.’²⁷

Young Timorese artists incorporate ‘invented traditions’ in their work to maintain a certain continuation of the past whilst simultaneously forging a new, distinguishable present. In 1983, Eric Hobsbawm employed the term ‘invented traditions’ which, he

²⁶ Benedict Anderson, “Imaging ‘east timor’,” *Arena Magazine*, April-May 1993, <file:///C:/Users/bartl/Documents/Melbourne%20University/Timor-Leste%20Thesis/Readings/Imaging%20'East%20Timor'%20by%20Benedict%20Anderson.pdf>.

²⁷ Jane M Gadsby, “Looking at the Writing on the Wall: A Critical Review and Taxonomy of Graffiti Texts,” 1995, https://www.academia.edu/37375726/Looking_at_the_Writing_on_the_Wall_A_Critical_Review_and_Taxonomy_of_Graffiti_Texts_Looking_at_the_Writing_on_the_Wall; OED (Oxford English Dictionary) or p. 4 of *Writing National Identity on the Wall*.

explains, are a set of practices which ‘seek to inculcate certain values and norms.’²⁸ In the context of nationalism, invented traditions are essential to the forging of national culture. Hobsbawm explains that although invented traditions imply a continuity with the past, they are often invented not because the old traditions are unviable but because they wish to differentiate themselves either through adaptation or complete rejection of the past. Hobsbawm postulated that invented traditions are likely to be seen more frequently after the rapid transformation of a society destroys the patterns of ‘old’ traditions, which is directly applicable to the case of Timor-Leste. Amongst the three overlapping types of invented traditions, Hobsbawm explains that the first type establishes social cohesion or the membership of an artificial community.²⁹ In this paper, the artificial community refers to the imagined Timorese national community which is struggling to find a consensus. Hobsbawm’s claim that invented traditions appear more frequently in the wake of social transformation or upheaval is validated by the inception of the ‘Movimentu Kultura.’ The cultural process of invented new traditions in Timor-Leste manifested itself in the Movimentu Kultura.³⁰ Broadly speaking, this artistic movement emerged in Timor-Leste in the mid-1990s. The material expression of the movement is not confined to one medium, and it encompasses all available media. Contemporary artists tend to imbue their work with traditional values and rituals since ongoing ancestral worship is a very important practice amongst Timorese. Thus, the most notable aspect of the movement is the integration of ‘fragments of tradition’ which connect the legacies of the cultural past to the contemporary present.³¹

The Movimentu Kultura is connected to reclaiming ancestry and cultural practice of the past which allows Timorese to affirm their identity in the present. The incorporation of past Timorese tradition in art is significant since, more often than not, it holds greater significance than the more modern and formal belief systems and laws of the state. The concept of *Lulik* is one manifestation of Timorese tradition. It originates from the Tetum

²⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) , 1-9.

²⁹ Ibid, 1-9.

³⁰ Leonor Veiga, “Movimentu Kultura in Timor-Leste: Maria Madeira’s ‘Agency,’” *Cadernos de Arte E Antropologia*, 2015 : 86-87.

³¹ Ibid, 86-87.

word meaning 'forbidden' and it exists in all of the different dialects in Timor-Leste. It refers to the 'spiritual cosmos that contains the divine creator, the spirits of the ancestors, and the spiritual root of life including sacred rules and regulations that dictate relationships between people and people and nature.'³² *Lulik* has often been described as animist and uncivilised by the Church, the Portuguese and the Indonesians. As a result, many Timorese are ashamed to discuss the concept, and this has provoked a sense of cultural insecurity amongst Timorese too.³³ According to Leonor Veiga, the *Lulik* tradition manifests itself in art, and similarly in street art, through three different styles: a surrealistic style which draws on books and images, a naturalistic style which incorporates portraits, landscapes and elements of everyday life and an assemblage style which integrates pieces of traditional cloth, betel nut paste and shells.³⁴ The inclusion of *Lulik* in street art, therefore, reaffirms this important aspect of Timorese identity, drawing a commonly accepted tradition into the public sphere. In this regard, Timorese tradition exists as a reference point of sorts around which all Timorese people can rally. It has the capacity to connect Timorese of all generations and of all different communities. Established Timorese artist and former student of the Arte Moris Free Art School³⁵, Tony Amaral³⁶, affirmed:³⁷

³² Josh Trindade, "*Lulik: The Core of Timorese Values*," Karau Dikur, published April 13, 2012, <https://karaudikur.blogspot.com/2012/04/lulik-core-of-timorese-values.html>.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Veiga, "*Movimentu Kultura*," 87.

³⁵ The Arte Moris Free Art School was established in 2003 by Swiss artist Luca Gansser and his wife, Gabriela Gansser. In its first year, Arte Moris was awarded the UN Human Rights prize for its advocacy for freedom of expression. The school offers art lessons and classes to young people. Its main exhibition gallery showcases the work of its students and provides young people with a platform to exhibit their art and express their broader concerns and grievances on subjects of their choice. It is the only art centre of its kind in the country and students come from different districts to participate in art classes.

³⁶ Tony Amaral is a visual artist who was born in Timor-Leste in 1984. Tony was one of the first students to study at the Arte Moris Free Art School in Dili in 2002. During the civil unrest which seized Dili in 2006, Tony participated in a campaign which used murals to send messages of peace and positivity. In 2008 he was awarded a scholarship to study at the National Art School in Sydney. After attaining a Bachelor of Fine Art in 2011, Tony was also awarded the Chroma Prize for Painting. Tony has remained heavily involved at the Arte Moris School where he worked as the artistic director. The occupation of Timor-Leste has had a significant influence on Tony which he expresses through his art. He now uses art as an expression of his desire for peace and unification. Tony has continued to work with young people both within and beyond the Arte Moris School. Through his own practice and his art collective, *Dili Arte Klandestina*, Tony engages community and individuals alike through collaborative art projects and festivals.

³⁷ "Tony Amaral," *Tekee Media Inc.* Published 2012. <http://tekeemedia.com/tony-amaral/>.

*Art helps young people to learn stories about the older generation's experiences. It also helps them to be able to tell their own stories.*³⁸

In this regard, the streets allow young people to create their own story whilst simultaneously reclaiming their ancestors' stories as their own. The walls of the streets facilitate the meeting of two narratives. On one level, young Timorese artists draw on the resistance struggle and the role of the older generation in securing the Independence. Here, the inclusion of traditional Timorese symbols and ritual is important in acknowledging the older generation and the traditional way of life. On another level, the very act of scrawling words or symbols across a wall or a canvas is an attempt to bridge a gap between a fractured community, to reach a consensus in order to move forward as a collective. The close relationship between the old and new generation conjured in the paint splattered across the walls of Timor's capital city, Dili, is mirrored in Tony's own reflection:

Yes, there is a close relationship between the new and old generation. The older generation fought for independence. The new generation fight for the truth and for a positive way forward. 'Lulik' and traditional culture inspires much of my work. I use lines and colours from traditional woven materials (tais). In my art that I paint on canvas I paint using nature motifs from my traditional culture and landscape such as Lulik trees and rocks. In my street art I draw heavily on cultural dress and rituals.³⁹

Here, Tony's use of the words 'traditional woven materials' and 'Lulik trees and rocks' refer to those aspects of his own traditional cultural and landscape. The traditional woven materials are those which have been passed down by the older generations in his local community. The traditional landscape refers to the natural surroundings in his traditional home. The trees and rocks in and around Dili may not necessary contain the same spiritual significance as those surrounding his traditional home in the districts. In this regard, the trees and rocks which Tony paints in his art are imbued with the same sanctity and Lulik sprit of those surrounding his traditional home. In an interview with the Director

³⁸ Tony Amaral, interviewed by Nick Bartlett, Dili, December 16, 2019.

³⁹ Interview with Tony Amaral.

of the NGO Belun,⁴⁰ Luis Ximenes reaffirmed the fact that many Timorese, like Tony, who live in Dili still maintain very close ties to their traditional homes:

Because we are Timorese, we have the traditional house. Each of us have the traditional municipal.⁴¹

The mural in figure 1 reaffirms the unifying effect of street art. The mural was commissioned by the Catholic Relief Service (CRS) in Dili on the outer wall of their compound in August, 2019. The financial investment in the street art reaffirms its value in the eyes of the CRS. Its visibility and accessibility make the message on the wall more appealing to the general population. In this way, the CRS is able to make its peaceful position more easily and more widely known. The different panels of the mural each have an intended effect in the broader message of Timorese national unity. The rippling ribbon



⁴⁰ Belun is an NGO based in Dili. Its primary mission is to prevent conflict through integrity and innovation. Its strategy is based around three key pillars: research, policy development, and community engagement. Belun works closely on between local communities and the government.

⁴¹ Luis Ximenes, interviewed by Nick Bartlett, Dili, December 16, 2019.

portrayed in the colours of the national flag, red, yellow and black, connects all the panels of the mural. Here, the artist, Tony Amaral, pays homage to the resistance movement. After all, it is independence itself, and liberation from the brutality of Indonesian occupation, which will allow the different visions of the future to flourish. The ribbon is somewhat symbolic of Tony's own position in society. As a member of the Geração Foun, Tony witnessed the brutality of the Indonesian occupation first hand, and he has remained committed to bringing people together through art every since. Figure 2 depicts two people in traditional Timorese garb. The inclusion of the two figures recognises the importance of Timor's past tradition and acknowledges the older generation. Figure 3 frames a white dove leaving the hands of a Timorese man. The dove provokes the hopeful vision of peace. Its flight marks a break with Timor's violent past and signifies a new beginning. Figure 4 similarly builds on the promise of peace. Here, the positioning of the dove between the two Timorese children reinforces the idea that the future success of a peaceful Timorese nation is predicated on a system in which all children receive sufficient education. The deliberate inclusion of female students in the panel serves as a reminder that women continue to be neglected in the educational sector.



Figure 2



Figure 3



Youth Engagement and Reconciliation

The streets not only allow the artist to express national unity in theory, but they also allow the artist to bring people together in practice. On April 1st, 2018, Tony's art collective *Dili Arte Klandestine* (Dili Clandestine Art) launched *Arte Luron* – an art and music festival in Dili. It was the first of its kind. The community involved itself in the month prior to the festival through the provision of food and other materials. The murals were the product of a collaborative art project which saw artists ranged between the ages of 20 and 35 working together with community members of all ages. Figure 11 shows the less developed and less complex array of shapes and symbols, such as bees and faces, towards the bottom of the mural. Tony explained that these were selected and drawn by the children in the community. The festival ended with a concert on the beach at the end of the road where the murals had appeared. Since the network of colourful murals appeared in the community, Tony observed that the streets have been looked after in a far more attentive way. The streets themselves have remained clean and the community has ensured the ongoing protection and preservation of the murals. Tony believes that the emerging art scene in the local community has been a source of pride. It has served to

unify the community members irrespective of pre-existing generational, political and social tensions.

Figure 5-12 were taken by Nick Bartlett in Dili, Timor-Leste, December 16, 2019.



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Young people utilise the streets to construct their own narrative of memory and reconciliation. In this regard, art allows young people to advocate their resistance to the existing memory of violence which has been shaped by the legal and political authority in Timor-Leste.⁴² In 2005, the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR) closed down. Following this, the Timorese and Indonesian government created the Commission for Truth and Friendship (CTF), whose final report reaffirmed the CAVR's conclusion that the Indonesian forces were responsible for crimes against humanity. However, since 2005 very little has been done to address the issue of reconciliation. In 2016, Prime Minister Rui de Araujo established the Centro Nacional Chega! (CNC). By July 2017, CNC was operational but it was not until the end of 2018 that it had access to a full budget. According to Article 3 of its Constitution, CNC 'has a broad mandate to promote the implementation of the CAVR and CTF's recommendations focusing on memory, human rights education, and solidarity with the most vulnerable survivors of human rights violations.'⁴³ The report issued by Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) in July 2019 noted the

⁴² Khoo Ying Hooi, "How arts heal and galvanise the youth of Timor Leste," *The Conversation*, June 12, 2017, theconversation.com/how-arts-heal-and-galvanise-the-youth-of-timor-leste-73927.

⁴³ Asia Justice and Rights, *Centro Nacional Chega!: Time to Focus on Survivors* (July 2019), 1-4, [file:///C:/Users/bartl/AppData/Local/Packages/microsoft.windowscommunicationsapps_8wekyb3d8bbwe/LocalState/Files/S0/1852/Attachments/CNCPaper-finaledition\[5210\].pdf](file:///C:/Users/bartl/AppData/Local/Packages/microsoft.windowscommunicationsapps_8wekyb3d8bbwe/LocalState/Files/S0/1852/Attachments/CNCPaper-finaledition[5210].pdf).

progress that had been made in the area of rehabilitation and healing, but it also outlined that urgent attention was needed in the following areas: to renew a victim centred approach, to provide material support to survivors, to document victims' experiences and stories and to affirm a gender-sensitive approach.

Interestingly, many of the examples of street art which I encountered in Dili touched on similar messages. Figure 13, for example, was an attempt by Tony Amaral in 2018 to protest the excessive government spending on its official Prado cars, which are valued at around 40,000 US dollars. The text positioned above the Timorese child and the Prado car reads, 'don't play with peoples' lives.' Essentially, Tony's piece argues that government expenditure should be directed towards more pragmatic and useful projects. Figure 14 documents the experience of LGBTQI+ peoples in the brutal occupation of Timor-Leste. The long line of Timorese lining up at the ballot box accounts for the difference experiences of suffering whilst simultaneously offering a visible show of support for the LGBTQI+ community, in particular, through the display of rainbow colours. Figure 15 shows that a greater focus needs to be placed upon women in the education sector. These three examples, therefore, show how memory manifests itself in a very tangible form through art. The way Tony has chosen to portray his own memory of the past on the walls of the street positions onlookers to mobilise in a peaceful and constructive way to pursue a unified vision of reconciliation.

Figures 13-15 were taken by Nick Bartlett in Dili, Timor-Leste, December 16, 2019.

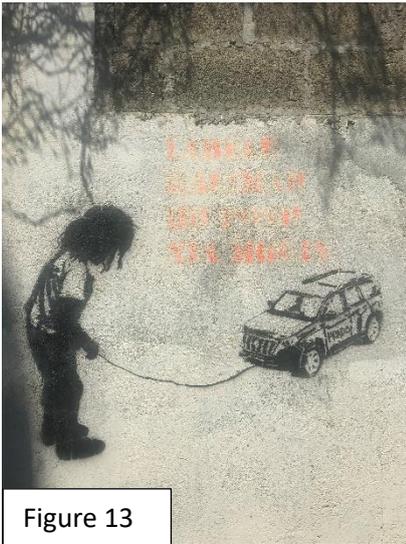


Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15

Conclusion

The unabating presence of colonial and imperial powers in Timor-Leste up until 1999 has engendered an ongoing disunity amongst the population. Most alarmingly, this disunity operates on a number of levels within Timorese society. At a generational level, clear categories divide young and old, making it all the more difficult to disentangle the older generation from the resistance movement and the achievement of independence post-occupation. This generational divide similarly flows into politics where most government positions are assumed by members of the older population. Importantly, this divide has not been sufficiently tackled by government intervention or policy. It is therefore no surprise that Timorese people find it difficult to agree upon a national identity when inclusion is not even practiced at a political level. In this context, the streets of Timor-Leste's capital city have become an important outlet for the expression of political grievances, resentment and disillusionment. Through various forms of street art and graffiti, local artists have adopted a more constructive approach to the nation building project. In an attempt to compensate for government complacency, local artists, such as Tony Amaral, have used the walls of the streets as a way of engaging disenfranchised youth and as a means of portraying a unified conception of Timorese national identity which is visible and accessible to all. The incorporation of traditional practice as well as

contemporary perspectives has successfully brought together different currents within post-independent Timor-Leste to paint a unified and inclusive image of the nation.

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