Constructing a national identity in Timor-Leste: some reflections

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An officially independent state since 2002
Timor Leste:
Area 14,874 km²; 2019 1,350,000 inhabitants; HDI 132/189.
“Se somos um país pequeno, ainda por cima sem recursos, porquê não investimos em ser diferentes?” (Mari Alkatiri)

Cit. in: Monteiro 2017: 25.
Eastern Timor and foreign supremacy

Portugal until 1975;

Indonesia 1975-1999;

[UN (transition period) 1999- 2002].

20 de maio 2002 :
Republik Demokratik Timor Leste
“East-Timorese identity”

**Motives** for developing a national identity in the case of Timor Leste:
- Creating a sense of a common project;
- Recognition of the role of the central government;
- Overcoming conflicts and avoiding future conflicts;
- Affirmation of the new state on the world stage;
- Differentiating from other states.

“Identity-building consolidates and legitimises a new nation-state and mitigates the risk of further state failure or collapse” (Shiosaki 2018: 54).

**Identitarian politics:** The state and institutions have a main role in instilling values, feelings, attitudes (education and language policies; official narratives).

Identity has various **dimensions**, which may be manipulated, according to context and situation.

(Some authors on identity: Barth 1969; Eriksen 1993/2010; Maalouf 1998).
Dimension 1: perceived origins

Dimension 2: history and memory (1)

Portuguese colonial era

Fonte: Observatório da Língua Portuguesa (2015)
Via Daniel de Lucca
Dimension 2: history and memory (2)
Dimension 3: ethnicity

a. Phenotype and  
b. Culture
Culture: ethnolinguistic groups

Source: Fischer 2010
Dimension 4: language

In Timor-Leste:

A. Indigenous languages (N = 15+)

B. Official languages:
   - Tetum-Prasa
   - Portuguese.

C. Working languages:
   - Indonesian
   - English

Language (written word) and generation:
Generation of 1975: Portuguese;
Generation found: Indonesian;
Generation of Independence: .... + ..... + .....
Dimension 5: religion

Percentage of Catholics:

1974 27.8
1989 81.4
1999 90
Reconfigured tradition
The National Identity Survey
among students of Higher Education

Question of survey (adapted from IPSS):

Some people say the following things are important for being truly East Timorese. Others say they are not important. How important do you think each of the following is?

a. To have been born in Timor-Leste?
b. To have East Timorese citizenship?
c. To have lived in Timor-Leste for most of one’s life?
d. To be able to speak Tetum?
e. To be able to speak Portuguese?
f. To be a Catholic?
g. To respect tradition and adat?
h. To respect Timor-Leste’s political institutions and laws?
i. To feel East Timorese?

as in Leach 2012: 235-237
The National Identity Survey

2002

% of respondents; N = 320

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<td>Speak Portuguese</td>
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<td>31</td>
<td>26.5</td>
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<td>81</td>
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(as in Leach 2012: 235-236)
% of respondents; N = 250

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<td>28</td>
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<td>Be Catholic</td>
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Leach 2012: 237

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</table>

Leach 2012: 237
Construction and reconstruction processes go on.

The end. For now.
Bibliography (1)


• Barth, Fredrik (1969) *Ethnic groups and boundaries. The social organization of culture difference.* Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.


Bibliography (2)


- Schouten, Maria Johanna (2001a), Antropologia e colonialismo em Timor português Lusotopie, numéro spécial, pp. 157-171.


