

5

The Politics of *Lulik*

My visa for another land-border crossing into Timor-Leste was to expire two days after the honey harvest. It was time to go. But we had not anticipated the challenge of securing a rental car to take us across the border and on into Dili. The Indonesian rental company were highly reticent. The Timorese national election was scheduled to be held in three days time. On the day we were to travel, the ruling FRETILIN party would be holding their final mass rally at a lake on the edge of Dili that was on our route into the capital. Meanwhile, people in Atambua had been speculating about the likelihood of election-related violence. The rental company was spooked. As well as being worried about their car, they couldn't find a driver willing to take us to Dili. Just as we were about to give up, they secured the services of Paulus, a driver from Kefa who travelled into Timor-Leste regularly. As we piled our belongings into the brand-new vehicle, Paulus was ordered to maintain close phone contact with Atambua along the way.

We eventually left West Timor and began the drive of three hours or so along a relatively new road from the main border crossing to Dili. It was my first time travelling through this north-western part of the country. Even though the wet season had recently ended, the relatively sparse vegetation already felt dry and crackly and the lowland hills were parched. Apart from the many sago palms and the variety of wandering livestock, we might have been in the north Australian savannah. For lunch, we decided to make a detour from the coastal road into the mountains up to Balibo, the town infamous for the murders of five Australian journalists by invading Indonesian forces in 1975. This detour, we figured, would also buy us some time in our attempt to avoid the roadblocks and the political rally in Dili.



Photo 21: Flag house with painted Australian flag in Balibo.

We stopped first at the famous flag house in Balibo where the young journalists had filmed each other painting an Australian flag on the front wall. A vain hope, as it turned out, that their foreignness might protect the group from the impending invasion. Because of the resolute fight by their families and supporters to bring the Australian and Indonesian governments to account for their deaths, Balibo is a name many Australians recognise. It is often one of the only things they know about Timor-Leste. In a personal twist, we had only recently found out that a cousin of one of the Balibo Five lives over the back fence from us in Melbourne. Even though I knew the history of the Balibo Five well, it was unexpectedly moving to visit the actual site of their deaths. Visiting the house where they were murdered was poignant but, for me, it was somehow even more shocking to discover the view from the refurbished ruins of the nearby Balibo Fort. Looking down the mountainside from the old stone walls of the fort, it was evident how close we were to the Indonesian land and sea border with Timor-Leste, the place where the Indonesian gunships had anchored and helped launch the 1975 land attack. Despite the intervening 40 years, our proximity to the site of this initial invasion made it more real and still terrifying. The deaths of these five journalists was not the only reminder of Australia's connection to the Indonesian invasion. A recent book by Kim McGrath has argued that Australia's pecuniary interest in the Timor Sea oil and gas reserves dates as far back as the 1960s. Australia's support for the ensuing Indonesian occupation can be read in this light.



Photo 22: View from Balibo Fort.

As I mused over this history looking out across the walls of the refurbished Balibo Fort, Quin had met some old friends who had stopped by the fort cafe for coffee. When I went over, they were deep in discussion about the impending election. They were political party organisers on the campaign trail and said they were not discounting the possibility of violence. Quin and I returned to the table where the kids were seated, quietly ate our lunch and we continued on.

As we neared the capital, it was apparent that some of the hillier sections of the new coastal road were already cracked and subsiding. ‘Clearly,’ our driver said, matter-of-factly, ‘they didn’t do the proper ceremonies to ask the spirits of these places for permission to build the roads. So, this is what they get. Crumbling roads.’ I wondered if the roads on the West Timor side of the border were so good because they had carried out the required ceremonies and secured the requisite ancestral permissions? But before I could ask, he launched into a tirade about the Timorese political election. ‘It’s just like a football game!’ he exclaimed. ‘The only question is, do you go for Barcelona or Real Madrid? Just like in football. East Timorese go mad for their chosen party. Actual policies don’t matter.’

It was near dusk as we approached the lake at Tasi Tolu, the site of the final FRETILIN party electoral campaign rally. Despite our best attempts to avoid such timing, we arrived just as the rally finished and campaigners were spilling out en masse onto the main road. Our path was logjammed. We feared it would take us hours to travel the last few kilometres into Dili. Madalena and Zeca, who had been asleep, woke up as the vehicle came to a near standstill. It was a rude awakening. All we could see outside the car was guns. The roadside was filled with military soldiers, military police and regular police. All were in full combat gear and all seemed to be clutching semiautomatic weapons. We told the kids to relax; this was normal election security in Timor-Leste (which was not exactly untrue). It wasn't the first time that day, though, that I had worried about the situation we were going into with our kids.

Our Indonesian driver was petrified. He decided that our best option was to stick close to an open police vehicle containing two rows of heavily armed military police. I was not sure this was the best approach, given that it would put us right in the firing line. But proximity to the armed forces seemed to calm our driver and we continued towards Dili. In the end, all was fine. The traffic started to move much more quickly than we had anticipated and, from there, it was not long until we arrived at our hotel, where, despite our invitation to take refreshments, the driver quickly bolted for the safety of his company's compound on the other side of the city.

In contrast to the Indonesians' trepidation (and much of the international commentary), the people we met in Dili, including Quin's family, reassured us that we needn't have worried. The pact between the security forces had held throughout the recent campaign. It was only if the security forces started turning on each other, as had happened back in 2006, that we would need to worry. Indeed, as we had driven through some of the coastal villages earlier in the day, the atmosphere had been almost festive. At each house lucky enough to have a television, crowds of people were gathered inside and out, intently craning to watch the final televised campaign spectacle. When we stopped for some freshly roasted fish in one village near the Loes River, we found the roadside eateries with televisions were also filled with crowds of locals. This village was obviously not a FRETILIN stronghold. Entire families had gathered around to watch, and all were vocal in their commentary, ridicule and criticisms of Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri's final campaign speech. Yet the criticism was matched by the certain intensity with which people were listening. As he

concluded his speech, Alkatiri's final words—'Keep the peace, respect democracy and respect the electoral process'—drew grudging respect and perhaps a collective sigh of relief from the television viewers. Despite the lively atmosphere and the ridicule, these were the calming words everyone had been waiting to hear.

Just one day earlier, many of the same villages would most likely have been deserted. The rival party had held their final campaign rally at Tasi Tolu and it too was televised and streamed on the internet. After we arrived in Dili the next night, Quin and I watched the recording of the coverage on hotel wi-fi. Viewing the footage of the rally, it was clear to us that the coalition known as the Reform Alliance Party (AMP) were at this stage campaigning on something of a *lulik* (ancestral power) ticket. The AMP alliance featured three heavy-hitting leaders: resistance hero, former president and prime minister Xanana Gusmao; former president and FALINTIL commander Taur Matan Ruak; and rural youth and mystic martial arts leader from the central mountains, Naimori. Through their speeches it became apparent that the three had aligned themselves (and their political campaign) with the three sacred mountains of Timor-Leste. In this consubstantiation, Xanana's power was linked to the country's tallest mountain Rame Lau, Taur with Matebian, the 'mountain of the dead' in the east, and Naimori with the third tallest mountain, Cabalaki, which was the early twentieth-century stronghold of Dom Boa Ventura, Timor's first 'nationalist' hero.

Taur spoke first. In an impassioned speech, he told the frenzied crowd that the problem in the previous elections a year earlier was that the parties who comprised the new AMP alliance had campaigned on separate tickets. None of the parties now comprising AMP had won, because their separateness and disunity had displeased the ancestors. Now he affirmed that the parties had come together, assuring the elated crowd that with ancestral backing the AMP would surely form government.

Next Naimori spoke. His words were *falun* (poetically wrapped) in the style of the richly coded botanical metaphors contained in the ritual poems of Timor's traditional orators and origin houses. In these cultural metaphors, every pathway can be traced back to a powerful source and for a path to be successful the source must be acknowledged and embraced. Naimori spoke of trunks and branches and new sprouting tips, of the roots of life (the ancestors) and possibilities of flourishing life for those

people who voted for AMP. His speech invoked AMP's connections to the ancestral powers of the natural world, a world that he, too, claimed would undoubtedly support the AMP to victory.

During the rally, Xanana Gusmao was singled out by both Taur and Naimori for the greatest praise. They both referred to him as Timor's greatest-ever leader. Xanana himself did not make a speech at the rally. Instead, he chose to take on a role akin to that of court jester, humouring and exciting the crowd with his larger-than-life body language and antics. All the while, Xanana said very little. He didn't need to speak; his mystique and power preceded him.

Some commentators said that the enigma of Xanana had clearly been reborn in this election campaign. His CNRT party had lost power unexpectedly in the previous year's elections on what might be considered a modernising ticket of progress and mega-projects. The president had given the FRETILIN party (who had won the most seats) the opportunity to form minority government. Devastated by the shock loss, Xanana had left the country for many months. He justified this absence as necessary for him to focus on renegotiating the Timor Sea Maritime Boundary Treaty that would finally resolve the decades-old oil and gas dispute with Australia. At a distance, Xanana began to regroup politically. Back in Dili, the new minority FRETILIN government was faltering. They could not pass their budget and the funds needed to deliver even basic services were running out during a political stalemate over the budget negotiations. It was then that Xanana pounced. He summoned his former political rivals, Taur Matan Ruak and Naimori, to meet with him in Singapore. From there, the three leaders held a joint press conference, announcing the birth of a new coalition that would hold FRETILIN to account. For a while, Xanana was nicknamed the 'tele-commander'. It seemed that the writing was on the wall for the Alkatiri government. An election was called in 2018, around the same time that, against the odds, a new maritime boundary with the Australian government was announced. Xanana returned to Dili, victorious and ready to campaign again to take power.

* * *

When things go wrong in the lives of Timorese people, they generally return to their roots. Problems are addressed by opening up channels of communication with their ancestral *lulik*, a realm ordinarily forbidden and taboo. In difficult times, people concentrate on summoning their

resources to carry out the necessary rituals and to implore their ancestors and potent nature spirits to redress their suffering. Was this what Xanana was doing when he regrouped with the AMP alliance? A reframing of his modernist vision through a *lulik* alliance signalled a return to his cultural roots that assisted in regaining his waning charisma. This power comes not only from inside Timor-Leste, but also from outside: people speak of Xanana's predilection for visiting *lulik* sites and finding audiences with mystic leaders across the Asian region. While these encounters are understood to run much deeper than political opportunism, they are also common populist strategies in Indonesian political campaigns.

The *lulik* alliance worked the crowd into a frenzy at that final campaign rally. I was told emotions had also run high at earlier rallies in places like Oecusse. People spoke about this election as being akin to the popular referendum in 1999. They likened it to a second national referendum on the future of the country. Despite the high stakes, it was never clear to me, and many others, how different the FRETILIN and AMP policies actually were. What was most obvious was the leadership styles of the two rivals and their difference in abilities to reach out to people and draw them in. In this regard, Xanana was peerless. Mari Alkatiri was widely known and respected, by supporters and political opponents alike, as an astute manager. However, even his supporters recognised his lack of charisma and inability to connect with the people. In Oecusse, his technocratic governance style ultimately proved both unpopular and detrimental to the FRETILIN agenda. I was told of a woman who pleaded to Xanana through her tears at the AMP rally in Oecusse: 'Why did you give us to Mari?' Ironically, this woman and the others wailing and hugging him at the rally knew only too well that the ZEESM project they were bemoaning was of Xanana's creation and the speculation was that it was proffered as a kind of peacemaking gift to Mari after FRETILIN lost power in the post-2006 political crisis. Yet banishing Mari Alkatiri to Oecusse had backfired. He had used ZEESM as a platform to return to the national stage and, on the back of his own modernist agenda, he had staged a political recovery. The promise of modernism could, however, only take each of these leaders so far. Now, in Oecusse at least, the people wanted Xanana back.

Many Timorese who hailed from the east of the country had a more cynical view of the self-styled *lulik* alliance promulgated by the AMP. The east of the country remains a FRETILIN stronghold. This was the heartland of the armed Timorese resistance during the occupation,

and people continually refer to the fact that their ancestors died for the revolutionary FRETILIN flag and no other. Our conversations with easterners in the days prior to the election revealed a deep ambivalence about the AMP's politics of *lulik*. One veteran of the resistance told me that *lulik* was undoubtedly the reality of life in Timor-Leste. FALINTIL fighters always knew that they must both honour and harness the power of *lulik* to secure victory. Those in the east had laid their lives on the line for both their ancestral lands and for the FRETILIN flag and they had won the war only because their ancestors were backing them every step of the way. This man said that people from the west of the country (the locus of AMP's largest support base)—people who 'did not actually fight for independence'—were only now coming to understand this reality.

Others from the east whispered that it was not a positive *lulik* behind Xanana's latest push for power. This time, they believed, his power had its source in something much more sinister. Rumour was rife that a malign supernatural force (*biru*) had taken over his body and this powerful force was feeding Xanana's return to power. As with any such form of spiritual exchange, it was understood that he must feed it in return.

According to some, the source of this *biru* was spirits from outside of Timor-Leste—malevolent spirits, sometimes specified to be female, that had captured Xanana's soul and made him a prisoner to their demands. Ideas about such malevolent forces pervade Timorese political life and their need for sacrifices is evinced, in such accounts, by recent Timorese political history. Former president José Ramos Horta was nearly offered up when he averted death from a rebel attack following the 2006 political crisis. Horta's would-be assassin, renegade military commander Major Alfredo Renaldo, was instead shot dead during the attack (some attributed his death to a bewitching by a glamorous girlfriend). Another renegade ex-resistance leader, Mauk Moruk, openly challenged Xanana's authority and was killed in 2015 by a military operation. Even the untimely heart attack and death of Fernando La Sama, former student resistance leader and leading national political figure in Xanana's government, could be read as a sacrifice to insatiable *biru* appetites pervading the political scene. Given these supernatural forces at work, it was understood that Xanana's power would only grow stronger. His longevity already attested to this. Even his fiercest critics believed there was nothing he could not do. According to these FRETILIN supporters, Mari now needed to exercise extreme caution; his managerial brilliance was simply not equal to the

biru enveloping Xanana. These claims were not so much personal as a pragmatic recognition of the darker power of *lulik* and the supernatural. If you honour it and pay your respects, it will support you. If you go against it, look out.

Xanana's resistance history has been well documented in a biography by Sara Niner, but lesser known fragments of this story and its post-independence pathways continue to be evoked or reworked in conversations across the country. While in West Timor, I had watched an online video in which Xanana explained to a new generation of viewers his connections to the ancestral world. The story revolved around the origins of his bestowed first name, Kay Rala. (Xanana is his nom de guerre.) In the video, he is filmed in conversation with a young female reporter explaining an incident in the early days of the resistance. On patrol outside of the town of Manatuto area, he and his ragtag band of fighters had stumbled on a small swidden garden where there lived a very old man. At the time, Xanana and his men had only 12 guns and 16 spears between them. The old man came out of his house to speak with them and immediately recognised Xanana. It turned out that during the Japanese occupation, this old man had hidden Xanana's town-dwelling parents and provided them safe haven in his home. As a result, the old man, who was also a mystic, knew the details of Xanana's family lineage and history.

At one point during their encounter, the old man had asked Xanana if he really wanted to win the war. 'Yes, of course,' replied Xanana. 'Well,' said the old man, 'if so, you must change your name. Jose Alessandro is a Portuguese name, a Catholic name—if you carry that with you, you will only die early.' He proceeded to tell Xanana that he could keep his family name of Gusmao, but that he must chose a different first name. He gave him a choice of two indigenous names from the family's ancestral lineage: Kay Rala or Kay Olok. Only these names had the capacity to *fanu bei-ala sira* (to wake up the ancestors) and give Xanana the strength, endurance and power he needed to win the war. It was from that moment that Kay Rala Xanana Gusmao came into being.

Wherever you travel in Timor-Leste, conversational anecdotes will link Xanana with the *lulik* or ancestral powers of particular places. The greatest claim a healer can make to the efficacy of their practice is that they once healed Xanana, or one of his family members or associates. In the far east, I was once told a story offering another explanation as to the

source of Xanana's formidable power during the resistance. In despair at the deaths and suffering of so many of those around him, Xanana had decided to travel across to the far eastern island of Jaco, in the company of a local mystic. One night, as evening fell and the tide receded from the island shores, Xanana walked with the tide back towards the mainland. He walked as close as he could to the deep-sea channel that lay between Jaco and the mainland. In the language of Fataluku, Jaco is known as Tortina, meaning 'to be cut off', a reference to the act of a maritime-based ancestral being who severed the island from the mainland. This division created a channel, a place where it is said that the island's south male and north female seas most potently mix. It was there, by the channel of one of Timor's most auspicious sites, that Xanana began to incant a ritual prayer to the ancestors, whereupon an ancestral grandparent crocodile rose out of the deep water, opened its mouth and gifted something (perhaps a crocodile tooth?) to Xanana. Whatever its material form, the immense power of this object turned around the prospects of the resistance movement. Xanana, I was told, carries this object with him to this day.



Photo 23: The channel between Jaco (Tortina) and mainland Timor-Leste.

Yet my Fataluku friend who related this story and many other East Timorese insist that Xanana lost the respect that ought to accrue to someone with so much power. He had done too many deals, let down too many people and brought into his inner circle too many former pro-autonomy people—people he now controlled, but who weakened his power. The pro-independence leaders left on the outer were people he could not so easily control. An AMP campaign rally in the capital of the far eastern district of Lautem was poorly attended. Some youth even protested Xanana's presence, a response that two decades earlier would have been unthinkable.

According to those who give credence to ideas about malevolent spirits linked to Xanana's resurgence in power, the church has also knowingly distanced itself from Xanana. Yet warfare between the supernatural forces of the 'dark world' is not something that the church—a product of the light—can openly countenance. Similarly, the theory goes that the FRETILIN leadership cannot talk publicly about *biru* and the supernatural. They, too, are people of the light—modernists—and their talk is about the need to find out facts. During the campaign and immediately after the 2018 election, the FRETILIN leadership was preoccupied with revealing the truth behind Xanana's reported electoral manipulations on the campaign trail. But everyday Timorese critics of Xanana know that the FRETILIN leadership won't be able to find this data; the evidence simply cannot be produced. Xanana's power to mobilise support from the supernatural world draws on the services of beings so tiny they are not even visible to the human eye. They, these critics believe, are the ones who get inside things like voting booths and business contracts and manipulate outcomes. They have the ability to change things like election results, monetary sums and the names of payees. They leave no evidence because they are invisible. And it is because of this invisible support that Xanana will always win. The suggestion is that Xanana has, in effect, succumbed to their will. According to this scenario, the FRETILIN leadership are merely unsuspecting do-gooders in a battle between good and evil.

Later, when Xanana and his AMP alliance triumphed over FRETILIN, those who believed in such malevolent spirit theories also expressed their concern for Mari. Despite being part of his vanguard of support, they say that he would be better off accepting the result. 'Other leaders—like Mari—can't do anything. Mari can't win. It has now been proven beyond doubt. He is simply not powerful enough.'

I discern some deep politics in these accusations, framed as they are by particular worldviews. Yet these views are also slippery and complicated, arising from no single source or agenda. They are indicative of the deep spiritual politics bound up in expressions of *lulik*. The politics revolve around claims to national political legitimacy and an even deeper politics, centuries old, that can be traced back to the power struggles between Catholicism and indigenous religions. In the symbolic and material battles between the so-called forces of darkness and the forces of light, darkness represents indigeneity and the fickleness of the ancestral world, while the light is modernity and the salvation offered by Christ—and, increasingly, economic mega-projects like those in Oecusse.

Xanana's political rhetoric of oil and gas riches and mega-project development in the country holds out the promise of the light. So, too, does FRETILIN's technocratic agenda. Yet, Xanana's hold over the East Timorese people is of a different order. His is a power deeply enmeshed in Timorese ways of understanding the world and in their everyday ancestral practices. People in Timor believe in the powers of *lulik* and of their ancestors, as they believe in the agency of malevolent spirits (some of whom might be angered ancestors) to control others and to wreak havoc. The power of *lulik* is extremely potent and always influential, invoking fear, awe and at least begrudging respect. The spirit world has power to do good as well as ill, and it can turn on people and make them captive to its whims. Xanana—not the man but rather the public figurehead—represents these processes and more to different people, in different ways, at different times. He, more than any other person, embodies both quintessential Timorese power figures and the paradoxes of darkness and light, tradition and modernity.

This text is taken from *Island Encounters: Timor-Leste from the outside in*,
by Lisa Palmer, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National
University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/IE.2021.05