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## “Señora, diak!”: Co-Constructed Identity of a Foreigner in Timor-Leste

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### Abstract

This article takes place in not one taxi, but all the taxis I have caught in Timor-Leste, encapsulating first encounter conversations I have had across the country, where my “otherness” as a Señora, an Australian who towers over the local population is contrasted to my knowledge of the country. I take a reflexive approach to explore how my identity as a work colleague and researcher has been constructed by many factors. Such encounters as I typify here challenge me to consider who I am and what is expected of me as a sensitive and ethical adviser and researcher.

### Keywords

Intercultural Research, Reflexivity, Timor-Leste

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## “Señora, diak!”: Co-Constructed Identity of a Foreigner in Timor-Leste

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### *Catching a taxi*

*I am waiting to hail a taxi on a dusty road in Dili, the capital city of Timor-Leste. In the dry season, the heat beats down and I invariably have forgotten to bring a hat so don't relish the idea of navigating the treacherous footpaths, amid the exhaust of cars and buses, dust choking my nose and throat. In the wet season and its slow build up, the air sits like a warm, wet blanket, making walking heavy and exhausting, even the promise of air-conditioning at the destination a poor incentive. Catching the attention of a cruising taxi, helpfully painted New York-yellow a number of years ago as the means of regulating who could pick up paying customers, is not a terribly difficult task for a foreign lady of past-marriageable age, clearly a Señora<sup>1</sup>. I am highly visible and likely to pay more than a local passenger. A flash of lights, a honk, a lifted index finger that eloquently conveys “Do you want a taxi? I'm available and ready to take you” and I am soon wrestling with a door of varied functioning and sliding into the interior of stale cigarette smoke, myriad dangling plastic ornaments, Catholic icons and football paraphernalia, all to the blasting sounds of Indonesian hip hop. I give my destination and am on my way, slowly and with worrying sounds from within the car's infrastructure, but en route nevertheless. And it is then that the adventure begins, for me and the driver, as he begins to discern my real identity and how he should deal with me.*

### *Reflecting on identity*

I have been working and researching in Timor-Leste since 2001, a considerable period in a nation whose independence was only (re)established<sup>2</sup> in 2002. In this article I want to take a reflexive approach to explore how my own identity as an Australian worker and researcher is co-constructed in Timor-Leste, through my interactions with local colleagues and strangers. Co-construction is an approach to intercultural work taken by Evanoff (2004) to suggest a

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<sup>1</sup> The orthography used for Tetum words in this paper is set down in the law 1/2004 (2004) and as such, Portuguese loan words will look different to the original spelling. The spelling *Tetum* is used here within the English prose: in Tetum itself, the language is spelt *Tetun*.

<sup>2</sup> Independence from Portugal was declared on 28 November, 1975, before the Indonesian invasion of 7 December, 1975.

dialogic enterprise, where “universal” or “essentialist” understandings of cultures might be re-interpreted as an interplay between interlocutors. In the same way Cuncliffe (2003, p. 992) suggests that meaning is “constructed between research participants,” not taken for granted. However, reflexivity should not be merely “a privileged and self-indulgent focus on the self” (Kobayashi, 2003, p. 348). Alvesson, Hardy and Harley (2008) define reflexivity as:

thinking through what one is doing to encourage insights about the nature of social science and, especially, the role that language, power/knowledge connections, social interests and ideologies, rhetorical moves and manoeuvring in the socio-political field play in producing particular accounts. (p. 497)

My aim is to look at how understanding myself and how I am viewed in Timor-Leste provides the means to work and research more authentically and how this might provide both challenges and opportunities to work constructively with colleagues and research both ethically and sensitively. To explore these issues, I will present some of the identities I am reminded of regularly through everyday conversations typified by that of the taxi encounter, that challenge me to consider who I am and what is expected of me as an advisor and researcher.

### *Background to the setting*

I arrived in Timor-Leste with minimal knowledge of its history, recent or ancient, to simply do a job I had been offered: deliver an English language program to teachers for three months in the area around Baucau, the country’s second largest town. For various personal reasons, the events of 1999 when the then-province of Indonesia was given the chance to vote for independence, the ensuing violence wrought by the departing Indonesian troops when they chose independence – and in overwhelming numbers – and the subsequent arrival by United Nations-backed police and army, had all but passed me by. I knew that things had been bad, but I was not prepared for the utter destruction and dislocation of this tiny country: over 95% of school buildings were destroyed along with health posts (World Bank, 1999) and other public buildings and infrastructure (East Timor Planning Commission [ETPC], 2002).

Into such settings, foreigners flock and for various reasons. Initially, the role of running the state was in the hands of the United Nations, over time transitioning into independent government in 2002. As the Timorese have sought to build an independent state, both the United Nations and other advisors were needed, acknowledged by the government in the first national development plan as required for the first “twelve to eighteen months” (ETPC, 2002, p. 28). Support still remains, with technical assistance provided by donor countries – for example, Portugal, Australia, United States, New Zealand – and International Non-government Organisations – for example, Oxfam, Red Cross, Catholic Relief Services, Plan International, Care – maintaining a strong presence across most sectors. Such a situation sees foreigners working with Timorese, ranging from long term contracts (two years or more) and those making a quick trip of a few days. Other workers are volunteers on extended placements and others making short-term visits to the country. Added to this are those working in religious organisations, often for many years on end, and a smaller number of private businesses. And, of course, wherever there exists such a diverse set of interests and a new country emerging, there are foreigner researchers from universities across the world, observing, asking questions, an additional presence within the country.

It is difficult to ascertain how many foreigners live permanently or at any one time in Timor-Leste, but there is much movement in and out of the country. The government provides figures for those entering and leaving the country: in 2017, it recorded over 66200 foreigners arriving at Dili airport, the major entry point to the country, with the greatest number (18500)

from Indonesia, followed by Australians (12200) and Chinese and Portuguese (7500 each) (República Democrática de Timor-Leste General Directorate of Statistics [GDS], 2017). A better indication might be the census results (GDS, 2015) showing mother tongue use: there are 32 local languages identified for a population of just over 1 200 000 with only about 13000 who have a foreign mother tongue. Of these, over 7000 are English speakers, nearly 3000 are Indonesian speakers and over a thousand, Portuguese speakers. These foreign language speakers are generally located in the capital, Dili and traveling outside the city confines, into the *foho* (“the countryside,” but generally anywhere outside Dili), Timorese languages or Indonesian is needed. Thus, in seeking to make sense of who these foreigners might be and how to deal with them, even what language to use, Timorese display a variety of ways to decide how to “place” the foreigner, the *malae*, and what might be expected.

### *Husi ne'ebé?*

*As I settle into the taxi back seat, not even bothering with the fruitless search for a seatbelt, once again rationalising, “At this speed, an accident will be minor,” I see the taxi driver regarding me in the rear vision mirror. I see him take in my dark hair and eyes, my complexion and dress and I wait as he considers me. Having engaged in the pleasantries (Diak ka lae, Señor?/ “How are you, sir?”) and given my location request in Tetum, my origins are unclear to him. I have worked on my accent when speaking Tetum to clear it of any remnants of a distinctive Australian twang and use a Portugal version of Portuguese that gives me a slight sh sound on the s: this provides a dilemma for my taxi driver as he grapples with whether I am an Australian or a Portuguese and how he should then react. We play the location game:*

*Driver: Señora, husi ne'ebé? / “Where are you from?”*

*Me: Ha'u husi Dili / “I'm from Dili”*

*Driver: Ehhh...maibe rai seluk, ita-nia rai? / “But another country, your country?”*

*Me: Señor hanoïn, rai ne'ebé? / “Which country do you think?”*

*Driver: [long pause] América?*

In Timor-Leste, knowing if someone is from Australia or Portugal becomes shorthand for a set of presumptions, built on a history of colonisation, neglect, intervention and deceit, perpetrated at various times and in various quantities. These build the background before personal connections are developed. In Timor-Leste, choosing “America” removes the chance of offence!

I am from Australia, just over an hour's flight from Dili, and the home to nearly 10000 Timorese-born immigrants (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019) and others who work and study across the country, with the majority in the southern state of Victoria. Australian cities and towns have built strong relationships with Timorese communities through Friendship City programs, often the impetus for schools and community groups to travel and collaborate in local projects. Australia is also the largest of Timor-Leste's country donors, allocating through Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) AU\$100.7 million for this current financial year in development aid<sup>3</sup>. Assistance in Timor-Leste from 1999 – 2019 is summarised in an infographic under the title “Parseria, Paz, Progresu (*Partnership, Peace, Progress*)” (DFAT, 2019), including over 5500 defence personnel and 1500 police serving in the country, over 380 schools receiving teacher training since 2016, over 50000 mothers connected to ante-and post-natal services since 2014 and many community projects,

<sup>3</sup> See DFAT <https://dfat.gov.au/geo/timor-leste/development-assistance/Pages/development-assistance-in-timor-leste.aspx>

scholarships, small business partnerships and other support that would make Australians the good neighbours one might expect of a larger, richer nation. Many programs have endured since independence due to the strong personal connections that Australians have made with Timorese over the years, what DFAT call “strong people-to-people links”.

However, I also recognise that Australia has not been a good neighbour, that my country is characterised as “uma Austrália que não ama [*an unloving Australia*]” (Soares, 2010, p. 8). In 1975, in a pact with the Indonesia government, Australia looked the other way when the Indonesian troops massed and advanced on Timor-Leste in December that year. This was despite the support that Australia’s own troops had received during the Second World War, when solo special operatives were adopted by local *criados*, young men who sheltered and led the officers through jungles and across mountains to avoid Japanese capture. Instead, the Australian government’s response in 1975 was to allow Timor-Leste’s assimilation into the Indonesian nation in exchange for favourable and profitable marine boundaries in the Timor Sea. Such a windfall has allowed Australia to reap the rewards of rich oil and gas fields (see Cleary, 2007; Dixon, 2017; Collaery, 2020).

Thus, Australia’s aid has not always been seen as altruistic, but rather “a way to strengthen Australia’s position in Timor Sea oil negotiations” (Neves, 2006). The oil and gas negotiations since independence have been “remarkable for its heavy-handedness and arrogance” (Dixon, 2017, p. 8). The low point has been the revelation that Australia installed cameras inside the Timorese government cabinet rooms to provide an unfair advantage in oil and gas talks, subsequently being directed in 2014 by the International Court of Justice to stop spying on its neighbour (Allard, 2014), our own Watergate moment. Such actions are supported by images and messages of Australia manifested in public spaces around the country: a wall in Dili, 2014: the Australian coat of arms re-styled to show the kangaroo and emu drinking from a bucket labelled “Timor Oil”; graffiti on a way in Maubisse, 2007: “Australia, where is your position? This is my country.”

In my own work, I am mindful that the next person that I meet will already have an identity for me ready-made, depending on their experience of Australians. Aspects of my character may already be conflated with being Australian. Their experience of other Australians may be favourable, based on friendship and collaboration. Conversely their experience may be more negative or based on the images of bullying and attempts to dominate.

In response, I am constantly checking my own behaviour to minimise the opportunities that play into an image of “heavy-handedness,” taking care not to dominate conversations or decision-making, to consult and collaborate, beyond what might be clearly good practice, but so that I do not reinforce any image of what Australia has built in terms of working with its neighbours. *Where I am from* must not decide *who I will be*.

*Señora, ain a’as liu!*

*Fitting into the back of a taxi is not an easy task. The front seats are often pushed back as far as they go, restricting space in the back and the profusion of hanging ornaments and paraphernalia mean I hit my head as I duck and weave around items that would not bother the average Timorese passenger. The taxi driver, cigarette dangling out the window, has turned the music down (thankfully) so that he can ask some more questions: am I married; do I have children; how old am I. He is confused by the answers: no husband, no children. To explain the final answer, I explain Ha’u ferik (“I’m an old woman”). He feels a polite need to reassure me:*

*Driver: Maibe Señora, bonita lo’os/ “But madam, you are quite beautiful”*

*Me:* *Obrigada, Señor, maibe, la bonita, ain a'as de'it!* // “Thank you, sir, but not beautiful, just tall!”

*Driver:* *Sin, ain a'as liu!* // “Yes, very tall”

Many aspects of my physicality impact on how I am encountered and perceived, both from the colour of my skin to the sheer space I inhabit in Timor-Leste. I am a white, middle-aged Australian of Anglo-Celtic origins, thankfully with the colouring of my black-haired, dark-eyed mother rather than my blonde, blue-eyed father, whose skin would scream in pain in the tropic sun. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012), I am slightly taller, but not as heavy as the average Australian woman: she is 1.61centimetres and 71kilograms while I am 170 centimetres and 67 kilograms. Thus, I am hardly remarkable in Australia. It is in Timor-Leste that I stand out from the crowd, or rather, above the crowd.

Whiteness as a marker of the “outsider” is theorised in many places, often suggesting class and privilege, at odds with that identified by the researcher themselves. Clare (2017, p. 379) noted in his own reflections of identity in research, “my social class was assumed to be higher than I self-define,” yet the same misconception gave access to areas of power he had not counted on. Routledge (2002) noted in his work that his whiteness could be employed to transcend class boundaries, capitalised on by local actors who sent in the white researcher to places they themselves could not go. In the same way, my Timorese colleagues recognised that the *malae* could transcend layers of protocol and position, and trojan horse-like they would send me with requests to power – “But, *mana* (“sister”), you could ask the Minister” – in situations and for things that they could not.

More than just my colour, my body is regarded and commented upon, by colleagues and research participants. I am no longer as slim as when I first started coming to Timor-Leste, a fact that had made colleagues worry as I was *krekas*, skinny in a bad way. There was pure admiration when I would return from a few weeks of riotous eating in Australia, sporting a little extra flesh. *Bokur!* (“fat!”) they would shriek in glee, pinching my arms, delighted that I was exhibiting a marker of good living. This always sat uncomfortably with me in a country where malnutrition is the curse of children and mothers, resulting in high rates of underweight births and 46% moderate and severe stunting in under-5 year old children across the nation (General Directorate of Statistics [GDS] & ICF, 2016). How strange it seemed to me that what might be seen as gluttony and a slippery slide to obesity might be rewarded by my colleagues as opportunity well-taken.

In human research, the ethical investigator is rightly concerned with the bodies of those being researched, minimising any harm, as Turner & Norwood (2013, p. 697) muse, “When we do attend to the body, we often focus on only the embodiment of the other, our research participant, and disregard our own.” Awareness of bodies in research can be more recently found in feminist and queer contexts (e.g., Jogensen, 2011, Laurie, Dwyer, Holloway, & Smith, 1999; MisGav & Johnston, 2014) and those from health and therapeutic contexts (e.g., Ellingson, 2006; Turner & Norwood, 2013; Wainwright, Marandet, & Rizvi, 2018) as they seek a space to account for how meaning is constructed not from a disembodied voice of the researcher, but reflected on and through the body of the observer. “Instead of the body being positioned as a bar to knowledge, knowledge is produced through the body and embodied ways of being in the world” (Price & Shildrick, 1999, p. 19). This makes me reflect how my own body can be re-positioned to enhance my work.

Thus, I try to be conscious of how my body dominates the space when I am with Timorese where I fear that I am both impressive – those false assertions of beauty! – as well as daunting. I cannot reduce my 170 centimetres and have neither the will nor desire to starve back to my former size. Instead, I find myself seeking ways to diminish my physical presence, such as sitting as soon as is polite so that I am (almost) at eye level and stepping back when

talking with colleagues so they are not looking up at me, but across the space. I am alert to the furniture and objects around me, becoming more-than-usually nimble lest I resemble a cartoon-like character bumbling around, unable to control my mass. When collecting data in Timorese classrooms in 2005 for my PhD research, I became adept at squeezing into school desks and folding into a small form at the back of the room, so that my very being in the room, while exotic and strange, would not dominate the lesson. In both the work and the research spheres, I try to make my largeness not a barrier to communication, acknowledging I am not Timorese size, but pose little threat to those who are. I have also learnt to laugh at the surprise when I stand up to full height and to grow a thick skin over my white skin when it is pointed out and commented upon. I acknowledge that they are talking about me before they talk with me.

*Ba ona?*

*Once we have established that I have a modicum of intelligible Tetum, I take the lead by initiating a conversation thread with the driver. I have discovered more recently that many taxi drivers are from Oecusse, the small exclave of Timor-Leste inside Indonesia, an overnight boat ride away from Dili and the poorest of the country's districts ("municipalities").*

*Me: Señor, husi ne'ebé? / "Sir, where are you from?"*

*Driver: Ha'u husi Oecusse / "I'm from Oecusse"*

*Me: Ahh, Oecusse. Ha'u ba ona. Iha Oecusse, husi ne'ebé? / "Ah, I've been to Oecusse. Where in Oecusse?"*

*Driver: Señora ba Oecusse! Ha'u husi Pune / "You've been to Oecusse! I'm from Pune.*

*Me: Pune? Ha'u ba ona. Ne'e do'ok! / "Pune? I've been there. It's a long way!"*

*Driver: [with immense surprise] Señora ba Pune! Ehhhhhh, diak! / "You've been there! Ehhhhh, good!"*

Pune is indeed far. You can really only go there in the dry season where you drive along the rocky riverbed for a number of hours (distance being hard to judge at such a slow pace). When one taxi driver looked at me askance recently, suspecting that I was lying to curry favour – or a cheaper fare? – I added to cement my authenticity, "The primary school has a really great garden, right?" My experience of Pune was over 10 years old, but I had remembered how carefully the school had tendered their garden, bright with flowers and neatly staked out to keep the ravenous goats from destroying their work. The children brought water each day to care for the plants. The driver was startled: "Yes, yes, a beautiful garden" and then shook his head that I would know such a fact, that I really had been to Pune.

Timor-Leste is a small country, only 15000 kilometres square, just 364 kilometres long and 149 kilometres wide (GDS, 2017). Yet the geography is rugged with steep mountains and few roads that are paved, let alone in good condition. Roads on the north coast such as the main road between Dili and Baucau, cling tentatively to the edge of mountains that fall steeply to the sea and those that travel down to the south coast through the interior can take many hours, particularly in the wet season when the rain washes away the substructure, leaving truck-size holes. Yet, traveling beyond Dili and beyond the main coastal roads provides some insight into how the majority of Timorese live and work since more than 70% of the population live in rural areas (GDS, 2016), many of which are remote and difficult to access.

My various contracts and research in Timor-Leste have taken me to each of the 13 municipalities, mostly by car on precarious roads over spectacular mountains. My most meaningful piece of advice ever given – in a career of advice-giving – was for all the passengers

in the USAid car I was travelling in to get out of the vehicle and to help direct the driver as he negotiated backwards down the mountain road – all rock and grit sliding under the wheels – and around blind corners, as a large yellow truck asserted its right of way coming the other direction on the single-vehicle track. My impetus was less assistance for the driver whose skill and patience had gotten us this far, as safety for me and the other passengers: no use everyone going over the edge of that mountain. We were deep in the interior of the country to visit adult literacy classes to understand the issues around teachers and students in such situations. The hours of driving took us only 50 kilometres from Dili, but not a 50 kilometre many foreigners travel.

Being able to name and talk about places where people are from builds rapport and some level of trust that people will not have to explain their lives in the same way they might to the newly-arrived advisor. I know that Bazetete is *malirin lo'os* (“very cold”) as are Venilale and Hatabilico. I know that Viqueque is *do'ok liu* (“a long way”), but have visited schools there. I know to ask, “How long does it take to get there?” or “Which way do you need to go to get there?” rather than the futility of “How far is it?” And though I speak no Timorese languages save Tetum, I know what languages can be expected in various places enough to ask “So, you are a Bunak speaker?” or “Is your first language Fataluko?”

Thus, time and travel in the country has afforded a sense of “insider” status to my work and research that disrupt Timorese assumptions that may be made of a *malae* who stays within the confines of Dili. My “position” is shifted as colleagues and participants find I am more or less conversant with Timor-Leste history and geography, similar to what has been found in other research contexts (Routledge, 2002; Valentine, 2002; Shah, 2004) and Timor-Leste (Thu, 2017) where researchers have noted the ways in which acceptance is negotiated with communities. Taking time to read accounts of Timorese history and to listen to the stories of colleagues, sometimes harrowing and many lives away from suburban Australia, has helped contextualise my own research and work, to start to understand the impetus for decisions, past and current.

### *Insights*

The issues brought up here are in no way exhaustive. I could have chosen to look at my further issues of my “otherness”: my gender, my access to education and opportunity, my lack of children, in a place where the response to “I have no children” is *Seidauk* (“Not yet”). All would further show the differences that I have highlighted. What I have explored are those issues I have found most spoken of and brought to my attention in my experiences of nearly 20 years.

In doing so, these chosen examples indicate that my identity as a tall Australian is not fixed, since I have some “insider” knowledge having lived and worked for many years and in many places. Being sensitive to the space I take up and how I may be perceived also helps me to re-write understanding so who I might be and what people can expect of me. Crang (2003) cautions that we need “new and sophisticated approaches that move us well beyond what have become almost formulaic discussions of fixed positionalities” (p. 501). I would hope that my own position in Timor-Leste is not fixed, but emerging and responding to the work and research being undertaken at any time.

In taking a reflexive approach, I hope to be questioning and re-thinking how I am perceived and how I perceive myself in Timor-Leste, the effects I have on those with whom I work. Cuncliffe (2003) suggests

reflexivity leads us to question the limitations we may unknowingly impose on ourselves and others, and in doing so, open up new ways of “theorizing” practice (p. 1000)

By being not-quite-easy-to-place, not-quite-what-we-expected, perhaps I am presenting new ways to understand who the foreigner might be.

Being *malae* in Timor-Leste provides both challenges and opportunities in engaging with Timorese. Their own experience of foreigners will be greatly varied, whether they have worked with foreigners, studied or worked abroad, encountered foreigners on mountain tops or seen the media accounts of how they move and act in or on the country. I am not able to control the way my country operates politically which reflects on me as its citizen, but I can manage the way I move and act within Timor-Leste and look for ways that might enhance the work and research I do.

I have learnt to act carefully and without presumptions, to understand that the history of Australian – and other nation – influence in Timor-Leste positions me and what I might stand for. Developing points of contact and admitting difference (“yes, I am *very* tall”) can lay the foundations for trust and respect that are at the basis of shared endeavour. What I have learnt in Timor-Leste enhances work in other sites and amid the diversity of university teaching.

### *Arrival*

*We have reached the destination and slide to a halt. Before I do battle with the door which will have some idiosyncrasy I will need to negotiate, I hand over the money I have ready, a clutch of coins for the fare. I reach into the front and the driver will take it without making eye contact: money exchanges in Timor-Leste, as in many places I have observed, are carried out as though no one is noticing, the money placed on a counter, removed and change given as though something more important is happening in another part of the room. In this case, the driver takes a quick look to see I have given enough: he and I both know that the formula for malae is roughly double that of a local fare and I usually throw in an extra 50 centavos for good conversation. Having established that I can conduct a conversation in Tetum – so maybe an argument – and that I have long experience of Timor-Leste and taxi drivers, he knows that he cannot try his luck with an ambit claim of \$10 or even \$5...I've been to Pune, for goodness sake: I know the score.*

*Me: OK, señor, obrigada. Loron diak/ “OK, sir, thank you. Have a good day”*

*Driver: Sin, señora, diak/ “Yes, madam, good.”*

*My driver is satisfied. The taxi glides into the stream of traffic.*

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