

From Fretilin to freedom: The evolution of the symbolism of Timor-Leste's national flag

Catherine Arthur

Since regaining its independence in 2002, nation-building has been the focus of much scholarly research on Timor-Leste. National identity construction is a crucial aspect of this process, yet the ways in which this identity is officially represented has been largely overlooked. This article takes the national flag of Timor-Leste as a case study to explore the ways in which a historic East Timorese national identity has been symbolically constructed and visually embodied. By considering the potency of flags in an East Timorese cultural context, and by analysing the origins of Timor-Leste's flag alongside that of the political party Fretilin (Frente Revolucionária do Timor-Leste Independente), it becomes clear that post-independence re-imaginings of its symbolism have rendered it a powerful national symbol in the contemporary nation-state.

The recent nature of Timor-Leste's internationally recognised nationhood has prompted much discussion of the construction and consolidation of an official, independent national identity, as part of the ongoing nation-building project. This issue has been particularly pertinent since self-determination in 2002, given the centuries of foreign occupation, first by Portugal (from the early sixteenth century to 1974) and then by Indonesia (from 1975 to 1999). As such, since 2002 national identity construction has been at the forefront of Timor-Leste's political agenda. The collective identity that has emerged in the post-independence state is one founded on the core concepts of *funu* (struggle) and *terus* (suffering) in the name of self-determination.¹ In 2002, the then Minister for Education, Armindo Maia, outlined this idea:

We have a common history of resistance; first against the Portuguese. There's a long list in [the] history of rebellions against the Portuguese. Then we have the history of

Catherine Arthur is a postdoctoral researcher and currently works at Queen's University Belfast. Correspondence in connection with this article may be addressed to: carthur02@qub.ac.uk. I would like to express special thanks to Rob Raeside at Flags of the World for permission to reproduce the images of all the flags in this article, to Dr Dominic Bryan, Dr Ciaran Arthur, and to the numerous East Timorese who collaborated with me during my field research.

1 Angie Bexley, 'The *Geração Foun*, *Talitakum* and Indonesia: Media and memory politics in Timor-Leste', *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 41, 1 (2007): 73, 86. See also Catherine Arthur, 'Painting their past: The *Geração Foun*, street art and representing notions of "East Timorese-ness"', *Sojourn* 31, 1 (2016): 177–9.

resistance against the Indonesians. This unifies us. And I hope it will cement our determination to fight for a better future, to fight for a better life and society. There is broad support for this simple version, or notion of *funu*.²

Thus, after only sixteen years of independence, this aspect of state and nation-building continues to be a central area of national politics, and hence, scholarship.

Flags and other symbols in Timor-Leste constitute a significant area of underdeveloped research, despite their centrality to the creation and representation of national identity.³ In Timor-Leste, flags are a particularly powerful cultural sign:

Although flags have a common and conventional place in democratic political processes almost everywhere, in East Timor they seem to take on a heightened significance The symbolic capital of flags also resonates with much older associations from colonial East Timor when the possession of a flag was a symbol of jural power and authority.⁴

As the processes of nation-building and national identity construction in Timor-Leste continue to be debated, the critical importance of flags as identity symbols is therefore worthy of further consideration. This article attempts to situate the national flag of Timor-Leste within a discussion of symbols and collective identity, as part of the ongoing nation-building project.

Informed by ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in Timor-Leste in 2012,⁵ my analysis centres on its national flag, created in 1975, and draws pertinent visual and symbolic parallels with the official flag of one of the largest political parties, Frente Revolucionária do Timor-Leste Independente (Fretilin). As two of the most widely recognisable symbols in Timor-Leste, with common origins in the struggle for independence, I explore the extent to which both flags can be seen to embody tenets of East Timorese nationalism and represent the national 'imagined community'.⁶ Benedict Anderson's notion of 'imagined communities' is particularly useful here, as it is applicable not only to the largest and smallest of 'nations', but also to communities whose nationhood is not internationally recognised, as was the case for East Timor until 1999.⁷ Crucially, this theory places great emphasis on the act of 'imagining', which is precisely the process through which identity symbols are attributed their meaning and become a common locus of identification for members

2 Cited in Michael Leach, 'History on the line: East Timor history after Independence', *History Workshop Journal* 61, 1 (2006): 225.

3 Duncan Bell, 'Mythscape: Memory, mythology, and national identity', *British Journal of Sociology* 54, 1 (2003): 63–81; Pål Kolstø, 'National symbols as signs of unity and division', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29, 4 (2006): 676–701.

4 Andrew McWilliam and Angie Bexley, 'Performing politics: The 2007 parliamentary elections in Timor-Leste', *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 9, 1 (2008): 71.

5 I conducted fieldwork in Timor-Leste from June to August 2012. A primary medium of data collection was through personal interviews with voluntary participants from a wide range of social backgrounds.

6 Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

7 Anderson also wrote an article focusing on the East Timorese case, published before independence. See Benedict Anderson, 'Imagining East Timor', *Lusotopie* (2001): 233–9. Prior to regaining independence in 2002, the occupied territory was known by the English 'East Timor', formerly known as Portuguese Timor. The official name Timor-Leste was reinstated after 2002.

of a collective, thus gaining their symbolic power. Ewan Morris affirms that ‘groups of people become nations by identifying with common symbols, and individuals become aware of their membership in the nation as they become conscious that they share their attachment to certain symbols with others’.⁸ By tracing the symbolic meanings attributed to the national flag of Timor-Leste (together with the Fretilin party flag), it is possible to demonstrate this process, to elucidate how the recent past has influenced and changed its symbolism, and to explain how the national flag retains its legitimacy in the post-independence state.

Of particular interest to this analysis are the aesthetic and symbolic similarities between the national and Fretilin flags, which stem from their common Fretilin authorship, and which arguably raise questions about the ability of the national flag to fully represent the imagined national collective. Indeed, a national symbol should represent the whole national community, irrespective of political leanings and partisan ties. As such, close scrutiny of the national flag alongside the Fretilin flag is required to better understand the continued use of the former in the post-independence state.

I argue here that while the national flag of Timor-Leste was deliberately constructed in 1975 for the newly independent República Democrática de Timor-Leste (RDTL, Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste) to represent notions of an emerging ‘nation’ and its specific history, the symbolic meaning of the flag for the national collective has changed since its creation. By nature, identities are continuously (re)imagined, (re)invented, and (re)constructed and so are the symbols that represent them; as flags are markers of identity, their symbolic meanings are therefore subject to change.⁹ The symbolic role of the East Timorese flag during the resistance to the Indonesian occupation has arguably removed partisan ties between the national flag and Fretilin, and the dominant symbolic association is now with the revered struggle for independence — a significant unifying force for nation-building and the foundation of national identity. The significance of both flags to the resistance movement altered their symbolic meanings, and it is precisely this transformation that consolidated their continued endorsement in the post-independence state.

It is necessary, however, to critically analyse the connections between the national flag, official East Timorese nationalism, and Fretilin. By understanding the history that the national flag shares with the party’s symbols, it is possible to elucidate the ways in which symbolic meanings have evolved and changed, and have diminished partisan ties to Fretilin. This analysis is important in a study of one of the world’s youngest democratic states, as the national flag of Timor-Leste must represent all of its citizens and not just Fretilin supporters.

Monopolising the nation-building project? Fretilin and its flags

In a post-independence state, a national flag that is strikingly similar to that of a political party may seem problematic within the recently established democratic system

8 Ewan Morris, *Our own devices: National symbols and political conflict in twentieth-century Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005), p. 1.

9 See Anthony P. Cohen, *Self-consciousness: An alternative anthropology of identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 55; Abner Cohen, *Two-dimensional man: An essay on the anthropology of power and symbolism in complex society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974).

of governance. Gabriella Elgenius argues that a national flag should hold meaning for the whole nation, as diverse as it may be.¹⁰ Therefore, any explicit association with a specific political party in a democratic state is problematic for two reasons. First, it undermines the democratic spirit by not fully representing the pluralist nature of the political system. Second, if the construction of the East Timorese national identity were tied to a single political party — Fretilin — then that party's role in nation-building could be perceived as overly dominant and subjective. Indeed, it could be asserted that in this case, Fretilin promoted an identity aligned with its own particular ideology.¹¹ The evident aesthetic similarities between the two flags thus raise questions about authority, ownership of symbolic capital, and monopolising the nation-building project.

While Fretilin has played a significant role in creating an East Timorese national consciousness,¹² it is not the only political party to have significant popular support in the post-independence era. In the first elections for the Constituent Assembly in 2001, Fretilin secured 57 per cent of the vote, a victory which demonstrated the party's popularity immediately prior to full national self-determination.¹³ However, in the 2007 national parliamentary elections, the party received 29 per cent of the vote; although this was the best result of any political party, it represented a significant decrease in their share of the vote.¹⁴ Furthermore, in the 2012 parliamentary elections, Fretilin received only 29.9 per cent of the vote, coming second to the Congresso Nacional de Reconstrução de Timor-Leste (CNRT), which won 36.6 per cent.¹⁵ In light of these electoral statistics, it is evident that Fretilin no longer enjoys the absolute majority of the national vote as it once did, and cannot legitimately be the sole leaders of the nation-building process.

There have been some who reject the national flag and assert that Fretilin has dominated the process of national identity construction, indicating a conflict of ownership and entitlement to symbolic power. Henri Myrtilinen notes that the national flag is viewed by some as

being too close to the Fretilin party flag (which has the same colours and a similar design) and therefore unacceptable Various groups have proposed alternatives to the current flag, including a proposal by the head of the RAG [ritual arts group] Colimau 2000 to incorporate the Christian cross in the flag to underline the importance of Catholicism to Timor-Leste society Others including CPD-RDTL, however, claim

10 Gabriella Elgenius, 'The origin of European national flags', in *Flag, nation and symbolism in Europe and America*, ed. Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Richard Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 26.

11 See Joanne Wallis, *Constitution making during state building* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 113–47.

12 See Helen M. Hill, *Stirrings of nationalism in East Timor: Fretilin 1974–1978: The origins, ideologies and strategies of a nationalist movement* (Oxford, NSW: Oxford, 2002): especially pp. 61–92.

13 Dwight King, 'East Timor's founding elections and the emerging party system', *Asian Survey* 43, 5 (2003): 747.

14 McWilliam and Bexley, 'Performing politics': 75.

15 Secretariado Técnico de Administração Eleitoral, *Resultado Provisorio Eleisaun Parlamentar 2012*; <http://www.stae.tl/elections/2012/rezultado/parlamentar> (last accessed 27 July 2012). Note that this political party is different to the Conselho Nacional de Resistência Timorense (CNRT) resistance movement of the 1980s, discussed later in the article. The acronym is arguably a deliberate attempt to draw on the symbolic capital of the resistance era, furthered by its leadership by Xanana Gusmão (the former commander-in-chief of the resistance).

the current flag as theirs, and feel that Fretilin, the party which was at the forefront of the independence struggle has unrightfully sought to monopolise it.¹⁶

While these non-state organisations are small and few in number, the fact that they criticise the national flag's apparent partisan connections suggests that it is perhaps not as effective a point of collective identification as it initially seems.¹⁷ Indeed, Fretilin's state-leadership in the years following self-determination placed the party in a prime position to dominate claims to symbolic capital; as Pierre Bourdieu argues, this is because 'the state [or leadership] is a referee, albeit a powerful one, in struggles over this monopoly' of symbolic capital.¹⁸

From the perspective of those who criticise the continued endorsement of the 1975 national flag, the symbolic capital of the resistance movement has been exploited and monopolised by Fretilin in the post-independence democratic state. Simon Harrison's concept of a 'proprietary contest' is particularly useful in understanding this subjective construction of the national past. A proprietary contest is defined as 'a dispute over these rights and, at its simplest, takes the form of a struggle for the monopoly or control of some important collective symbol or symbols'.¹⁹ This dispute is somewhat typical of building a national history and culture because the process is inevitably subjective, as David Lowenthal attests:

Conflict is thus endemic to heritage. Victors and victims proclaim disparate and divisive versions of common pasts. Claims of ownership, uniqueness, and priority engender strife over every facet of collective legacies. Clashes ensue when rivals press entitlements to being first, being distinctive, or being sublimely endowed.²⁰

Symbols depend on recognition by the collective in order for them to have potency and, in a similar way, ownership of symbolic capital is also legitimated by the population. The imaginings of the national community not only establish which symbols represent the collective, but affirm those actors who can legitimately utilise and own them. However, as this article argues, under the Indonesian occupation, Fretilin gained a degree of respect from the national community that has perhaps now attributed to the party such legitimacy as a result of its historic role in attaining self-determination. If the party's role in the liberation movement is traced, then Fretilin's position in the recent national past arguably counters the claims that 'the [national] flag doesn't represent the country — it represents politics'.²¹ Moreover,

16 Henri Myrtilinen, 'Resistance, symbolism and the language of stateness in Timor-Leste', *Oceania* 83, 3 (2013): 213. Interestingly, Myrtilinen highlights that the Conselho Popular Demokrátiku (CPD)-RDTL group does in fact see the 1975 national flag as legitimate, claiming it as their own and criticising Fretilin's monopolisation of this symbol. See also Wallis, *Constitution making*, p. 119.

17 This conflict over claims to symbolic capital is an example of Bourdieu's 'social relations'. He argues that "social problems" are social relations: they emerge from confrontation between two groups, two systems of antagonistic interests and theses'. Pierre Bourdieu, 'The production of belief: Contribution to an economy of symbolic goods', *Media, Culture and Society* 2, 3 (1980): 269.

18 Pierre Bourdieu, 'Social space and symbolic power', *Sociological Theory* 7, 1 (1989): 22.

19 Simon Harrison, 'Four types of symbolic conflict', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 1, 2 (1995): 258.

20 David Lowenthal, *The heritage crusade and the spoils of history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 234–5.

21 Josh Trindade, cited in 'Fumbled flag has Timorese worried', *The Lost Boy Blog*, 26 May 2009;

for the majority of the population who accord Fretilin a significant degree of respect, the party's authorship of the national flag does not diminish its distinct, representative symbolic power.

In tracing the evolution of an East Timorese national identity, it is important to analyse the origins of the flags that represent it, specifically because they predate the official narratives of the newly independent state. The national flag was created in 1975 and therefore precedes one of the defining periods of the national community's history. Indeed, the East Timorese identity is primarily delineated in narratives of its recent struggle for independence from Indonesia, which was only achieved in 2002. Further, the core concepts of *funu* and *terus* are most profound when considered in the context of the Indonesian occupation, during which hundreds of thousands of East Timorese suffered and died in the fight for self-determination. Thus, while the official symbolism of the flag does encompass a commemoration of the centuries under Portuguese colonialism, it does not include references to the Indonesian occupation. Considering this, one could argue that the symbolism of the national flag does not fully represent the more recent struggle and suffering that are integral to contemporary imaginings of an emerging East Timorese national identity.

Nonetheless, the meanings attached to the flag are not static. Popular identifications with the flag since independence can accordingly indicate the ways in which national identity continues to be (re)produced at a grassroots level. This aspect of my analysis is informed by primary ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Timor-Leste in 2012. It is clear that the role of both flags in the resistance to the Indonesian occupation has changed their symbolic meanings, arguably overcoming any overt partisan ties between the national flag and Fretilin. During the fieldwork interviews, every single participant mentioned the liberation struggle and the loss of life during the Indonesian occupation when discussing the national flag of Timor-Leste. As articulated by one East Timorese man, '*Hau komprende, maibe ituan deit Bandeira nasional signifika boot. Nee signifika kona ba ema Timor hotu, ema mate, ema nebee mak moris Sira hotu iha laran. Bandeira nee ema hotu nian*'.²² Thus, while many East Timorese citizens may not necessarily know the exact official meanings behind each of its components, there is a general understanding that the national flag is symbolically tied to the suffering of the liberation struggle.

Comparable symbolic associations can be made with the Fretilin party flag as a result of its similar role under the occupation, which allows the party to retain significant symbolic capital and authority in the post-independence state. Crucially, though neither the national nor the Fretilin flag officially incorporates a reference to the Indonesian occupation in its symbolism, there is a popular belief among East Timorese that both are representative of this difficult period of their history. As I explain, these flags clearly demonstrate the flexible nature of symbols and their

<https://starting-points.blogspot.co.uk/2009/05/fumbled-flag-has-timorese-worried.html> (last accessed 22 Jan. 2018).

22 'I understand [the meaning of the colours] but only a little ... The national flag means a lot. Its meaning is about all Timorese people, people who died, people who are alive They are all in it. The flag is everyone's.' Personal interview, Dili, July 2012. Interview and transcript in Tetun. Translation my own.

meanings, as well as the agency of the national community in interpreting them. The following section outlines the official symbolisms of the national and the Fretilin party flags, both created in the 1970s. This will enable a deeper understanding of the change in meaning that took place through the years of the Indonesian occupation and the increased symbolic power that the flags acquired as a result.

Constructing meaning in the East Timorese flags

Flags are powerful symbolic representations of nations as they have the potential to embody and enshrine narratives of a historical and cultural heritage of a national community.²³ They are markers of the national community to both its members and to external actors, including other nations, as Karen Cerulo outlines; ‘a nation’s symbols ... constitute a nation’s identity, the image of the nation projected by national leaders both to their constituents and to the world at large.’²⁴ However, the symbolic power of flags requires more than state or top-down projection: it is dependent on continual popular interaction because, as Lucy Bryson and Clem McCartney assert, flags only gain power and influence once the members of the nation react to them:

“Culture is a language” in the sense that culture consists of signs which are structured and organised like language. Flags and anthems are such cultural signs. From this perspective the flag is just a piece of cloth ... until people react to it in ways which give it meaning and significance.²⁵

The reaction to these symbols gives them potency, but in order for this to occur, there must first be evident symbolic meaning in the flags which resonates with the collective. The symbolic meaning of the flag is what enables members of the national community to engage with the symbol, by objectifying abstractions of their collective identity and thus allowing identification to take place. As members of the national community identify with the flag, they are able to attribute their own individual interpretations and meanings to it; this cycle is repeated in the ongoing process of national identification. Upon gaining popular recognition of their symbolic meaning, flags perform the unifying and representative function of national symbols; as Jonathan Leib and Gerald Webster note, ‘flags [become] a central element of the “glue” that states develop as part of their sets of national iconography’.²⁶

As noted, flags constitute incredibly powerful symbols within the East Timorese cultural context, as markers of both political power and juridical authority. Scholars such as Andrew McWilliam and Angie Bexley, Michael Leach, Tanja Hohe, and Elizabeth Traube have all noted the cultural importance of flags and attest to their

23 Robert T. Schatz and Howard Lavine, ‘Waving the flag: National symbolism, social identity and political engagement’, *Political Psychology* 28, 3 (2007): 333.

24 Karen Cerulo, ‘Symbols and the world system: National anthems and flags’, *Sociological Forum* 8, 2 (1993): 243.

25 Lucy Bryson and Clem McCartney, *Clashing symbols? A report on the use of flags, anthems and other national symbols in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies for the Community Relations Council, 1994), p. 4.

26 Jonathan Leib and Gerald Webster, ‘Rebel with(out) a cause? The contested meanings of the Confederate battle flag in the American South’, in Eriksen and Jenkins, *Flag, nation and symbolism in Europe and America*, p. 31.



Figure 1. The national flag of Timor-Leste



Figure 2. The political party flag of Fretilin (Frente Revolucionária do Timor-Leste Independente)

vital role in collective identification in Timor-Leste.²⁷ Within this specific context, a flag as physical object is automatically attributed certain symbolic power, as it is seen as ‘a sacred object ... the flagpole still represents political authority’.²⁸

The national flag of Timor-Leste was deliberately constructed to represent the ideas of a ‘nation’ and its history (fig. 1). Red, which is the most dominant colour, symbolises the fight for national independence and freedom (*funu*); the yellow triangle symbolises the remaining influences of colonialism; the black triangle represents the obscurantism left by colonialism that must be overcome; and the five-pointed white star represents the peace which has been desired for so long.²⁹ While traditional interpretations of red symbolising a struggle or war, and white symbolising peace, are common in flags across the world, the meanings behind the yellow and black sections have been constructed to apply to this specific ‘nation’, with its own specific history and shared heritage.

Any aesthetic resemblance to the Fretilin flag is not mentioned in official references to the national flag, despite their shared origins and authorship in 1975. Nonetheless, the same colours representative of war, sacrifice, and peace are all contained within each flag, and parallels of meaning and symbolism can subsequently be drawn. The Fretilin flag (fig. 2) is made up of red and yellow rectangles, with a white star on a black background and the party’s name clearly marks the centre of the flag.³⁰ The symbolic meanings that are evidently shared with the national flag are red,

27 See McWilliam and Bexley, ‘Performing politics’, pp. 66–82; Michael Leach, ‘Valorising the resistance: National identity and collective memory in East Timor’s Constitution’, *Social Alternatives* 21, 3 (2002): 43–7; Tanja Hohe, ‘Totem polls: Indigenous concepts and “free and fair” elections in East Timor’, *International Peacekeeping* 9, 4 (2002): 69–88; Elizabeth Traube, ‘Planting the flag’, in *Life and land in Timor-Leste: Ethnographic essays*, ed. Andrew McWilliam and Elizabeth Traube (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2011), pp. 117–40.

28 Hohe, ‘Totem polls’: 16.

29 See Governo de Timor-Leste; <http://timor-leste.gov.tl> (last accessed 7 Feb. 2012).

30 Frente Revolucionária do Timor-Leste Independente, *Conferência Nacional, Documentos Aprovados* (Sydney, 1998), p. 18. Available at: *Fundação Mario Soares*, http://www.fmsoares.pt/aeb_online/visualizador.php?bd=BIBLIOTECA_DIGITAL&nome_da_pasta=07708.014&numero_da_pagina=1 (last accessed 24 May 2013). Details about the Fretilin flag’s symbolism come from a Fretilin manual, given to members who attended the National Timorese Convention in Portugal, 25–27 April 1998. This information was kindly shared by an individual present at this conference.

signifying *funu*, and black, representing the time during which Timor-Leste had been colonised. While the yellow differs somewhat in its symbolic meaning in the Fretilin flag, signifying the natural richness of the land, the white star shares the symbolism of peace and hope for the future.³¹

The construction of the Fretilin party flag and the period during which it was first adopted are of particular interest when considering its global political context. Creating its flag in 1974, Fretilin chose a combination of colours and symbols that were common to flags of other anti-colonial movements, rooted in socialism, and signifying the quest for national independence. Two case studies of liberation movements and their respective flags that can be analysed alongside those of Fretilin are from Mozambique and Angola. Though varying slightly in colour, the national flags of Mozambique and Angola — also former Portuguese colonies — nevertheless contain some visible points of comparison to the East Timorese national flag. In the Mozambican flag (fig. 3), the shapes used (a triangle imposed upon a rectangle, divided by stripes of different colours) and the colours red, black, yellow, and white are all present, with a five-pointed star as a further important element. In the Angolan flag (fig. 4), the colours red, black, and yellow and the same star are also present.

The colour red immediately brings to mind certain connotations of the particular political context of the creation of the flags in the 1970s. Since the late nineteenth century, red has been adopted as the main colour of socialism and ‘became the symbol of radicalism and revolt’.³² Throughout the twentieth century — particularly during the Cold War — the colour became almost synonymous with communism, and socialism is still represented by the red rose today.³³ The use of the star in each of these flags is associated with leftist politics, as in those of China and the former USSR. The choice of red within the East Timorese, Mozambican, and Angolan flags as a symbol of revolt was deliberate: the revolutionary movements in each of these former Portuguese colonies stemmed from a leftist ideology.

Within this context, the similarities found between the national flag of Timor-Leste and the Fretilin party flag are not as unusual as they might first appear. The Mozambican national flag was constructed by the revolutionary Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Frelimo), a Marxist movement and contemporary of Fretilin in the 1970s that sought independence from Portuguese colonial rule.³⁴ It has been suggested by Amanda Wise that Frelimo could have been ‘one of the models on which FRETILIN based itself’.³⁵ The Mozambican national flag was similarly

31 It is noteworthy that the original meaning attributed to the yellow segment of the national flag was also the natural richness of the land; however, this meaning was changed prior to the restoration of independence in 2002, to distance the flag from its Fretilin origins. See Michael Leach, *Nation-building and national identity in Timor-Leste* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 170.

32 Marian Sawyer, ‘Wearing your politics on your sleeve: The role of political colours in social movements’, *Social Movements Studies* 6, 1 (2007): 41.

33 Ibid.: 41–2.

34 For an analysis of Frelimo and the MPLA, see Timothy W. Luke, ‘Angola and Mozambique: Institutionalizing social revolution in Africa’, *Review of Politics* 44, 3 (1982): 413–36; J. Bowyer Bell, ‘Contemporary revolutionary organizations’, *International Organization* 25, 3 (1971): 507–9.

35 Amanda Wise, ‘Nation, transnation, diaspora: Locating East Timorese long-distance nationalism’, *Sojourn* 19, 2 (2004): 157. Indeed, several members of the Fretilin leadership who were exiled after the Indonesian invasion spent the years of the occupation in Mozambique.



Figure 3. The national flag of Mozambique



Figure 4. The national flag of Angola



Figure 5. The flag of Frelimo (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique)



Figure 6. The flag of the MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola)

created by Frelimo after independence and the movement constructed the national flag in such a way as to make it subtly different from their own party flag (fig. 5), a process similar to that of Fretilin's creation of the East Timorese flag. Similarly in Angola, the revolutionary pro-independence, anti-colonial movement, the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA), authored the Angolan national flag once self-determination had been regained and again, the Angolan flags are strikingly similar in construction and colours. There is, however, some differentiation by the primary focus on a central star symbol to 'remove' party ties. A connection can thus be made between the symbolism and ideology of each movement in Mozambique, Angola, and Timor-Leste, reflecting a revolutionary struggle against the Portuguese colonial powers for independence.

The historical and political context of the creation of these movements and their symbols is vital to remember. The change in East Timor's status from an occupied, colonised territory to one of self-determination has inevitably softened Fretilin's political leanings, having achieved the goal of independence. Indeed, as identity changes, the meaning behind the symbolic representations of an identity must also be capable of change and evolution. Although Fretilin had originally leant towards socialism,³⁶

36 Dennis Shoesmith, *Political parties and groupings of Timor-Leste*, 3rd ed. (Canberra: Australian Labor Party, 2011), pp. 28–31.

today the party is regarded as having moved from the left of the political spectrum towards the centre. The elements of the East Timorese national flag that were perhaps once associated with socialism are arguably less rooted in their original ideological meaning. Traditional or universal interpretations of the symbolism, such as the red as a symbol of war or *funu*, are now more relevant to contemporary nation-building. As Marian Sawyer suggests, in the twenty-first century '[a]ppeals to patriotism are seen to trump appeals to socialist solidarity'.³⁷ Fretilin may prefer its flag to be representative of a wider imagined community, alluded to in its similarities to the national flag, rather than of a narrower sector linked to the socialist tendencies of the party in the past.³⁸

When the histories of both the 1975 national flag and the Fretilin party flag are traced, then the evolution of their symbolism is clear. The meanings attributed to the Fretilin flag and the first national RDTL flag changed under the Indonesian occupation. The national flag not only represented the declaration of independence from Portugal in 1975, but the self-determination that the East Timorese people hoped to regain one day. The Fretilin flag came to symbolise the resistance movement and the political ideology that opposed the Indonesian presence in occupied East Timor. The fact that the name 'Fretilin' is emblazoned on the flag attributed the party some of the symbolic capital that the flag gained throughout the occupation. Commander-in-chief of the armed wing of the resistance, Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão, stated at the time that '[w]e have always fought under the Fretilin flag and we will fight under it to the end!'.³⁹ Both flags subsequently became almost interchangeable as a result of their aesthetic similarities and shared symbolism. Further, given the absence of any real political opponents to Fretilin during the occupation, both flags inevitably became the dominant symbols of the resistance. The RDTL's first national flag came to represent the defiance of the East Timorese people against being subsumed into Indonesia, while the Fretilin flag was the symbol of the organisation that politically represented this ideal.

When Timor-Leste officially regained independence in 2002, the history of the flag as a symbol was again important. It was the *change* in meaning of the flag that was significant: the national flag was no longer directly associated with the Fretilin party ideology as much as it was directly linked to the resistance in the minds of the people. As Hohe suggests, the decision to re-adopt the 1975 flag as the national flag of Timor-Leste was 'as a result of the honour and respect ... paid to the first flag of East Timor's independence'.⁴⁰ In order to justify the post-independence endorsement of the 1975 national flag of Fretilin authorship, the Indonesian

37 Sawyer, 'Wearing your politics on your sleeve': 42.

38 Interestingly, the only Marxist-Leninist political party in Timor-Leste today, the Partido Socialista de Timor (PST) does not enjoy large popular support and received only 2.41 per cent of the vote in the 2012 parliamentary elections (Secretariado Técnico de Administração Eleitoral, *Resultado Provisorio Eleisaun Parlamentar 2012*). Fretilin is arguably aware of the lack of support for such an ideology in the twenty-first century and thus distances itself from any Marxist origins.

39 Xanana Gusmão, *Resistir é vencer! To resist is to win! The autobiography of Xanana Gusmão*, ed. Sara Niner (Richmond, Vic.: Aurora; David Lovell, 2000), p. 135. Though Gusmão resigned from Fretilin in December 1987, the links between the party, its flag, and the resistance movement were entrenched throughout the 24-year struggle against the Indonesian occupation.

40 Hohe, 'Totem Polls': 81.

occupation of Timor-Leste had to be recalled and the struggle against it highlighted. The following section historically contextualises the origins of both flags and traces their role in the resistance.

An emerging 'nation': The origins of Fretilin and the resistance

Timor-Leste had been ethnically diverse long before the advent of Portuguese colonialism, with over thirty ethnic communities and many different language groups.⁴¹ It has therefore never been ethno-culturally homogenous as a whole. While there is a trend in colonialism scholarship for arguing that colonised peoples generally unify against a common enemy,⁴² the case of Timor-Leste presents complications to this paradigm. Once the Portuguese had begun to withdraw in the mid-1970s, there was no unanimous anti-colonial sentiment among the people.⁴³ While Fretilin was in favour of an independent republic free from outside influence, the União Democrática Timorese (UDT) was initially in favour of a continued association within a federation with Portugal.⁴⁴

After a brief civil war between the two parties, Fretilin emerged as victors and declared the independence of the RDTL on 28 November 1975. Following this, any lingering divisions seemed to have been set aside in the face of being forcibly and violently incorporated into the Republic of Indonesia. This impending threat caused the East Timorese people to turn to their European-influenced heritage, and a 'resentful attachment to things Portuguese' was strategically employed to culturally and politically differentiate the East Timorese from Indonesians.⁴⁵ The identification with a foreign Lusophone cultural heritage illustrates the extent to which insecurity over national identity was an issue for the East Timorese leadership at the time. Indeed, the political elite in Timor-Leste were all too aware of the fact that 'in 1974–75 true East Timorese nationalism was still quite thin on the ground'.⁴⁶ In the absence of a smooth transition from decolonisation to independence and a secure national identity, following a civil war, the population was divided. However, the invasion by Indonesian forces on 7 December 1975 was to return the East Timorese to the status of an occupied people. It was during this period of occupation that the people were faced with a common foreign enemy and the stirrings of East Timorese nationalism began in earnest.

In the face of forced subsumption into the Indonesian state, there were a number of unifying factors that fostered collective identification. From the beginning of the

41 Anderson, 'Imagining East Timor': 238.

42 See for example, Frantz Fanon, *The wretched of the earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1965).

43 While the Portuguese resolved to devolve power back to their colonies, decolonisation seemed to have been centred on Angola and Mozambique. In Timor-Leste, the same process was not implemented or completed and the Portuguese withdrew abruptly as a result of the civil war between the UDT and Fretilin.

44 A third political party, Apodeti, was in favour of integration into Indonesia, though it was small and had minimal popular support. See further António Costa Pinto, 'The transition to democracy and Portugal's decolonization', in *The last empire: Thirty years of Portuguese decolonization*, ed. Stewart Lloyd-Jones and Antonio C. Pinto (Bristol: Intellect, 2003), especially pp. 30–31.

45 Anderson, 'Imagining East Timor': 237.

46 Ibid.

occupation, the Catholic Church in Timor-Leste was a powerful advocate of independence and from 1974 to 1989, the percentage of practising Catholics rose from 27.8 per cent to 81.4 per cent. By the time the Indonesian forces were withdrawing in 1999, some 90 per cent of the population were professed followers of the faith.⁴⁷ The fact that the Church had begun to celebrate mass and other services in Tetum, the lingua franca, was a non-aggressive means by which the people and the Church could culturally resist the foreign invaders, making Tetum ‘a focal point of patriotism’.⁴⁸ As Jill Golden affirms, ‘the Tetum language and the Catholic Church together became points of resistance and a focus of national identity’.⁴⁹ However, to symbolise such abstractions as language and faith as markers of the collective resistance movement was perhaps difficult. It was conceivably more effective to look to established, familiar symbols to unify the resisting nation — and the main symbol first associated with East Timorese independent nationhood was the 1975 RDTL flag.

As the first government of the RDTL, declared in November 1975, Fretilin took on the role of political leadership of the resistance following the Indonesian invasion. The fact that it was Fretilin that had first declared independence in 1975 perhaps gave the party greater significance after the Indonesian invasion took away the same freedom just days later.⁵⁰ Fretilin unified the population under the Indonesian occupation and transformed the resistance into what Raphaël Pouyé terms a ‘shadow state’.⁵¹ Indeed, during the Indonesian occupation, the front was politically active, with ‘a party network covering the entire country’ acting at a sub-state level.⁵² Fretilin continued its role of leadership of the resistance throughout the ensuing decades, creating a state-within-a-state with education and welfare programmes and health centres for the populace.⁵³ The ‘shadow state’ was defended by its own armed forces, Forças Armadas de Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste (Falintil), which was seen as the heart of the resistance movement itself.

At the time, as Samuel Moore outlines, the Indonesian military circulated propaganda suggesting that the East Timorese people were afraid of the reckless and

47 Sven Gunnar Simonsen, ‘The authoritarian temptation: Nation building and the need for inclusive governance’, *Asian Survey* 46, 4 (2006): 577. Identification with the Catholic faith could be understood as a means of distinguishing the East Timorese national community from the predominantly Muslim Indonesia. It could also be argued that the number of conversions to Catholicism stemmed from the Indonesian policy of *Pancasila* that was enforced in all territories, including Timor-Leste. See Donald E. Weatherbee, ‘Indonesia in 1984: Pancasila, politics and power’, *Asian Survey* 25, 2 (1984): 187–97; Michael Morfit, ‘Pancasila: The Indonesian state ideology according to the New Order government’, *Asian Survey* 21, 8 (1981): 838–51.

48 Simonsen, ‘The authoritarian temptation’: 577.

49 Jill Golden, ‘When the diaspora returns: Language choices in post-Independence Timor Lorosa’e’, in *The regenerative spirit: vol. 2 (Un)settling, (dis)locations, (post-)colonial, (re)presentations — Australian postcolonial reflections*, ed. S. Williams, D. Longeran, R. Hoskings, L. Deene and N. Bierbaum (Adelaide: Lythrum, 2004), p. 118.

50 Ian Martin, *Self-determination in East Timor: The United Nations, the ballot, and international intervention* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001), p. 16.

51 Raphaël Pouyé, ‘“Shadow states?”: State building and national invention under external constraint in Kosovo and East Timor (1974–2002)’, *Research in Question* 13 (Feb. 2005): 1–60.

52 Hohe, ‘Totem polls’: 72.

53 Estêvão Cabral and Marilyn Martin-Jones, ‘Writing the resistance: Literacy in East Timor 1975–1999’, *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 11, 2 (2008): 156–7; José Ramos-Horta, *Funu: The unfinished saga of East Timor* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea, 1987), p. 39.

subversive Fretilin-Falintil guerrillas.⁵⁴ In reality, the civilian population was in fact ‘strongly determined to feed, shelter, and provide information to Falintil and continually replenish its ranks’.⁵⁵ When considering this widespread active support for the resistance movement in the face of violent reprisal by the Indonesian military,⁵⁶ it is perhaps not surprising that its symbols provided a common, unifying locus of collective identification and gained such significant symbolic power.

‘Mate-bandeira hun’ — Sacrifice, honour and dying by the flagpole

Memories of Indonesia’s brutal occupation were crucial to the change in the flags’ symbolic meaning. The symbolic capital that they gained as a result of representing the independence struggle has been sustained in the post-independence years, despite their Fretilin authorship. Interestingly, in 2002, Mari Alkatiri stated that the government should *not* have a role in constructing the ‘nation’:⁵⁷

[o] *objectivo de um governo não é o de “construir” unidade nacional. Ou melhor, esse é o objectivo de todos os timorenses. ... em tempo de paz, democracia e independência, todo o processo de planeamento deve ser observado de uma perspectiva da base para o topo.*⁵⁸

While Alkatiri argues that national unity should come from the people, rather than the government, he specifies that this should occur in a time of peace (*em tempo de paz*). It could therefore be understood that during the resistance, Fretilin’s leading role in unifying the ‘nation’ was legitimate. The nature of the conflict validated Fretilin’s influence by the fact that the East Timorese people looked to its leadership to unify and defend them. As Alkatiri suggests, the task of maintaining a unified national identity in the post-independence state should be devolved to the people. This arguably problematises the central role that Fretilin held in nation-building and national identity construction in the early years of independence. The continued endorsement of a national flag created by Fretilin therefore requires consideration in light of the independence struggle.

As the East Timorese national flag came to represent the goal of self-determination and defiance in the face of Indonesian rule following the 1975 invasion, the Indonesian military frequently responded with repression whenever the flag was publicly displayed. Retaliations against the flying of the East Timorese national flag were extreme and violent because the Suharto dictatorship had ruled that the only flag that could legally be flown in its territories was the *Merah-Putih*, the

54 Samuel Moore, ‘The Indonesian military’s last years in East Timor: An analysis of its secret documents’, *Indonesia* 27 (2001): 9–44.

55 *Ibid.*: 71.

56 Peter Bartu, ‘The militia, the military, and the people of Bobonaro’, in *Bitter flowers, sweet flowers: East Timor, Indonesia and the world community*, ed. Richard Tanter, Mark Selden and Stephen R. Shalom (Sydney: Pluto, 2001), p. 81.

57 Mari Alkatiri is the Secretary General of Fretilin and has held the office of Prime Minister of Timor-Leste from 2002–2006, and from 2017 to the present.

58 ‘The objective of a government is not to “construct” national unity. Rather, this is the objective of all the Timorese people. ... in a time of peace, democracy and independence, the whole process of planning should be considered from a bottom-up perspective’. Mari Alkatiri, *Timor-Leste o caminho do desenvolvimento: Os primeiros anos de governação* [Timor-Leste the road to development: The first years of governance] (Lisbon: Lidel, 2005), pp. 26–8. Translation my own.

Indonesian flag (fig. 7).⁵⁹ This law had been implemented since the invasion to symbolically demonstrate Timor-Leste's incorporation into Indonesia, despite the fact that the territory was effectively shut off from the outside world until 1989, when a Portuguese parliamentary delegation was due to visit. In preparation for international media attention, the Indonesian government had bought 30,000 flags intended to be flown from East Timorese houses as a way of enforcing this policy on flag flying and to visually portray an 'integrated' East Timorese population to the outside world.⁶⁰ As Peter Bartu notes, those East Timorese who had not fled the territory after the invasion were forced 'to "accept the red and white" and fly the Indonesian flag outside their houses. To not do so was an open invitation to attack'.⁶¹ Indeed, the Indonesian flag and its colours would be associated with fear and repression for the East Timorese population; the Indonesian-sponsored militias (such as the *Besi Merah Putih*) were identified by the red and white colours of their uniform, and were notorious for their brutality towards those thought to be sympathetic towards the goal of independence.⁶²

The symbolic act of rejecting the *Merah-Putih* and supporting the resistance by flying the East Timorese national flag was subsequently synonymous with defiance against Indonesia and its illegal occupation. Identification with a different national flag from that of the occupying forces further emphasised the notion that the two nations were fundamentally different. This is a primary function of flags, as Howard Schatz and Robert Lavine have noted:

key symbols such as a flag represent the group as a whole or in the abstract, thus communicating "groupness" itself, the shared ingroup categorization per se. Consequently, they should be particularly capable of rousing group identification and demarcating ingroup from outgroup(s).⁶³

In light of the fact that flags perform the function of symbolic boundary markers for collectives, this was a powerful statement. The distinctions between the East Timorese and the Indonesian national collectives were made clear by the resistance movement in various forms, such as through language and religion, but the most visible sign of differentiation was through group identification with the East Timorese national flag. Thus, the 1975 national flag symbolically demarcated the boundaries of the East Timorese national community and symbolised the right of its people to self-determination.

One legacy of the Indonesian occupation in the post-independence state is the common understanding amongst the East Timorese people that those who suffered during the resistance should be recompensed and honoured. As Elizabeth Traube outlines, there is a paradigm of debt and repayment in Timor-Leste:

59 Image taken from the World Flag Database website; <http://www.flags.net/INDN.htm> (last accessed 15 Mar. 2017).

60 Moore, 'The Indonesian military's last years in East Timor': 23–4.

61 Bartu, 'The militia, the military, and the people of Bobonaro', p. 82.

62 Moore, 'The Indonesian military's last years in East Timor': 23–4.

63 Schatz and Lavine, 'Waving the flag': 332.



Figure 7. The national flag of the Republic of Indonesia, the *Merah-Putih*

'The formula is simple: those who pursued their own selfish interests and prospered under the occupation should be made to pay, while those who suffered and sacrificed for independence should be recompensed.'⁶⁴

The many East Timorese who died under the Indonesian occupation are widely considered to be martyrs of the 'nation' and, in the national imaginary, are given high prestige and respect.

This notion of martyrdom during the Indonesian occupation and the honour and respect still paid to those who died can be linked not only to the 1975 national flag, but also to the Fretilin party flag. It was under the Fretilin flag, flown in defiance of the Indonesian occupiers, that so many civilians died during the resistance: after the Indonesian invasion it was common that 'entire families [were] being shot for displaying Fretilin flags on their houses ... Fretilin sympathizers [were] singled out for immediate execution'.⁶⁵ Vicious reprisals were common throughout the occupation, even up to the last days around the independence ballot in 1999. Charlie Scheiner witnessed these last days after the East Timorese people overwhelmingly voted for independence: 'New Indonesian flags flew in front of every house on the street. The militia had visited each home, threatening to kill people if they were pro-independence.'⁶⁶ An individual's position on independence (or integration) was demonstrated by the flag that appeared outside their home. Thus, the symbolic act of supporting the Fretilin-led resistance by flying its flag was an act of defiance against Indonesia and its illegal occupation.

It should be reiterated that the flags were not just symbols of defiance or resistance, but highly potent cultural symbols of political and juridical authority in

64 Elizabeth Traube, 'Unpaid wages: Local narratives and the imagination of the nation', *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 8, 1 (2007): 21–2. Today, corruption and the apparent lack of a legitimate, functioning executive and judiciary has meant that those who did not suffer or who collaborated under the Indonesian occupation are now privileged and undeservedly enjoying power. Traub sums up that 'an educated but undeserving minority appeared to be expropriating the profits of nationhood, while "the [common] people continued to suffer" (*povu terus nahatin*)' (ibid.: 22).

65 John G. Taylor, *East Timor: The price of freedom* (London: Zed, 1999), p. 69.

66 Charlie Scheiner, 'Things fall apart', *Estafeta: Voice of the East Timor Action Network* 5, 3 (1999); <http://etan.org/estafeta/99/autumn/things.htm> (last accessed 1 Oct. 2012).

Timor-Leste. The public display of the Fretilin party flag suggests that while Timor-Leste was occupied and had no official independent leadership, the people symbolically acknowledged their leaders through identification with this flag. It was a symbol of the East Timorese resistance and the state-within-a-state that had been created. As such, it was a 'national' symbol in the imaginings of the East Timorese people before they had a nation in constitutional terms. Indeed, Pouyé points out that 'to be "*mate bandeira-hun*" — to be "of those who die by the flagpole" — was a colloquial Timorese phrase designating selfless patriotism'.⁶⁷ If those who died under the Fretilin party flag were considered to be martyrs to the Fretilin state-within-a-state during the resistance, their memory continues to mingle conceptions of the nation and the resistance in the emerging post-independence identity narratives. In election campaigns since independence in 2002, the potent discourse of martyrdom has been employed by Fretilin to garner support from the electorate:

Fretilin was not perceived by voters as a political party but still as a 'front' that deserved their respect and honour for its deeds [during the resistance]. ... To be a Fretilin member or to vote for Fretilin was to respect the resistance fight and reaffirm one's personal experiences.⁶⁸

Moreover, a flag represents political authority and commands respect as a sacred object in Timor-Leste.⁶⁹ To question the flag would be to question the authority it carries and the sacrifices that were made during the resistance which it has come to represent.

From 1975 to the present: Reinstating the original flag of Timor-Leste

It is precisely because of this history of the Fretilin party flag, and its associations with suffering and sacrifice during the independence struggle, that the party continues to be respected today and the 1975 national flag it created continues to be endorsed. Indeed, the only time a formal debate over the national flag of an independent Timor-Leste has taken place was in 2001, when the flag of the overall resistance movement, the Conselho Nacional de Resistência Timorese (CNRT), was considered as an alternative to the 1975 RDTL flag for the new state.

Under the auspices of the United Nations Transitional Administration of East Timor (UNTAET) mission, there was a public debate in the Constitutional Commissions hearing as to whether the original 1975 national flag would continue to be endorsed in the post-independence state,⁷⁰ or be replaced by the flag of the umbrella resistance movement, created with the CNRT in 1998 (fig. 8).⁷¹ In addition

67 Pouyé, 'Shadow states?', pp. 48–9. The fact that this phrase was also uttered in reference to the flags of the Portuguese colonisers could question the loyalty felt towards 'national symbols'. Whether or not this loyalty to the national flag is changeable, the strength of loyalty felt was evidently such that people would fight and die under the flag.

68 Hohe, 'Totem polls': 77. Ideas of self-sacrifice during the resistance are also invoked by other political parties such as CNRT, ASDT and UNDERTIM as a means of rallying electoral support, by flying the flag of Falintil, for example. Due to space constraints, I cannot elaborate on this aspect of parties' campaign strategies here.

69 Hohe, 'Totem polls': 79.

70 Wallis, *Constitution making during state building*, pp. 117–18.

71 Throughout the 1980s, the resistance movement (which included armed, clandestine, diplomatic,



Figure 8. The official flag of the Conselho Nacional de Resistência Timorense (CNRT)



Figure 9. The official flag of the Forças Armadas de Libertação Nacional de Timor Leste (Falintil)

to these two suggestions, other alternatives were proposed by minority groups that included flags containing other symbols that invoked an identity that was more focused on local tradition and custom. These suggested flags incorporating such symbols as the traditional house (*uma lulik*), the crocodile (a symbol from popular mythology), and the dove (symbolic of peace).⁷² However, these suggestions never came to fruition and the debate revolved solely around the 1975 national flag and the CNRT flag of the resistance movement.

The CNRT resistance movement was the result of a series of reforms throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s to create a more inclusive movement, and to remove any lingering problematic partisan ties. The official flag of the reformed resistance was aesthetically modelled on the Falintil flag (fig. 9) and was therefore more visually aligned with the armed forces than with any political party. It was for this reason that the CNRT flag was provisionally adopted by UNTAET as a ‘temporary flag’ for Timor-Leste, and was considered by some to be a more diplomatic option for the national flag of the newly independent, pluralist, democratic nation-state.⁷³

The 2001 flags debate focused on two main arguments; according to UNTAET’s Constitutional Affairs Branch, ‘the [1975] RDTL flag marked the birth of a sovereign state on 28 November 1975, whereas the CNRT flag [was] seen as symbolic of national unity and that used on 30 September 1999 ballot’.⁷⁴ By the end of the Indonesian occupation, both flags had acquired significant symbolic capital and

and political wings) underwent many reforms. The reforms resulted in the formation of the non-partisan umbrella group Conselho Nacional de Resistência Maubere (CNRM) in 1987. The final reform was in 1998, when the CNRT name was decided, and which was the official and final name of the resistance movement until independence in 2002. See Sarah Niner, ‘A long journey of resistance: The origins and struggle of CNRT’, in Tanter et al., *Bitter flowers, sweet flowers*, pp. 21–2. CNRT and Falintil flag images from FOTW Flags of the world, <https://flagspot.net/flags/tl.html> (last accessed 28 Mar. 2017).

72 See Wallis, *Constitution making during state building*, p. 119.

73 Leach, *Nation-building and national identity in Timor-Leste*, p. 161.

74 UNTAET Constitutional Affairs Branch, ‘National flag’, *Constitutional Commission public hearings executive summary*, Dili (Sept. 2001). Available at: www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/etimor/DB/db190901.htm (last accessed 15 Feb. 2017). This debate took place and was formally considered by UNTAET’s Constitutional Affairs Branch after public consultation. Popular opinion over the flag debate was divided along regional lines and political opinion on other aspects of nation-building, including decisions

power as markers of an emerging national identity; as Michael Leach notes, ‘both flags were strong in the popular “imaginary” of the resistance era’.⁷⁵ Indeed, while the original 1975 national flag had been consistently used throughout the occupation to represent the East Timorese national community in resistance, the image of the CNRT flag had been used on the ballot papers of the 1999 independence referendum to signify the option of self-determination — a powerful symbolic meaning to be attributed to this flag at a crucial moment in the history of the liberation struggle.⁷⁶ Thus, while the CNRT flag was a very recent creation at the time of the independence referendum, it was the sole visual symbol on the ballot paper and had been used in a very powerful way to represent the option of self-determination.⁷⁷

The outcome of the 2001 flags debate is telling of the symbolic power that the original 1975 RDTL flag had acquired throughout the Indonesian occupation in popular imaginings, as it was the flag that was finally adopted by the new Constitution.⁷⁸ Joanne Wallis notes that, despite some criticisms from opponents to the decision, there was widespread support for the choice of flag.⁷⁹ The support for a Fretilin-authored flag is clear when the context of the debate is considered; on the brink of self-determination and mere months after the Indonesian military had left the national territory devastated, any conflict of interest that had since arisen in the post-independence state was not an issue. Writing in 2001, Lurdes Silva-Carneiro de Sousa described popular perceptions of Fretilin as

the political formation that has best embodied the face of the resistance, the mirror of East Timor national heroes, the Party whose flag best represents the East Timor nationalist movement, and, *last but not least*, to the Party that declared East Timor independence in 1975. Undoubtedly Fretilin has for better or for worse embodied the concept, the idea of East Timor nationalism.⁸⁰

One East Timorese official, who was *not* a supporter of Fretilin, attested that the choice was important because the 1975 national flag represented ‘the blood and bone of all those who fought and died for this country’.⁸¹ The connections between this national symbol and the core tenets of East Timorese nationalism — struggle and suffering — are clear; this flag was a symbol under which thousands of East Timorese people died in the struggle for self-determination and it is understood that by honouring the flag, the dead are also honoured and respected.

about national holidays and official languages. See Leach, *Nation-building and national identity in Timor-Leste*, pp. 157–9.

75 Ibid., p. 161. UN observers at the time also affirmed that ‘there was equal and strong support for both the RDTL and CNRT flags, both having been used in the struggle for independence’. See UNTAET Constitutional Affairs Branch, ‘National Flag’.

76 Richard Tanter, Mark Selden and Stephen R. Shalom, ‘East Timor faces the future’, in Tanter et al., *Bitter flowers, sweet flowers*, p. 245.

77 Wallis, *Constitution making during state building*, p. 88.

78 The adoption of the 1975 national flag is protected by the Constitution under Article 156, which stipulates that this decision is ‘incapable of future revision’. Cited in Leach, *Nation-building and national identity in Timor-Leste*, p. 170.

79 Wallis, *Constitution making during state building*, pp. 117–18.

80 Lurdes Silva-Carneiro de Sousa, ‘Some facts and comments on the East Timor 2001 Constituent Assembly elections’, *Lusotopie* (2001): 309. Emphasis in the original.

81 Cited in Wallis, *Constitution making during state building*, p. 118.

The widespread support for this choice of flag, its emotive symbolic power, and its popular appeal is attested to by its use in contemporary electoral campaigning to garner votes. For example, in 2012 the national flag was used by a range of political parties in their rallies, such as the UDT and CNRT, just prior to the parliamentary elections, attesting to the wide appeal of the national flag to groups from differing political positions (figs. 10 and 11).⁸² With regards to the national flag's partisan origins, its continued endorsement has two main implications. First, it can be seen as recognition of the legitimacy of Fretilin's initial declaration of independence and government, which had not been recognised by outside actors. Second, it implies an acceptance of a flag that has ties to a political party symbol, but one that has since taken on distinct and wider symbolic meanings. In this way, even if the aesthetic similarities to the Fretilin party flag are consciously recognised, they are accepted, which suggests that even implicitly there is continued respect for Fretilin.

Respect for the Front: Post-independence perspectives on Fretilin

While Fretilin has seen its electoral support diminish in recent years and is no longer the only dominant party in East Timorese politics, reverence is still shown for its role in the resistance. The universal respect towards Fretilin was demonstrated in 2007 when the desecration of Fretilin flags by some Australian soldiers led to a public outcry. The Australian soldiers (from the International Stabilisation Force in Timor-Leste) had stolen three flags from two villages, amid protests from Fretilin supporters against the new government led by Xanana Gusmão.⁸³ The East Timorese reactions to the soldiers' desecration of the flag included accusations that the Howard administration was hostile towards Fretilin, and served to underline the continued strength of feeling towards the party and its flag.

Both the East Timorese and Australian governments condemned the actions as 'culturally insensitive', which is perhaps an understatement given that within an East Timorese cultural context, flags are sacred objects as well as symbols of political authority.⁸⁴ When the East Timorese people spoke about their outrage, however, the predominant cause of anger was directly connected to the concept of *mate-bandeira hun* and Fretilin's role in the recent past. This was articulated at the time in an opinion piece in *The Age* which echoed the sentiment: 'Tens of thousands of Timorese died fighting under that flag during a bloody 30-year struggle for independence and the events of last week undermine their sacrifice and offend their memory.'⁸⁵ The popular associations of the Fretilin flag with the independence struggle are

82 Indeed, the 1974 civil war was fought between Fretilin and the UDT. The UDT's endorsement of the 1975 flag in particular is testament to its change in meaning and distancing from Fretilin roots.

83 Fretilin supporters protested because they believed that the new government had been formed illegally, that Fretilin had received more votes in the election than any other party, and claimed that Gusmão's new government had unlawfully usurped the democratically elected government. See 'Troops desecrate Fretilin flags', *The Age*, 21 Aug. 2007; <http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/troops-desecrate-fretilin-flags/2007/08/20/1187462178157.html> (last accessed 24 May 2013).

84 See Elizabeth Traube, *Cosmology and social life: Ritual exchange among the Mambai of East Timor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 51.

85 'Troops must fly a flag of respect', *The Age*, 22 Aug. 2007; <http://www.theage.com.au/news/editorial/troops-must-fly-a-flag-of-respect/2007/08/21/1187462262475.html> (last accessed 23 May 2013).



Figure 10. UDT parliamentary election campaign rally, Dili, July 2012 (author's photograph)



Figure 11. CNRT parliamentary election campaign rally, Dili, July 2012 (author's photograph)

clear and emotive, and the sacrifices that were made under this symbol of the resistance movement are retained in the memories of many.

The widespread public outcry over the incident attests to the cultural importance of flags as symbols in Timor-Leste and, more importantly, the respect that is still felt for Fretilin and its symbols. It is worth noting that this incident took place in 2007, the same year of the parliamentary elections in which there was a significant drop in the number of votes won by Fretilin. For Fretilin, a lack of electoral support does not necessarily equate a lack of respect. There may be many East Timorese who do not



Figure 12. Supporters of the Associação Social Democrata Timorese (ASDT), cheering on a Fretilin rally passing by, Dili, 3 July 2012 (Author's photograph)

wish to be ruled by a Fretilin government, but that does not mean that the appreciation felt for the political wing of the resistance movement is diminished. The party's flag, as a symbolic representation of both Fretilin and the liberation struggle, is understood by the people to retain great symbolic capital, and had to be treated accordingly.

Thus, while Fretilin has seen its electoral support decrease, it is still widely recognised as a significant political actor in the recent history of Timor-Leste and one which continues to be deserving of great respect. As part of the fieldwork that I conducted in Timor-Leste in 2012, I was present for the campaigning season prior to the parliamentary elections. In the final days of campaigning in the capital, Dili, I witnessed crowds at a rally for the Associação Social Democrata Timorese (ASDT) party stopping in the middle of speeches to cheer on the Fretilin supporters who were passing by in trucks and on motorbikes, flying the Fretilin party flag (fig. 12). Cries of *'viva Fretilin!'* and *'viva Frente!'* came from East Timorese who were wearing ASDT T-shirts and who had previously been flying the flag of the ASDT party the same afternoon.⁸⁶

When all of these factors are considered, it is perhaps unsurprising that the original flag, created for the first independent government of Timor-Leste in 1975, was reinstated and endorsed once self-determination was regained in 2002, despite its Fretilin origins. The national liberation struggle is the foundation upon which a contemporary national identity has been constructed and it is a powerful bond that unifies the East Timorese national community. As such, the symbols that represented it

86 The contemporary ASDT party has historical connections to Fretilin: the original party was formed in 1974, but later transformed into Fretilin as it stands today. In 2000, Xavier do Amaral 'resurrected' the original ASDT, which now co-exists alongside Fretilin. See Shoesmith, *Political parties and groupings of Timor-Leste*, pp. 18–20.

have come to represent the collective identity of a people who have resisted foreign occupation, suffered in the name of self-determination, and who have ultimately succeeded.

Conclusion

David Kertzer argues that '[f]ar from being window dressing on the reality that is the nation, symbolism is the stuff of which nations are made'.⁸⁷ In light of this, the importance of the East Timorese flags to national identity construction is affirmed, a process that was instigated by the Indonesian occupation. Over time, the symbolism and the symbols themselves gave meaning *to* the collective, as much as they were given meaning *by* the collective. Under the occupation, the Timor-Leste national flag was a symbol of independence to be regained and, since achieving this goal, it has been attributed an additional meaning — that of the sacrifices during the struggle for independence.

In a state where the consolidation of a national identity and unity is still at the fore of the political agenda, the unity that was achieved under the resistance movement would inevitably have been the starting point from which the political elite began the formal process of self-determination in 2002. As such, considering the enormous support for Fretilin within the resistance movement, partisan ties to the national flag were not considered so problematic as to have to replace it. Indeed, Fretilin continues to enjoy significant respect today. As McWilliam and Bexley affirm,

The Fretilin name retains a deep legitimacy... For the many who endured the long years of the resistance struggle, Fretilin stands as a symbol of their shared suffering and eventual victory. In their minds, to vote against Fretilin would be an act of disloyalty.⁸⁸

Regardless of the party's waning electoral fortunes, the origins of national identity and unity in the years of the Indonesian occupation were intertwined with Fretilin's roots and its contribution to the resistance. It is for this reason that respect is still felt for the party and its authorship of the national flag in 1975 maintains its legitimacy. Since the national flag has been distanced from its partisan origins and is now primarily associated with the bitter struggle for independence and the revered resistance movement, it remains one of the most powerful national symbols in the post-independence state. In the words of one East Timorese man: '[the national flag] is a symbol of us, our country, our identity, many people died for this flag, it is the colour of our spirit'.⁸⁹

87 David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, politics and power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 6.

88 McWilliam and Bexley, 'Performing politics: The 2007 parliamentary elections in Timor-Leste', p. 76.

89 Personal interview, Dili, July 2012. Interview and transcript in English.