

In the pursuit of being human: Social commentary and experimental filmmaking in Timor-Leste

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Introduction

In 2017, East Timorese and Australian filmmakers collaborated to create the film *Emá Nudar Umanu* (Henning and Dias, 2018), the title of which can be loosely translated as ‘people in the manner of being humans’, set in Timor-Leste’s capital city, Dili and its surrounds. In a filmmaking landscape still in its infancy, the film breaks new ground by being the first feature made in Timor-Leste that employs Gothic aesthetics, within the context of a post-independence art movement referred to as *Movimentu Kultura*, one in which artists draw on East Timorese cultural references to intervene in the process of nation-building. Being the product of a cross-cultural collaboration, *Emá Nudar Umanu* demonstrates a hybridisation of local and foreign influences as well as their commitment to what Ancuta (2012: 430) refers to as ‘doing Gothic (or consciously acting upon an established generic convention)’. The film incorporates the supernatural and other well-established conventions of the Gothic genre, such as ghosts as the main protagonists as a way to comment on belonging, identity and being human in the new nation-state of Timor-Leste. Through cinema, the makers suggest that the postcolonial present is haunted by a colonial history of violence, and that citizens must confront colonialism’s legacies of poverty and powerlessness in the quest to build a new nation.

Contemporary art and political and social critique

The arts, such as dance, music, weaving, drawing, painting and sculpting, as manifestations of culture, have played an important role in East Timor’s history.

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Contemporary art has provided a means for undertaking social critique, even from the late 1990s during Indonesian rule when this took the form of asserting more visibly East Timor's separate cultural identity, such as by painting on the Timorese woven *tais* fabric and the work of several *sanggar* (artist studios) in Dili, Manatuto and Oecussi, some of which were associated with Indonesian-born artist and long-term East Timor resident, Yahya Lambert (Conceição Silva and Barrkman 2008: 47 and Crook 2009). Since independence, artists have intervened in debates on the construction of Timor-Leste as a new nation and to promote the importance of the arts in the process of nation-building. Veiga (2019: 256) has argued that '[artists'] attention has been directed towards fostering an inclusive national identity where all spectrums of society are represented.' She characterises the rise in independent Timor-Leste of what artists term *Movimentu Kultura* as a phenomenon in which 'artists residing in the country's metropolis [Dili] share a desire to forge a national identity through fragments of traditional arts, many times coupled with social commentary (Veiga 2019: 256).' One of the most important contemporary art hubs is Dili's Arte Moris, established in 2003 by Swiss couple, Luca and Gabriela Gansser (Conceição Silva and Barrkman 2008: 48).

The rise of *Movimentu Kultura* has coincided with a revival of East Timorese customary ritual practices (sometimes referred to simply as *kultura*) and a valorisation of indigenous origins, as shown for example by the reconstruction of the traditional sacred houses (*uma lulik*) in the countryside (McWilliam 2005: 39). An important element of *kultura* is the practice of honouring the dead, because it is perceived that how the living pays homage to the dead shapes relationships between the living themselves (Bovensiepen, 2014: 119). The dead also continue to be linked to the living through ties such as the *uma lulik* and marriage alliances between families. The rituals to be observed in honouring dead tend to merge Catholic and animist practices (Grenfell 2012: 92-93). Cultural revival in the independence era enables artists to deploy East Timorese motifs and animist beliefs in their work.

Experimental filmmaking in Timor-Leste draws on traditions of oral storytelling, animism and a belief in the spirit world that predated mass conversion to Catholicism in the 1980s and 1990s. A surfacing of the supernatural, even in a globalised form in

a cross-cultural artistic collaboration, relates well to Timor-Leste's recent history, of matters left unfinished and unresolved in its transition to independence. For artists and intellectuals intervening in this arena, as Medeiros (2011: 131) argues, in his work on postcolonial African Lusophone films, 'what is at stake is the conceptualization of a form of postcoloniality that is haunted, by colonialism of course, but also by *the irruption into the present of those forces from the past that condition the possibilities for any future development of the polities in question* (emphasis added).' More broadly, Bräunlein (2016: 12) has argued that Southeast Asian ghost movies, of which East Timorese experimental video and film form a part, fit into the genre of post-mortem cinema, as they reflect 'on identity crises of the living as well as the dead', in which the present is one of precariousness, insecurity and chaos. Concern with the shape of postcoloniality to come has also led to East Timorese artists making audiovisual works that incorporate spirits, ghosts and customary rituals to comment on present day crises and alienation and the unequal distribution of power.

Malkriadu Cinema is a small film production house in Dili and describes itself as 'a creative film collective from Timor-Leste' that produces 'fiction films, music videos, creative documentaries, video projection and installation' (Malkriadu Cinema n.d.). Its aim is 'to develop the roots of a collaborative and experimental film-focused community within Timor-Leste, from which can grow a unique culture of film production.' Irreverent, the production company's name, *malkriadu* means rude or ill-educated in Tetun. In 2015, Malkriadu produced a 17-minute vampire film, *Hamrok ba Ran* (Thirsty for blood), a cross-cultural collaboration between Australian filmmakers and East Timorese actors, musicians and technical crew (Henning 2015). It is a critique of corrupt practices in government, drawing parallels between a vampire (played by Apo Quintão) and a greedy government bureaucrat. They enter into a devil's pact where the bureaucrat traded his blood for the vampire's help to enrich himself. The film is both a wry, social critique of corruption and a comment on the hardships of life in the new nation of Timor-Leste.

Two key creatives in Malkriadu Cinema, Thomas Henning and Jonas Rusumalay Dias, co-write, co-direct and co-produce *Ema Nudar Umanu*, a film of 70 minutes' duration. It was Malkriadu's second film, which will be examined in detail in this

paper. Henning is an Australian film- and theatre-maker who has carried out several collaborations with East Timorese counterparts through theatrical productions, such as the surreal *Doku Rai* (Overturning the Earth) that toured several Australian cities, and films such as *Mensajeiru* (Messenger) (Maia 2013). Although Dias himself did not pursue his creative practice at the art hub, Arte Moris, he enjoyed personal friendships with those artists from Los Palos, his home district, who formed a key part of this hub, such as musician Etson Caminha, musical director of *Emá Nudar Umanu*. Prior to Malkriadu's founding, Dias wrote television sketches, such as for the series *Dalan Realiza Mehi* (Ways of Realising Dreams), produced for young jobseekers and trainees by the State Secretariat for Education and Employment (SEFOPE) and funded by the Asian Development Bank.

Malkriadu's storytelling is of a surreal and Gothic style, a hallmark of work coming out of Arte Moris and its artistic collaborations (Phillips, n.d.), but not usually one of choice in East Timorese filmmaking which has been preoccupied with films depicting the country's history (De Lucca 2020). Representing on film what are perceived to be East Timorese cultural practices and beliefs, such as the idea of restless spirits who have died an uneasy death, for example, are entry points into discussion with a movie-going audience regarding the nature of the self, social- and interpersonal relationships and the ethics of a good life. Using the Gothic genre enables artists to undertake social critique and to participate in debates about East Timorese society and nation, constituting, according to Veiga (2019: 256), 'performative acts of citizenship, which communicate with local and international audiences.'

Being human and postcolonial discontent

Emá Nudar Umanu is preoccupied with social critique and the imagination of an alternative future. It was made with a budget of AU\$7000, the script written, and film shot in five weeks (Henning, pers. comm, 24 February 2020). Post-production, however, lagged for 18 months due to a lack of funds, given there is no government support of creative filmmaking. The country's recent experience of colonisation and of the 2006 *krise* (crisis), in which intra-Timorese conflict arose (ostensibly as a product of divisions between the eastern and western regions of the country), were highly influential on the writing of the film (Leach 2017: 175). In the 2006 crisis, 'easterners' were targeted due to allegations of discrimination in their favour and

against officers from the western region of the country in the East Timorese Defence Force.² Some 150,000 were displaced throughout Dili by fighting between groups split into regional lines (Leach 2017:191). Dias was born in Tutuala, Los Palos in the country's easternmost district, where the Fataluku ethno-linguistic group predominates. He migrated to Dili in 2008, when the city was still recovering from the crisis (Dias, pers. comm, 6 March 2020). East Timorese experiences of violence and colonisation led him into highlighting, in the film, the importance of human values (*valores ema nian*), such as mutual respect, empathy and appreciation of others, and linking these with preventing gender and racial discrimination and the recurrence of violence.

The very title of the film is clearly designed to confound Tetun-speaking audiences, differentiating by placing side by side two words which are, at first glance, very similar to one another: *ema* and *umanu*, both of which are words which can be translated as 'people' or 'humans'. In this, Dias argues, he sets out to emphasise that being biologically human does not equate to behaving in the 'manner of being human', of practising human values. This is important to him as a member of a generation that experienced only the last years of the Indonesian occupation, as young children. In a country where the median age is 17.4 years with 39 per cent of the population below the age of 15 (UNDP 2018: 20), he sees his task as promoting the importance of practising concepts such as equality and tolerance among young people, who did not experience colonialism firsthand, in order to avoid future conflict.

The film's four main characters are a husband and wife couple, a wedding singer/musician (*tocador*) and a female ghost (*mate klamar*). The film opens with a man in a black suit floating in the sea (Apo Quintão). He rises out of the water. He meets a woman dressed in white who is sitting by a fire. In tears, the woman (Lola Betty Pires) confides in him that she is already dead, a ghost (*mate klamar* in Tetun) and she has lost her shadow. The man is confused about how he has ended up there beside her, listening to her story. The film soon shifts to the other protagonists,

² The eastern regions of East Timor are Baucau, Viqueque and Los Palos of which Tutuala is a part, while the western regions are the other 10 regions of the country: Dili, Aileu, Manufahi, Ainaro, Manatuto, Ermera, Liquica, Suai, Bobonaro and Oecussi.

the wedding of a couple (Tuta Monteiro Pires and Juvencio da Silva Correia) taking place in the bare frame of a churchlike building. Their families, each from the east and the west of the country, have arranged their marriage since they were babies, as if alluding to Western colonial powers determining the future boundaries of postcolonial nation-states. They dance their wedding waltz mechanically like dolls, barely looking at one another. They are serenaded by a long-haired wedding singer (Quintão) on his acoustic guitar who we recognise as the man floating in the sea at the opening of the film.

Figure 1 Wedding ceremony (screengrab)

After the wedding, the couple move into a basic cement house that has been constructed above another. Their house is bare and has few furniture. The setting is Dili and surrounds, where land tenure is tenuous after decades of conflict and displacement under Indonesian rule and construction is chaotic and unregulated (Fitzpatrick, 2002: 6). Their house is not unlike many others in Dili, but comes with its very own ghost, the woman in white, who we saw at the opening of the film. *Ena Nudar Umanu* refers to Dili's stark contrast between rich and poor, by showing the destitution of the couple in the film as they struggle to find anything to eat and cannot ask their families for help.

Figure 2 Wedding Singer and Ghost holding hands on a Dili night (screengrab)

On their first morning together, the corpse of a man is left in the street outside their house, which is then cast away at the rubbish tip, symbolising a society in which humans are accorded little value. The film shows a deep pessimism about life in Dili by including a montage of images of urban decay, with voiceovers referring to boredom, a boredom that slowly rots brains and hearts, making everything 'all rotten' in the city. Viewers are shown Dili's 'Smoky Mountain', its rubbish tip, the incessant sandmining of the Comoro River, and monkeys chained up as pets pacing restlessly as far as their chains would allow. The film seems to infer meaningless lives, by, for example asking the question, 'How has life come out like this?' claiming there is no freedom, no liberty and no reason for being human, a reference to the title of the film.

The distinct pall of pessimism about life in the city is an expression of how boredom, poverty, inequality and hopelessness are features of postcolonial dissatisfaction in the country's capital. For Dias, Dili is a 'dirty place' (*fo'er fatin*) and 'not a good place for people to live as humans' (Dias, pers comm. 2020). Dili has increased in size and population from 100,715 in 1999 to 277,279 in 2015, driving competition for living space and access to jobs and infrastructure (*Dili em Números 2018*, 2018: 25). It is, arguably, what Schneider and Susser (2003: 1) term a 'wounded city', a body politic that has been collectively damaged by widespread killing, violence and dispossession that, in turn, has been wounded in more recent times by the city's increasingly sharp social demarcations. Government jobs, contracts and procurement are concentrated in Dili. Yet, the 2015 national census shows, for example, that youth unemployment was as high as 26 per cent in urban areas (UNDP 2018: 5). The city is ill-equipped to dispose of increasing amounts of rubbish, largely detritus from cheap, disposable imports and packaging (Quintão 2018). Sand is mined continuously in the Comoro River to satisfy demand for building materials, as shown in the film.

The search for meaning and dignity leads Husband to go and search of work, but instead he gets kidnapped by an evil man, Gouveia, after his skin inexplicably turns green. Gouveia promised to help him, but instead keeps him imprisoned in a pig pen, ordering him to teach his pigs 'to become smart' from a few old textbooks, in a comment in the film about rote learning. He eventually breaks free and makes his way home to find the Musician has been invited into their house by Wife out of a sense of solidarity with the lonely figure. The Musician is assisted in trying to work out his identity by a giant mirror in the couple's home. In East Timorese culture, the mirror is an item used as part of death ceremonies to enable family members to see the reflection of the spirit of the deceased. In the context of this film, according to Dias, 'We should use the mirror to see ourselves first, to reflect on human values, on the fact that we are all equal (*hanesan hotu*), that we are all just humans (*ita ema de'it*).' The mirror renders Musician visible to himself and symbolises reflection and growing self-awareness.

Figure 3 Husband escaping the makeshift pigpen (screengrab)

Related to the theme of identity is the question of gender and gender roles. While sharing a meal, consisting of cakes that Husband has collected from the rubbish bin, stale and full of cockroaches, Wife confides in him, “Every day I dream of escaping,” telling him of her dislike of housework and her love of parties. Her dream is to invent robots to go to war and to help people plant corn, an important source of food for the East Timorese. In turn, he discloses to her that he prefers to stay home and cook. They seem to find common ground in desiring to challenge the prevailing gendered division of labour in Timor-Leste. While formal mechanisms are in place to improve gender equality, there continue to be gaps in the labour participation rate and rates of pay between men and women (ADB, 2016: 13). In peacetime, despite women’s involvement in the struggle against the Indonesian occupation, recognition of their contribution has been slower to occur compared to the way in which the heroism of male guerrillas has been celebrated (Kent and Kinsella, 2014). The couple in the film find that each of them is not happy with their accorded gender role. Instead, the film suggests, gender fluidity and boundary-crossing can enable one to pursue one’s dreams, and of achieving personal freedom and individual autonomy. An example of such gender-crossing in the film, in terms of childbirth and child-rearing, is discussed below.

Figure 4 Wife and Husband discuss their dissatisfactions (screengrab)

The film also aims to challenge gender norms more broadly, by arguing for acceptance and equal treatment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) people in Timor-Leste. Despite the East Timorese constitution stipulating human rights for all citizens, a report by East Timorese coalition of women’s rights organisations, REDE FETO and the ASEAN SOGIE Caucus (2017) found that a majority of 57 LBT women surveyed had experienced violence, including being subjected to forced marriages, as a result of their sexual orientation and gender identity. Evidence shows that there is also stigmatisation of those who are HIV positive in Timor-Leste, with the Catholic Church having a strong influence on state policies on sexual health and attitudes towards reproductive choices and sexuality (Williams, Haire & Nathan, 2017: 1117; Richards, 2015: 343-58). Dias is critical of the role of religion, more specifically the Catholic Church, and of the education system in promoting what he believes to be a narrow worldview that condones the

oppression of others who may be perceived as different, such as Amanu with his green skin. In the film, the personification of evil in the form of Gouveia, who confines Amanu in the pigpen and violently murders the Wedding Singer, symbolises a system of oppression, a system that stifles creativity and critical thinking among citizens, that takes away life and liberty at will. This system of oppression is made up of a dominant patriarchal culture, as well as religion and government, and Dias argues, it leads to the East Timorese people losing their 'humanness', with gender discrimination being one manifestation of this oppression and this oppression must be resisted.

For most of the film, it is not revealed to the audience the names of our two key protagonists. As the audience, we do not know much about them, other than as possibly, Woman and Man, or Wife and Husband – binary categories. This practice of not naming the couple relates to a major theme of the film, the search for one's identity, belonging and purpose in life, with the end of the national liberation struggle that had so occupied the people before. Youths are reminded on a regular basis of the sacrifices of their elders in establishing the nation-state, as despite its mythic status, this liberation struggle is also one that has remained elusive from the domain of lived experience for those born after 1999. The Wedding Singer and the Ghost too are wondering about where they have come from and how they fit in, if they do. With a growing section of the country's youthful population not having taken part in the national liberation struggle, the film raises the theme of alienation and inter-generational rifts and misunderstandings.

As if in a resolution of some of these contradictions, towards the end of the film, as the Wedding Singer is buried in a hilltop cemetery, the couple stands together by his grave, the grave of a friend they had only just begun to know. At that moment, they disclose their names to one another for the first time; he, Amanu and she, Ela. Disclosing their names shows them beginning to know themselves and to be human. Amanu appears to be carrying the couple's baby in his belly. When the couple finally has a baby girl, each is shown holding the infant and smiling, and then in a rapid burst, the film shows alternating shots of their faces until it becomes difficult to distinguish between the two; they seem to morph into one another. By using this

technique, the film seems to raise the question of whether identity is actively chosen and lived or is governed by oppressive forces such as biology or gender binariness.

Figure 5 Amanu and Ela leave behind the Wedding Singer at his grave (screengrab)

Audience responses

In Dili, the film has been shown a few times free of charge since early 2018 and enjoyed a three-week run in September 2018 at Platinum Cineplex, a cinema complex in the middle-class indoor shopping mall, Timor Plaza (Henning, pers. comm, 24 February 2020; Smith, 2017). Audience numbers were modest, possibly because the US\$5 ticket price was too high for many East Timorese, and according to Henning, the cinema was more accustomed to dealing with mainstream films. With the involvement of mainly Australian filmmakers as collaborators, the film has been shown in Melbourne, Darwin and smaller regional centres including at film festivals, and to niche audiences in art galleries and higher education institutions in the United Kingdom and Malaysia.

Although East Timorese audiences have been- and continue to be exposed to themes of horror, the supernatural and mystical, that constitute strong elements of Indonesian television (Heeren 2012: 136), the surreal storytelling style of Malkriadu Cinema, wrapped around deeper messages about social inclusiveness, has not been as easily digested. Dias blames the influence of Hollywood and Bollywood films in genres such as action, drama, comedy and romance, and Indonesian *sinetron* soap operas. The problem may be that audiences do not view death rituals, spirits and ghosts, which are such embedded parts of their everyday lives as metaphors through which to channel contemporary critiques. Instead, they may be understanding *Emu Nudar Umanu* more as a reflection of an animist world view and a discussion of the appropriate ways of appeasing restless souls. In its varied interpretations, Malkriadu Cinema's creative works, however, contribute to fostering a critical public sphere. Cheah suggests that radical writers and postcolonial theorists of nationalism regard literature as capable of creating or reviving a critical public sphere that can, in turn, be vital in reenergising the national spirit (Cheah, 2003: 258). At the same time, though, the extent to which cross-cultural

collaborations in contemporary art in Timor transmit global ideas and values which are predicated on the rights and accountability of the individual could be an area for further research, with *Emá Nudar Umanu* being highly influenced by Western concepts of individual freedom and liberty, seen as ways of overcoming a nation's problems in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Emá Nudar Umanu is a manifestation of *Movimentu Kultura* in Timor-Leste in the way that it draws on East Timorese cultural references that are brought into play with global transnational concerns and themes, such as gender and identity. Its key message is that personal and individual empowerment should be a corollary of national independence. By emphasising the importance of self-reflection, of overcoming alienation and estrangement from one another, in the journey of the East Timorese people from colonialism to liberation, the film warns that the colonial history of violence is deeply embedded in the fabric of the postcolonial present. Violence not only haunts the built environment of Dili, but is, more troublingly, embodied within the East Timorese as they emerge from colonisation. As part of post-conflict cinema, the film expresses the trauma of the wounding of a city, and by extension, of a land and a people; and in a cinematic exercise of *nunca más* (never again) seeks to perform citizenship in this newly established nation-state by calling for the East Timorese to strive for a more equitable society if they are to overcome the legacies of violence. Its East Timorese cultural reference points also enable *Emá Nudar Umanu* to be interpreted by local audiences in more diverse, complicated and creative ways, thus creating a new, critical public sphere.

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