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'La iha fiar, la iha seguransa': the spiritual landscape and feeling secure in Timor-Leste

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ABSTRACT

While the spiritual landscape in Timor-Leste has been widely acknowledged and documented, its security dimensions remain relatively unexplored and under-theorised. This article argues that there are many different dimensions of security, and that a more holistic acknowledgement of the beliefs and practices which constitute a prominent basis for the ways that people engage with and understand the world is required. Building on qualitative fieldwork conducted in 2016, this article examines how, in Timor-Leste, engagement with the spiritual landscape informs to a significant extent how people experience, understand and produce security, in ways that state-based security provision often cannot.

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Introduction

One afternoon in May 2016 while conducting fieldwork in Uartu-Carbau sub-district (Viqueque municipality), I was travelling with a local colleague¹ and her mother between the villages of Irabin De Beixo and Irabin De Cima. A number of their neighbours and relatives, as well as others we had already interviewed, provided safety advice, such as slowing down at certain locations to greet and pay respect to the *Rai nain*,² asking permission to pass (by tooting the car horn and an offering of a cigarette or gold coin). I had been warned of the consequences of doing or saying anything disrespectful, with community members recounting stories of travellers whose behaviour had resulted in accidents and even death during or after their journey, such as car accidents or people drowning in the river.

Though only a short distance, the journey took almost two hours. As the roads became progressively steeper, muddier and rockier, I felt my anxiety rising. This was not helped by the noises and steam coming from the car's bonnet. Noticing my tension, my colleague pointed out that although we could never avoid problems in life, what we were capable of was creating the best possible scenario through the power of positive thinking. At the same time, my colleague's mother brought out *bua malus* (betel nut) from her bag – blessed from her *uma lulik* (sacred house) – clenching it in her fist while praying to God, her ancestors and the *rai nain sira* that we were passing to ensure that we were safe and unharmed. When we arrived, my colleague's mother and relatives pointed out that our safety was guaranteed; firstly, by following the correct protocol of respectful behaviour; secondly, by acknowledging

and engaging with the various spiritual entities around us; and thirdly, by demonstrating strong faith and positive thinking that we would be protected.

This story reflects a common phrase expressed by those I met during my fieldwork, *la iha fiar, la iha seguransa*, which means that without belief, there is no security. For those who may not share in these particular beliefs or practices, the security dimensions of this story may seem unclear. The point I make in opening with it, however, is to demonstrate the many different ways of being, and forms of knowledge and practices informing the ways in which people understand, experience and produce security in their daily lives. In Timor-Leste, people's beliefs are an important source and demonstration of agency, playing an integral role in the constitution of security. These beliefs have very tangible impacts in terms of the practical ways in which people seek to secure themselves, as well as providing comfort and well-being in a more abstract sense, as expressed by one community member in Irabin De Cima:

...you travel to Dili, or your children leave to study in Dili ... Believe in yourself, believe in God, believe in culture, believe in your *uma lulik*, and everything will proceed well.³

The ideas put forward in this article call to attention how we can work – conceptually and methodologically – to pluralise approaches to security studies. Specifically, how ethnographic methods that capture the complex layering of social and cultural realities, practices, beliefs and sources of knowledge can provide for more contextualised understandings of the everyday lived experiences of security in different sites. Timor-Leste is a country with a long and violent history of colonisation and foreign occupation. After nearly 500 years of Portuguese administration, Timor-Leste declared independence on 28 November 1975 before Indonesian troops invaded nine days later. For the next 24 years, the East Timorese suffered under a brutal regime of Indonesian occupation while Falintil⁴ (the military wing of pro-independence party Fretilin⁵) and an extensive clandestine network mounted a resistance movement.⁶ In August 1999, the East Timorese voted overwhelmingly for independence in the Popular Consultation which saw the Indonesian military and pro-autonomy militia launch a mass campaign of violence and destruction. Since formally gaining independence in 2002, Timor-Leste has been host to ongoing international efforts to 'reform', 'develop' and 'capacity-build' the security sector. Fifteen years and five UN missions later, an abundance of time and resources have been thrust at the architecture of state security institutions. Yet in spite of this – and compounded by a legacy of mass human rights violations, unresolved grievances and trauma – Timor-Leste continues to deal with problems of violence and conflict that regularly punctuate people's lives. Communities, however, continue to demonstrate high levels of resilience and a capacity to negotiate and deal with sources of (in)security in ways that go beyond utilisation and reliance on traditional security apparatus.

In Timor-Leste, there is a prevalent worldview that informs to a significant extent the ways in which people experience and create security in their daily lives. As one part of this worldview, this article focuses on what I refer to as the 'spiritual landscape'. While I will explain in more detail what I mean by this, here I will refer to it briefly as a domain of relational space which, in Timor-Leste, can be broadly said to consist of the following four sources of power: (i) God (*Maromak*); (ii) Ancestors (*Matebian* or *Avo sira*); (iii) spiritual guardians/owners of the land (*Rai nain*) and nature spirits (*espiritu natureza*) and; (iv) *lisan*, the customary regulations of social practices and relationships between the living, ancestors, the spirit world and natural environment.

In this paper, it will be argued that in Timor-Leste people's engagement with the spiritual landscape is pivotal to the ways in which they feel secure (or insecure) in three key ways. Where I speak of people's engagement with the spiritual landscape, I focus on relationships of reciprocity, exchange and power between and among the living, dead and nature. While the fieldwork demonstrated that this landscape has both malevolent and benevolent effects on people's lives, here I primarily discuss forms of protection and harm minimisation.

The first way in which I argue that the spiritual landscape is pivotal to the ways people feel secure is through the significance of having an embodied connection to land, specifically one's origin (place of birth). In the context of Timor-Leste, being 'grounded' to one's 'roots' means being physically, mentally and spiritually tied into relationships of reciprocity and exchange with one's ancestors, nature spirits and spiritual custodians of your land. Being aware of and maintaining these relationships through daily practices and rituals is a crucial element in feeling safe, particularly as it is these connections to one's origin and ancestors that provide vital sources of protection, ensuring the well-being of the living.

The second point I will discuss is how engagement with the spiritual landscape means that it also functions as a form of social regulation tying people into relation with one another. Either directly (genealogically), or more abstractly through a common identification with, and understanding of, shared cultural norms and practices, thus contributing to social cohesiveness. The third point I make locates power within the spiritual landscape, and how the entities and energies which constitute it can be mobilised by people as a kind of resource in acts of protection and risk mitigation of the body and space (such as one's home or community).

Methodology

The arguments put forth in this article draw from fieldwork conducted across two sites: (i) the administrative region of Comoro in Dili (capital city); and (ii) the villages of Irabin De Cima and Irabin De Beixo in Uartu-Carbau sub-district, municipality of Viqueque. Located in the sub-district of Dom Aleixo, Comoro comprises the westernmost suburbs of the city. It is known for having high levels of communal violence; a combination of overcrowding and contested property claims, more diverse demographics (in terms of ethno-regional and linguistic origins) as well as high levels of ritual and martial arts group activity.⁷ The participants quoted in this article were residents of the areas of Bebonuk and Beto Tasi – the latter being particularly notorious with many locals and taxi drivers unwilling to enter the neighbourhood. The two adjoining villages of Irabin De Cima and Irabin De Beixo (formerly a single village, Irabere)⁸ form part of the Uartu-Carbau sub-district area of Viqueque. At the time of fieldwork, it was a 14-hour drive eastward out of Dili (through municipality of Baucau) down to the South coast then travelling further east. Irabin de Cima and Irabin De Beixo are located at the foot of the spiritually and historically significant Mt Matebian and since independence are still known as Fretilin and Falintil strongholds. This was reflected in the interviews, where stories were often about Falintil soldiers or the community's experience of being close to the jungle where civilians and resistance fighters would hide from Indonesian soldiers. As a predominantly subsistence-based society, all participants in this site stated agriculture as their family's main source of livelihoods.

Ethnographically informed methods of data collection were utilised and while there were thematic areas of questioning guiding the interviews, the emphasis was on having informal

conversations, providing the benefit of opening up further points of discussion that may not have been previously anticipated in a more structured interview. *Ad hoc*, day-to-day interactions with neighbours and colleagues opened up new points of inquiry (as well as informing existing ones) and were useful opportunities to obtain further clarification, contributing to the refinement and adaptation of the framing and targeting of interview questions. In both research sites, interviews were conducted in Tetum (the national language) with participants incorporating Bahasa Indonesian and Portuguese vocabulary. In Uartu-Carbau, participants also spoke Naueti, the regional language of that area. Transcriptions remained in Tetum so as not to lose or misinterpret any of the context, with translation into English occurring simultaneously to analysis.

Pluralising approaches to security studies

In the past decade, there have been calls for the ‘widening’ and ‘deepening’ of what and how we conceive of security.⁹ Situated within this, one line of debate critiques how conventional security studies leads to analysis that is limited and ‘distorted’¹⁰ because the core categories and assumptions used are ‘a product of European history and are not necessarily adequate everywhere.’¹¹ This means that Western, Euro-centric categories of understanding and ways of seeing the world dominating the focus of much security theory and practice are often ill-suited in their analytical applicability and relevance to the everyday social, historical and cultural contexts of locations labelled as the ‘global south’, ‘periphery’, ‘failed’, ‘fragile’ or ‘under-developed’ states.¹² Moreover, the often state-centric nature of conventional security studies overlooks the realities of many of these former colonial sites such as limited penetration of state institutions, the prevalence of legal pluralism and colonial legacies, to name a few.

This growing body of literature highlights the absence of focus on the ‘everyday’ realities in the local contexts of communities considered to be in the ‘periphery’ or ‘Global South’¹³ and scholars such as Pinar Bilgin argue that ‘the historical absence [...] of non-western insecurities and approaches has been a “constitutive practice” that has shaped (and continues to shape) both the discipline, subjects and objects of reality in different parts of the world’, resulting in the perpetuation of the ‘western-centric trajectory’ of security studies.¹⁴ In identifying the ‘everyday realities’ of those people I spoke with, a common issue discussed were risks and concerns associated with travel. This was not only because of the threat of violence from gangs but also the potentiality of less materially tangible threats such as those posed by spirits or curses. For instance, when entering into unfamiliar areas it is common practice to ‘announce’ one’s entry. Elaborating further on what this means, my local colleague provided an example of what people may say: ‘Excuse me, I want to enter this area, I recognise you as the owner of this land and area’, followed by a statement of intention (such as visiting a friend) and seeking permission through an offering, usually 5 or 50 cents. By doing this and ‘speaking’ with the natural environment, one is making an agreement to respect and abide by the *lulik* of that area.

Understood to mean several things (sacred, prohibited, taboo, holy or magic), *lulik* is broadly described as ‘the spiritual cosmos that contains the divine creator, spirits of the ancestors, and the spiritual root of life.’¹⁵ It is also considered an energy or source of power – ‘an active agent that can create and destroy life residing in ancestral houses, objects and the environment.’¹⁶ Some participants pointed out that if an area had a strong ‘owner’ who

could sense a person's bad intentions, something bad or strange could happen to them such as becoming mute, falling ill or becoming an easy target for spirits to enter your body. In addition to this, people would also protect themselves from being cursed by strangers by carrying items such as a lemon, or *buah malus*, able to deflect attacks away from one's body. Other observable 'everyday realities' included an acute awareness of the consequences of one's actions, particularly in relation to familial relations and obligations, and the subsequent process of diagnosing the cause or trigger of a death, accident, illness or misfortune. Another common issue cited was the understanding of the perpetuation of misfortune, death or illness as a result of unresolved issues from the past, particularly when it came to crimes committed during the Indonesian occupation.

Hönke & Muller provide perhaps the most detailed and practical discussions of how to go about addressing the issues and shortcomings identified above, and what this would look like methodologically. Their strategies for developing an empirically reflexive methodology for research in 'post-colonial conditions' include: (i) engaging with anthropology and using ethnographic methods, asserting the importance of these over 'statistical surveys, formal models or secondary data' that are 'a reflection of the hegemony of the 'codeable' over the "messy"; and (ii) transferring analytical categories to the experiences as well as social and cultural environment of those being studied. And, finally, moving analytical privilege away from formal and highly institutionalised forms of security governance to the more 'subtle, non-official and little institutionalised' forms, and the interaction of these with their more institutionalised counterparts.¹⁷ The purpose of this research, therefore, is to begin testing alternative approaches that take into consideration the different categories of understanding, social realities and worldviews that continue to have resonance for communities and individuals.

One of the most noticeable trends to emerge early on in the fieldwork was the vocabulary and language used by participants of what it means to feel safe in their home or community, demonstrating many parallels with concepts traditionally located with the global human security discourse. People would speak about *moris bain-bain* (everyday 'normal' life) to differentiate what they were describing from national, state-level security, quality of life (*moris, vida*), health (*saude*) and sickness (*moras*), social cohesiveness, as well as physical and mental well-being (protection from threat of harm, violence) and ensuring safety when travelling or away from home. When it came to describing how they felt secure (or insecure), people would speak about themselves or the community being *hakmatek* or *kalma* (calm, peaceful, tranquil), or *kontenti* (happy). Or in the reverse, of feeling *tauk* (scared), *laran susar* (stressed), *triste* (sad) or *nervozo* (nervous). When it came to discussions of the kinds of factors and conditions contributing to them, their family, or community feeling secure, people would refer to there being an absence of conflict or problems (*la iha problema*), and there being good overall relations among the community. Discussions of feeling insecure would often reference instances of *moras* (sick), *bulak* (crazy), *dizastre* or *accidente*, or *mate* (death). When it came to the discussion of 'referent objects',¹⁸ people spoke in terms of the securing of their 'self' (*aan*), physical body (*isin*), mind (*ulun*) and relationships (family, friends, neighbours and ancestors). Interviews and day-to-day interactions revealed consistency in the use of the words *protéjé*, *defende*, *salva* (protect, defend or save) in relation to the actions people would take to produce security or the experience of feeling safe in relation to their self, body, mind, home and family. These observations regarding the language used by participants are consistent with existing literature. For instance, calling upon ancestors to protect living

descendants during times of conflict or violence,¹⁹ raising armies of spirits to fight enemies and intruders,²⁰ activities of religious cult groups or 'ninjas' who use magic and sacred relics to enact violence and cause harm,²¹ and the role of 'dangerous' spirits in the outskirts of inhabited areas that not only guard the boundaries of the community and protect inhabitants from strangers and sickness but can also restrict the mobility of inhabitants from venturing outside of those boundaries for fear of attack by that malevolent spirit.²² That the spiritual landscape is a reality of the living world with the potential to induce fear or anxiety, create senses of security and insecurity and have influence in governing behaviour, actions and mobility – indicates that people's engagement with it is worth sustained inquiry.

The spiritual landscape in Timor-Leste

The concept of spiritual landscapes has been aptly explained and theorised by anthropologists such as Catherine Allerton and Judith Bovensiepen.²³ As a space, it consists of geographical features (land, mountains, rivers, caves, rocks, trees, etc.) as well as what some would call incorporeal or invisible forces. I use the term 'spiritual landscape' as it speaks to the complex layering and conflation of the living, natural and spiritual world in Timor-Leste.²⁴ It is broadly constituted by the coexistence and relationship of the following sources of power and agency: God (*Maromak*), and other spiritual entities associated with Catholicism; the spirits of ancestors (*matebian sira*); custodians of the land (*rai nain*), as well as other nature spirits and the life-giving force residing within all elements of nature (*espiritu natureza*). In addition to these are the customary rules and regulations – *lisan* – governing relationships between people, people and nature, and the living with the dead. Most East Timorese people live with an acute awareness of the presence of the dead, and of the power of ancestors to influence their lives positively and negatively. In this way, the role of ancestors and spirits in conjunction with *lisan* can therefore be understood as a kind of 'system' or normative compass orientating and regulating social behaviour, interactions and obligations.

Many people's lives consist of an awareness of and relationships with a broad and complex range of entities and forces which can harm or protect, help or punish, cause fortune or misfortune, as well as illness, disaster, death or accidents. As such, the spiritual landscape is a useful term in referring to a domain of relational space in which many East Timorese are situated within and through which they view and engage with the world around them. The overlapping and permeable boundaries between these realms create mutually reinforcing, interdependent relationships of negotiation, exchange, reciprocity and obligation between and across; and where the actions and intentions of one actor or agent can reverberate across the others. Anthropologists such as Dewsbury & Cloke define spiritual landscapes as being constituted by 'sets of relations between bodily existence, felt practice and faith in things'; and refers to 'embodied practices of being in the world, including ways of seeing but extending beyond sight to both a sense of being that includes all senses and an openness to being affected'.²⁵

One of the main findings was the fluidity in which people engaged with the spiritual landscape. For instance, one ritual leader in Dili strongly asserted that it was not possible to place one (God or culture) as more important than the other. This sentiment was often communicated through the phrase *lao hamutuk* (to walk together), that it is not possible to separate culture from nature or spirits (of the dead).²⁶ In addition to power coming from a

range of sources, another noticeable theme was that there was no uniformity in people's beliefs. Namely, that some aspects of the spiritual landscape had more traction for some than others. For example, some respondents were more inclined to place their faith in the church and Catholicism, as indicated below:

It is better to be close to the Church. I only pray. I also put blessed water with *ahuk desan paskoa*²⁷ on my doors and windows, and at the *oratoriu* (small altar). This protects me from bad things, like people with bad intentions or jealousies.²⁸

It is also important to note that the spiritual landscape – and the entities and forces that constitute it – are not necessarily always 'set apart from the profane activities of daily life', but rather are a part of and engaged with as 'intrinsic' aspects of people's lives.²⁹ For instance, the regulation of land, agriculture and natural resources,³⁰ marriage,³¹ governance and authority,³² and conflict resolution³³ amongst many dimensions of daily life.

The importance of connections and being 'grounded'

This section of the article discusses the significance of having strong connections to origin and place of birth – both in terms of the land as well as ancestors residing there. The importance of being aware of one's relationship with and obligations to their family (living and deceased) has ramifications for the level of safety that person feels. These ramifications can be both positive and negative, indicating the capacity of spiritual entities to exert influence over the lives of the living. This was demonstrated during a discussion with one participant who spoke of a recently deceased relative. The family did not believe that it was her 'destiny' to die yet so they suspected that her death was related to a transgression of *lisan*. A ritual concluded that the death was a result of unfulfilled obligations to the deceased's *uma lulik* and ancestors. As the respondent explained, the deceased had been born into the house of Watubita and had married a man from the house of Mola. Her and her husband, however, only ever visited and took offerings of livestock to her great uncle's house of Waidare rather than Watubita:

This made the ancestors unhappy and they asked: 'why do the children of Watubita take cows to kill to that house [Waidare] but don't come to Watubita?' Because she would also never attend when the family *halo adat* (family ceremonies and rituals), we also couldn't give her *bua malus*. So the ancestors were angry and made her sick, and then a few weeks later they compelled her to die. [...] Because she did not show respect and acknowledgement of her sacred house and her birth place.³⁴

While this story represents the more malevolent, consequential aspects of the spiritual landscape, all participants expressed the belief that a strong relationship afforded you protection. For instance, it is quite common to call upon ancestors to watch over living descendants, particularly if that person is about to go on a long journey, travel overseas, or in cases of heightened insecurity, as expressed by the following respondent:

They [family] wanted to protect me in 2006. I was the only person [in my family] in Dili. I never fled. The older people in the *uma lulik*, the ritual will sound like this: 'you have your grandchildren in Dili working to support their family. Can you please look after him and give him good health, protect him from any harm'. [...] Or if you travel, like yesterday, my dad brought me a goat to kill. It's like good fortune.³⁵

These examples above show two related dimensions of people's relationship to the ancestors. Firstly, the potential consequences (and threats to a person's safety and well-being) that can

stem from failing to fulfil obligations. Secondly, not maintaining connection leaves one unprotected and vulnerable to harm. Maintaining these connections involved returning to one's place of origin, visiting your *uma lulik*, participating in ceremonies and rituals and providing offerings (of money and livestock). One of the consequences, as demonstrated by the above respondent's comment that the deceased was not given *bua malus*, is that your name is left out of prayers and blessings that are performed to protect you. As such, the significance of not being physical or spiritually present is that one's link to their family and ancestors would be weakened. This was described as *hamrik namlele* (to be floating), that without roots one is unstable and can fall easily.

Another dimension of this connection was through an understanding of your family's *lisan* and acknowledgement of culture and customs, and that possessing this knowledge was important in terms of navigating the world around you and to be aware of the causes of problems in your life, or how spiritual entities can exert influence in your life. It was a commonly expressed sentiment that for the people who did not understand and respect culture there would be consequences or that in the future you would always face problems:

If you live according to cultural traditions, then it can give you security advantages. [...] If you get sick, then you can understand the cause: such as not showing respect or consideration, or ignoring the cultural rituals. You could go to the river and know that the (crocodile) water guardian/spirit is there and you would know not to irritate the crocodile because it is sacred. But if you do, then maybe something bad will happen. If you sever your connection to customs and regulations just because you don't want to follow them anymore, this can provoke illness, or you can meet with some kind of disaster or accident.³⁶

What this suggests is that one's spiritual connection to their origin ancestors, further strengthened by maintaining close physical proximity to one's place of birth, is an important aspect of gaining the knowledge and understanding of the origin narratives, rules, customs and relationships of reciprocity which all work to ensure well-being and minimise risk. The following respondent was one of many who also spoke of the benefits of connecting with nature, spirits and ancestors:

You need to look to connect with them; connect with nature, connect with *lulik*, connect with God. How do you make this connection? Normally daily, through prayer. But you can also meditate. You can ask to connect with nature or *rai lulik* (sacred land). For example, here, people are afraid to go into the jungle. But Xanana went and lived there – he did not eat or drink. He suffered, and so in return nature came to defend him and help him [and the other Falintil resistance fighters he was with]. They could be in any place in the mountains, and the Indonesian forces could have circled them already, but they would be able to escape quickly. The heavy rain would suddenly come. Where did that come from? From Xanana, from God, from the sacred land.³⁷

As felt by participants across both research sites, a key significance (and benefit) of having a strong spiritual and physical, embodied connection with the spiritual landscape, meant that one would be afforded certain abilities or powers to protect oneself. Although this was only possible through an exchange process, specifically, the sacrifice of something important in one's life in order to gain something valuable.

Social regulation and cohesion

The second way in which the spiritual landscape informs how people feel secure (or insecure) is through the role and function of *lisan* acting as a kind of moral compass and the sense of

security this provides by knowing one another. This contributes to a certain level of social cohesion by tying people into relation with one another, either directly – genealogically – or more abstractly through a common identification with and of understanding of shared cultural norms and practices as explained by the following respondent:

If you don't have *lisan*, there's no mutual respect. If you are far away from home and meet someone on the road, you can ask where they are from. They could say 'I am from Manufahi. My *uma lisan* is Bermia! Your *uma lisan* could also be Bermia, and so in this way you already know each other. We all have the same ancestors, we all have the same roots and come from the same *huun*,³⁸ and so in this way we all also have the same *Lisan*. Like Adam and Eve, or Cain and Abel.³⁹

Even those who did not particularly conform to customary beliefs still recognised the role of having a common belief system:

What's the purpose? Social bindness. Social Cohesion. I think a community that is cohesive tends to be more secure. Because they know each other, they know where everyone sits in the society and then where they respect each other. For example, the Church, it's kind of a uniting force. It gives people a sense of being a part of something.⁴⁰

This same respondent drew on childhood experiences saying that based on his observations his neighbours would not even know the full purpose or meaning of some of the religious or customary practices they engaged in but continued to do so as it was what everyone around them was doing and their parents had told them to do, thus eventually forming a habitual act. He went on to say that although he did not personally believe in the actual content of these beliefs, he could see the merit in them:

There are certain benefits to have people believe in something or fear, sense of fear. That is why we use *Tara Bandu*,⁴¹ right, to put the fear. If you cut this tree, you gonna get unlucky. It's stupid but gets things done. [...] ... it binds people. Whoever cuts this tree, you're going to get a punishment and it didn't say unless if you are a girl or unless if you are a kid – it's everyone. Everyone understands what that means, what they can and cannot do. So, the do's and don'ts itself make a sense of community. And if one f***** tried to break it, they are gonna get punished.⁴²

Although this represents a contrasting view to many of the other research participants, this participant could recognise the positive impacts that come with engaging with the spiritual landscape, even if he did not personally share the beliefs. As such, viewing them pragmatically in relation to their function and purpose in social regulation.

Locating power in the spiritual landscape: protection and harm minimisation

Throughout interviews and conversations, examples of protection (of bodies, homes or communities) ranged from general daily practices of risk prevention, to more reactionary efforts when faced with direct insecurity or threat. Discussions of these examples brought to light what could be termed as the mobilisation of entities or energies from the spiritual landscape. While there are many, here I will outline just a few that were the most commonly discussed. The first is the previously mentioned *buā malus* used in a range of ways:

You can put it on graves, inside your house. If you are travelling you can chew it or put it in your wallet, carry it with you, and it can save your life. For example, you could be travelling far and a person may be planning to kill you but if you pray, your *uma fukun* [clan] can save you [...] My *buā malus* is from my ancestors who can save me. God can save me; my land can save me.⁴³

Bua malus is imbued with power by the ancestors through a process in which it is blessed inside one's *uma lulik*. Some participants also referred to this as *matak malirin* (*matak* being green, representing the *bua malus* and *malirin* referring to shelter and protection). Another item commonly discussed by participants was *biru* which functions as an amulet or protective charm. *Biru* and its source of power and protective qualities were best described by the following participant:

Biru is not just any one item. It is a symbol and can be made from anything, material or roots, you just need to worship it. Its power can come from anything depending on the person's belief. Its power can come from your *uma lulik*, ancestors, God, or sacred (*lulik*) places [in nature].⁴⁴

Many of the stories recounted were from the resistance era, but continue to serve as tangible accounts of where a person's life or a place was secured by a range of forces. In Uartu-Carbau, for instance, community members spoke specifically of well-known Falintil resistance fighters (and current key political figures and veterans) such as Xanana Gusmao, Tau Matan Ruak, L-7 and their *biru*. One particular interviewee who spoke extensively about *biru*, referred to one of its functions as 'modifying the situation'.⁴⁵ For example, Tau Matan Ruak was able to hide in the jungle and avoid capture by Indonesian forces because his *biru* had the power to shut the eyes (*taka matan*) of the enemy. Other abilities included changing the appearance of one's face (*troka oin*) so those looking for you may even be talking to you and not realise, or changing a person's intentions of harming or killing you (*troka hanoin*), so that when they come face-to-face with you they forget their original intentions.⁴⁶

One participant recounted their experience during the 2006 crisis in Dili. In this case, he was part of a small group hiding in a marketplace, outnumbered by thousands just feet away from the perimeter of the market on the main road. An elder was called from Laga (a village located in Baucau municipality) to conduct a ritual (*taka netik*) which created a protective barrier around the market as well as creating the illusion that there were thousands of heavily armed people within the marketplace.⁴⁷ Other protective qualities of *biru* that were mentioned by participants included invincibility and anthropomorphism:

Most of the FALINTIL fighters used spirits. [...] During the war, none of my family got killed from the bullet, some of them were shot, like seventeen bullets in their body – they still survive. [...] They used their *uma lulik* protection- it's a kind of spirit as well. So, they call all of their ancestors to protect you, and they use nature, like spirits to protect them. Like Taur Matan Ruak and Xanana [...] some people say that L-7 can turn himself into a snake. Then if he gets killed, he can remain alive.⁴⁸

The ability of the land to protect its inhabitants was also a recurring theme, particularly in conversations in Uartu-Carbau where participants referenced the *lulik* power of the land and the *Rai Nain* (of the river – *mota Irabere*). It was explained that the *Rai Nain* could stop outsiders who wished to cause harm from transgressing certain boundaries but in cases where a person did, did they would be met with misfortune. Participants cited examples of Indonesian soldiers or other outsiders going crazy, drowning in the river as they attempted to cross the bridge, or the bridge itself collapsing:

During those 24 years, no-one ever entered here, no-one was ever harmed here. They would enter into other villages nearby. We all hid here because the Indonesians could not enter. Even the people from Uartu-Lari came here to hide. Same as during the 2006 crisis. Why? Because the environment was safe and calm. Why? Because the land is *lulik* -it would defend the people here, it wasn't possible to die. Even during the occupation, The Indonesians also believed that this land was *lulik* and so they were scared. They would just stand at the bridge but they wouldn't cross.⁴⁹

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to demonstrate that there is no ‘universal ontology’⁵⁰ of security, that it is a subjectively lived and formed experience and emotion. In challenging existing orthodoxies and rethinking security, we must recognise that factors of security and insecurity are ‘embedded’ in context and culture.⁵¹ The spiritual landscape that I discuss here is just one aspect of a particular worldview in Timor-Leste informing the myriad ways in which security is understood, experienced and produced. Similarly, the three points I have outlined here in this paper in regards to the connection between the spiritual landscape and security, are just a few of the many ways in which the people that I have spoken with experience and produce security in their daily lives.

It is sometimes claimed that ‘there is no culture in Dili’, and while it may be true that customary structures and beliefs in the urban capital are not as visibly apparent at first glance, that the spiritual landscape is a prominent aspect of people’s daily lives consisting of God, ancestors, nature custodians and spirits was consistent among all participants across both research sites. Moreover, although some specifics of *lisan* and spiritual beliefs can vary between families and ethno-linguistic regions (such as ancestor origin narratives, the physical forms taken by nature custodians, or prohibitions regarding consumption of foods or use of natural resources, to name a few), what does remain consistent are ways of engaging with the spiritual landscape and the values embedded in these relationships (for instance, reciprocity, exchange and notions of balance). What can vary, however, is the extent to which one source may have different levels of traction for different individuals time (such as the precedence of Catholicism over other practices expressed by some of the participants), or at different points in time. The point of this article has been to show how a more empirically engaged approach utilising ethnographic methods has brought forward a discussion of reconceptualising security in the context of Timor-Leste and spirituality.

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Notes

1. In addition to providing translation support, this person acted as a cultural broker and was an important link into the community. Her participation in interviews also made for a more relaxed, conversational-style of interviewing and post-interview debriefs and other time spent working together provided invaluable reflective discussions and sharing of different perspectives.

2. A Tetum term used to refer to the owners or custodians of a particular geographical feature, such as a banyan tree, river, waterfall, caves, mountains etc.
3. Male Respondent, mid-30s, Ritual Leader and former Village Chief. Irabin De Cima, Viqueque (16 May 2016).
4. Portuguese acronym for *Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste*.
5. Portuguese acronym for *Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente*.
6. The Clandestine network was an integral part of the resistance movement. Civilian-led and organised, it providing important sources of strategic support, logistics and information for guerrilla activity.
7. Scambary, "Conflict and Resilience in an Urban Squatter."
8. While these two villages are now officially recognised as separate administrative regions, most of the community members still referred to their home as 'Irabere' and of both villages consisting of the same extended family remaining connected from many generations ago through inter-marriage. Furthermore, the name of the main *lulik* site in the region was called *Mota Irabere* (Irabere River).
9. Buzan and Hansen, "Widening and Deepening Security."
10. Barkawi and Laffey, "The Postcolonial Moment in Security Studies," 330.
11. Seth, "Historical Sociology and Postcolonial Theory," 336.
12. Ibid.
13. Lemanski, "Everyday Human (In)security: Rescaling for the Southern City"
14. Bilgin, "The "Western-centrism" of Security Studies," 615.
15. Trindade, "Lulik: The Core of Timorese Values," 16.
16. Bovensiepen, "Lulik: Taboo, Animism, or Transgressive Sacred," 121, 122.
17. Hönke and Müller, "Governing (In)security in a Postcolonial World: Transnational Entanglements," 392, 395.
18. In security studies, this term refers to an object, ideal or person that is at threat and/or requires securing and protection.
19. McWilliam, "Harbouring Traditions in East Timor," 1123.
20. Bovensiepen, "Spiritual Landscapes of Life and Death," 329.
21. Molnar, "An Anthropological Study of Atsabe Perceptions of Kolimau 2000"; and Myrntinen, "Phantom Menaces: The Politics of Rumour, Securitisation."
22. Pannell, "Welcome to Hotel Tutuala: Fataluku Accounts," 207.
23. Allerton, "Introduction: Spiritual Landscapes of Southeast Asia"; and Bovensiepen, "Spiritual Landscapes of Life and Death."
24. Grenfell, "Modernising Timor-Leste: Moving Beyond Ideology," 211.
25. Dewsbury and Cloke, "Spiritual Landscapes: Existence, Performance and Immanence," 696.
26. Male Ritual Elder, Bebonuk, Comoro (29 February 2016).
27. This was described as a special type of Holy dust that people get from the church at Easter.
28. Female respondent, widowed. Active church participant. Irabin De Beixo, Viqueque (14 May 2016).
29. Allerton, "Introduction: Spiritual Landscapes of Southeast Asia," 238.
30. Kehi and Palmer, "Hamatak Halirin: The Cosmological and Socio-Ecological Roles"; and Thu, "Access to Land and Livelihoods."
31. Hicks, "Compatibility, Resilience and Adaptation"; and Niner, "Barlake: An Exploration of Marriage Practices and Issues."
32. Cummins, "Democracy or Democrazy? Local experiences"; Grenfell, "Rethinking Governance and Security in Timor-Leste"; and Molnar, "Died in the Service of Portugal: Legitimacy of Authority."
33. Babo-Soares, "Nahe Biti: The Philosophy and Process of Grassroots Reconciliation"; and Trindade and Castro, *Rethinking Timorese Identity as a Peacebuilding Strategy*.
34. Female respondent, widowed. Aged 60s. Became an informal ritual elder after her husband passed away. Irabin de Beixo, Viqueque (12 May 2016).
35. Male respondent, mid-30s, director of social enterprise. Comoro, Dili (21 March 2016).
36. Male respondent, mid-60s, Village Chief. Irabin de Beixo, Viqueque (12 May 2016).
37. Male respondent, mid-50s, secondary school teacher, Irabin De Cima, Viqueque (15 May 2016).

38. This word refers to tree but also can be used when talking about one's origin or source.
39. Male respondent, late 20s, spiritual healer. Comoro, Dili (11 April 2016).
40. Male respondent, late 20s, NGO staffer. Comoro, Dili (13 March 2016).
41. A customary practice that enforces a regulation or prohibition. Often conducted in the regulation of natural resources, and as a method of conflict resolution.
42. Male respondent, late 20s, NGO staffer. Comoro, Dili (13 March 2016).
43. Male Respondent, mid-30s, Ritual Leader and former Village Chief. Irabin De Cima, Viqueque (16 May 2016).
44. Male respondent, mid-50s, secondary school teacher, Irabin De Cima, Viqueque (15 May 2016).
45. Male respondent, mid-50s, secondary school teacher, Irabin De Cima, Viqueque (15 May 2016).
46. Male respondent, mid-50s, secondary school teacher, Irabin De Cima, Viqueque (15 May 2016).
47. Male respondent, mid-30s, director of social enterprise. Comoro, Dili (21 March 2016).
48. Male respondent, mid-30s, director of social enterprise. Comoro, Dili (21 March 2016).
49. Male Respondent, mid-30s, Ritual Leader and former Village Chief. Irabin De Cima, Viqueque (16 May 2016).
50. Bubandt, "Vernacular Security: The Politics of Feeling," 275.
51. Grenfell and James, *Rethinking Insecurity, War and Violence*, 15.

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