

Dress and Globalisation

By Margaret Maynard

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It's not difficult to identify the many cultural forces at play in East Timor. During my visits there, the mix of cultural elements is evident in every aspect of life from East Timorese, Indonesian and Portuguese music, language and food, to the obvious varying styles in dress. Locals wear T-shirts with brand names like "Star Wars", "Tweety and Sylvester", "Spice Girls" and "Nike". It's quite likely that some of this is the counterfeit labels donated by the Australian Federal Police, who had seized them as part of a criminal investigation. Women combine western clothing with customary, hand-woven cloth known as 'Tais', expressing and often revealing their cultural heritage and identity.

Brisbane fashion historian Margaret Maynard in her book *Dress and Globalisation* discusses how clothes form part of an information exchange and reveal differentially decoded messages about change within the global environment. Maynard explores the global homogenisation of dress, noting that western-style dress is widely adopted across cultures. She argues that there remains a powerful desire to express cultural, personal and local differences through dress. The prevalence of global brands, counterfeit or genuine, does not change the fact that people remain "engaged in multifarious style accommodations and resistances in their day-to-day choices of self-presentation".

A key to Maynard's critique of globalisation is the ability of everyone to express identity through choice. Yet she also acknowledges that choice is conditioned by what is offered for selection. In poor communities like East Timor, diversity is limited and poverty often negates personal and communal choice. Decisions to utilize dress as a reflection of individuality are restricted by inadequate resources. Consequently, the allure of an increased variety in consumer goods draws rural East Timorese away from their social networks into the city to join the thousands of other unemployed people living in Dili. According to the World Bank and IMF, the only way to reduce unemployment and increase consumer choice is to invest in economic activity and per capita consumption through free market initiatives.

Arundhati Roy argues that the extensive and supportive communal relations within many indigenous societies persist because the aggressive nature of capitalist relations has not penetrated their social structures. This is evident in the egalitarianism of rural and urban communities in East Timor, rich in the interpersonal connectedness that many of us in the west hunger after. Engaging in capitalist style development jeopardizes cultural relations and values. However, considering the abject poverty in East Timor, some form of development is necessary. There are many efforts to preserve cultural practices, especially within the legal system where there have been successful attempts to integrate traditional and state concepts of justice. Approaches such as these elevate the significance of traditional systems and open doors for other initiatives to do the same. One such initiative is KOVEFOKTIL (Cooperative of Veteran

Women, Widows and Orphans Timor Leste) who are attempting to deal with the new challenges presented by East Timor's independence while prioritising the preservation of local customs, practices and associations.

The benefits from projects such as KOVEFOKTIL are substantial. Tais contain motifs that are a symbolic dialogue, marking kinship and diverse cultural practices in specific districts. A concentrated presence of the Portuguese in the south east of the island, influenced the emblematic form of the weavings, though not the ritual use of the cloth. Through more than 400 years of colonial rule, the cloth remained an important signifier of traditions. By the commercial application of the traditional weaving skills used to create Tais, the women of KOVEFOKTIL are safeguarding their ceremonial value and traditions while simultaneously easing the disadvantages of poverty. Although the cooperative focuses on empowering women, particularly those who were widowed during the 24 year occupation, many younger generations of East Timorese women are participating and learning old skills.

East Timor Women Australia - ETWA, an Australian non-profit, voluntary organisation based in Melbourne, supports the cooperative by developing new ways for women to apply their cultural heritage to improve their life chances. We develop and find markets for their handcrafts, provide financial assistance and offer organisational support and advice. Interestingly, the cooperative model i.e. common ownership, consultation and member participation is akin to the relations within traditional East Timorese social structures, unlike the exploitative state and privately-owned "cooperatives" that operated in East Timor during the Indonesian occupation. Through collective decision making and consultation, a suitable business model is emerging at KOVEFOKTIL. The cooperative structure provides living proof of the promise of independence and self-determination for the people of East Timor, particularly women. We could learn much about cooperation, patience, loyalty and the essence of friendships from them.

Although there are many cultural forces at play in East Timor, the people of KOVEFOKTIL possess a resilient determination to maintain their cultural identity. Although at times they have insufficient funds to buy cotton etc, their allegiance to each other is shown by their continued presence at the centre. And in spite of the many conservative organisations with an influential presence in East Timor, KOVEFOKTIL sustains its autonomy while extending solidarity with its Australian sisters involved in ETWA. They are embedded in the capitalist economy and therefore, their presence in the market is inevitable. However they are not adopting inequitable relations in order to survive in it, rather their cultural identity will be preserved by their practice.

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