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## The Power of Music in Timor-Leste: Resistance and Poetry

by Monika Schlicher and Maria Tschanz

Joviana Guterres, Ego Lemos and Kiera Zen explain in this interview how national identity, fight for liberation, contemporary political concerns and uniquely Timorese ideals are communicated through traditional and new songs. Monika Schlicher and Maria Tschanz spoke with the musicians in September 2019 in Timor-Leste.

**First of all, could you tell us something about yourself? How would you describe yourself?**

**Ego Lemos:** I am a Timorese singer and songwriter. I was born in 1972. In my daily life, I work as a permaculturalist, we work to facilitate installing school gardens in the whole country and water conservation to restore the environment. We also organize permaculture youth camps

every two years. My music is inspired by my work and my work is inspired by music.

**Kiera Zen:** I am an ordinary Timorese who tries to do something for my country. I'm also a songwriter. I don't know whether I am considered an artist. We founded the first orchestra in Timor-Leste, Berliku Fanu Rai (BFR). We would like to give more opportunities to young Timorese to try to find their way, and try out where they fit in, in this society.



*Ego Lemos at the  
Konsertu Populár in  
Dili on 29.08.2019  
(Photo: Monika  
Schlicher)*

**Joviana Guterres:** I am 30 years old, studied in Hawaii and work for the human rights organization AJAR Timor-Leste. Since 2017, I have been performing my own songs. For me, music was and is like a blessing. There was finally an opportunity to express myself. My music is largely influenced by my working environment.

**Music is widely used for political protest and resistance. Can you explain how music is used as a means by movements in Timor-Leste? About what role it played during the resistance against the Indonesian occupation 1975 – 1999?**

**Ego Lemos:** During the resistance, not many people were aware that music and culture are powerful and influential. We had a diplomatic resistance, we had a clandestine resistance, we had an armed resistance. But we forgot that cultural resistance plays a very important role to keep the culture of the East Timorese alive. The spirit of music evoked their spirit and their strength to fight for independence.

**Kiera Zen:** As you know, the fight against Indonesia was very hard. We had to find ways out,

to resist, yet not only to resist but also to gain more influence; to convince not only more East Timorese, but also more Indonesians, more outsiders. In doing that, we had to try with as many ways as possible. Music also served this purpose. Even during the resistance in the bush, the freedom fighters were using music as a healing source and to strengthen the revolutionary spirit. And still, until now, it is acknowledged that music has contributed a lot to the movement.

**Joviana Guterres:** The movie called 'Generation 99' (Truth, Reconciliation and Rock & Roll in

*Joviana at the Konsertu Populár during the Solidarity Festival  
in Dili on 29.08.2019 (Photo: Monika Schlicher)*



Timor-Leste), which we just released at AJAR, reports on the role of music during the resistance. At that time, there were three fronts: the clandestine student resistance, the diplomatic resistance and the armed resistance with the Falintil. The “front of the art movement” was not mentioned. Music gave the resistance movement courage and the willingness to fight on. The resistance fighters in the jungle also had musical instruments with them – that is what I was told by others – and they composed their own songs. The songs talk about the resistance but they were always “veiled”, as if they were simple love songs, so that the occupiers did not notice it. Only us East Timorese could really understand the metaphors. We could sing those songs everywhere like that. That way, the role of music became strong for the resistance.

## Which musical traditions are cultivated in the resistance, which role models are used for music activism? In what way did music strengthen the identity and unity of the people in Timor-Leste?

**Ego Lemos:** So many traditional lyrics in popular songs were replaced by revolutionary lyrics. As you know, the traditional song ‘Kolele Mai’ (in the Australian band Midnight Oil’s version in solidary support of East Timor’s struggle) was modified by Fransisco Borja da Costa [Note from the authors: Borja da Costa was executed by Indonesian forces on 8 December 1975, the day after the start of the Indonesian invasion of East Timor. He was a member of the Central

### Kolele Mai: What is the Reason?

*Kolê lele mai rade kokodelê kôle le mai  
Kolê lele mai rade kokodelê kôle hele lalo! kôlele mai*

*I  
What is it that makes your corn not grow?  
What is it that makes your rice not flower?*

*II  
What is it that makes your stomach not full?  
What is it that makes your sweat not dry?*

*III  
Some say you are lazy, some say you are stupid  
Some say it is stupidity, others say it is poverty*

*IV  
What is the reason for it?  
Who, who, is really responsible?*

Lyrics of the song by Fransisco Borja da Costa – published as an English translation in: Jolliffe, Jill: *Revolutionary Poems in the Struggle Against Colonialism. Timorese Nationalist Verse*. Sydney 1976, p. 31 (Photo: Monika Schlicher)



Committee of the Fretilin Party], who put very revolutionary lyrics in it, to invoke people to keep fighting for independence.

And so many songs helped people. Music was inspired by the situation and the political pressure. So we also wrote songs about peace and unity.

When Indonesia in 1975 invaded, I was three years old. While growing up, ‘Kolele Mai’ was dancing music. The rhythm is still there, the tune is still there, people attached happy lyrics to it. But most people know it is a revolutionary

*Ego Lemos at the Konsertu Populár in Dili on 29.08.2019  
(Photo: Monika Schlicher)*



*Kiera Zen  
(Photo: Philipp Ray)*







*Francisco Borja de Costa – an exhibition honoring the journalists and artists who were murdered during the time of Indonesian occupation 1975 – 1999 at the Centro Nacional Chega! in Dili between August and September 2019. Filmmaker Max Stahl's documentation of the massacre that took place on the 12th of November 1991 on the cemetery of Santa Cruz raised an enormous amount of international awareness regarding the conflict in Timor-Leste. (Photo: Monika Schlicher)*

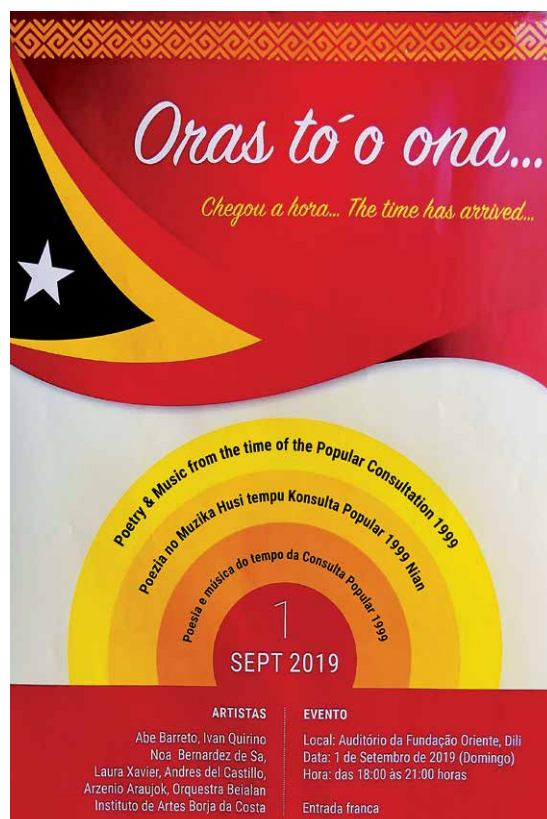
song. It is a very popular song. A traditional song from Baucau.

Following the same principle I wrote the song Hadomi Timor (*Love for Timor*) in 1999. The lyrics are not as straightforward, I had to use a lot of metaphors. But all the Timorese people understood what feeling was expressed in this song. For instance, Soe Isin Lemorai, one of our brightest singers and songwriters who already passed away, wrote a song called 'Hau hakarak kaer ba fitun'. He wrote it while he was in prison. People think he simply meant, 'I want to reach for the stars'. But what he really meant to say was that, sooner or later, Timor-Leste would be independent.

I think many songwriters used lots of metaphors in their music to invoke the people to move towards independence. Even our independence leader Maun Xanana wrote songs, not recorded yet, during the resistance in the jungle. And some

guerrilla fighters wrote songs, too. I think the meaning of the songs is to keep up the spirit and fight for independence. That is why music and culture is very important. It has a large influence in bringing people together. I think whether from Los Palos, from Tutuala, from east, south, north and west in Timor-Leste, the rhythm and the meaning remain the same. The lyrics are different. The instruments that people use, like a drum, are also the same. Even though Indonesia is a big country that tried to spread division, they could not separate us because the music is flowing throughout the whole country. It is a good thing that culture in Timor until now is still visible).

*Oras to'o ona – Poetry & Music from the time of the Popular Consultation 1999. Flyer for a cultural event held 1.9.2019 in Dili. (Photo: Monika Schlicher)*



**Kiera Zen:** Music as a means of resistance began with Borja da Costa and his poems about Timor-Leste. They were new, inspiring and motivating to many East Timorese. Borja da Costa and Abilio Araujo are, to me, those who really set the ground for music to be used as part of a movement. And then we had the band Cinco do Oriente (The 5 Do Oriente 1972). (Of the five founding members, during the Indonesian occupation, three were “disappeared” outside Hotel Dili after a gig, and were never seen again. Toto Lebre re-established the band in 1995. Today the band has five new members and continues to play traditional Timorese music combined with modern sounds.)

In Australia, for example, Agostinho Moniz wrote a romantic song called 'Maria' (see the [original](#), as well as a [cover version](#) by the Dili Acoustic Community (DAC), performed at Natar Rohan Cafe & Bar, Maliana, Timor-Leste, in 2018). So when we sing this song, the Indonesians think, "Oh, it's a love song", but we East Timorese know it is a song about Timor-Leste.

The young generation really learned from those artists. And later, from the 1980s to the 1990s, some music groups were established and songs were written only to mobilize the movement and to fire up the spirit of the young East Timorese. One song I remember is 'Lemorai'. It is about all Timorese going around the world to fight for independence. They bring what they can to contribute to the process. And then, later in 1999, Lahane Group released the songs 'Oras to'o ona' (*The time has come*) – which was the song of the [United Nations Mission in East-Timor \(UNAMET\)](#) to carry out the referendum – and '[Loron aban hahu ohin](#)' (*Tomorrow starts today*). The song became an iconic song for the referendum that inspired everyone to go and vote for our freedom.

So, music has different roles and is contributing a lot. Today, to keep up that spirit and to remember those songs and their roles in the struggle for liberation, I ask my orchestra team to have those songs be written in orchestra formats. In this way, they are passed on to the younger generation.

## Is music still an instrument to express political, social and environmental concerns today? And can it be a tool for education?

**Kiera Zen:** I think the musicians had a big task to support and mobilize people with their music. From 2002 to 2005, I was in a band called Rai Nain (*Indigenous*). There were five songs I wrote that protested Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri at that time, because of his approach. For me, at that time, he was quite a dictator, so I protested him through a song call 'KETA'. He insulted people like us who graduated from Indonesia. He said "Sarjana Supermie", instant noodle graduates. In one of my songs I said, "Yes, we are 'Sarjana Supermie', but we eat plants, which come from nature. You eat cheese, which comes from an animal. That's why your mentality is so bitter in treating people.



It's true! It's true! My parents were very Fretilin. Now, I was perceived as being against the party. I told them: "Look, I was in the jungle with you three or four years. And what I learned during the fight is that it's about consensus and self-criticism. It's about accepting differences and finding a solution together. One must not dictate one's own idea to others as the right way." I see that these approaches are no longer part of the spirit of Fretilin. I wrote another song called 'Nasionalismo' to express this concern about how Fretilin treats people and what inhuman approaches the party takes in politics.

*Abe Baretto Soares live at the Oras to'o ona cultural event in Dili (1.9.2019). (Photo: Monika Schlicher)*

## Many musicians were and are politically motivated. Do you think this will continue, and are young people getting involved?

**Ego Lemos:** Yes. I think during the resistance, music was used for unity and to bring people together. Even now, music plays an important role in the development of the country. I think now many are surprised to see a singer-songwriter who writes very inspirational songs. Many of them now are female singer-songwriters like Cidalia and Joviana. There are many



## Joviana „Labarik Lakon“ by Gil Asis

*Hau kaer metin o tais rohan, wainhira sira mai.  
Militar ida dehan „lori ida ne’e“, hau hanoin ba eskola.  
Husi karreta laran haree o matan ween suli, tinan 30 liu neineik.  
Maibe ohin hau fila, fila ba hau moris fatin.*

*Tau iha ro laran hakur tasi husik hau uma fuik.  
Ema sira hanesan laran di’ak mai hau, maibe hau tauk wainhira nakukun  
Mama, Mama, Mama, Mama mai foti hau, keta husik hau mesak.  
Hakuak hau, mai salve hau, hau hakarak fila, fila ba hau horik fatin.  
Hau hakarak fila, fila ba hau horik fatin.*

*Dook tebes iha tasi balun, suli hau isin no fuan ran Timor.  
Labarik lakon, fetu no mane lao namkari laiha lian.  
Loron la’o, kalan mos lakon, lori ai-funan ba mutu,  
Teki-tekir inan feton mosu, lori lia menon, nia hetan hau.  
Mama husik nia-an fiar katak, lia loos bele mosu no milagre mos.*

*Mama hau iha dalan fila ba uma, fila ba hau moris fatin.  
Hau fila ba uma, fila ba hau horik fatin.  
Hau fila ba uma, fila ba hau moris fatin  
Hau fila ba uma, fila ba hau horik fatin, Timor Lorosa’e*

I clutched at your Tais when they came.  
An Indonesian soldier said, “Take him with you”, but I thought  
it meant to school.  
From the car I saw your tears streaming, for 30 slowly passing years.  
But today I am returning, back to my birthplace.

Held in the boat, we cross the sea, leaving my home abandoned.  
The people are friendly to me, but in the dark, I am scared.  
Mama, Mama, Mama, Mama, come get me, don’t leave me alone.  
Embrace me, save me, I want to go back, back to where I came from.  
I want to go back, back to my home.

Far away, across the sea, Timorese blood flows through my body  
and heart.  
Children lost, women and men scattered, without a voice.  
Days pass by, the nights are lost as well, flowers are made into  
a bouquet.  
Suddenly, a woman appears, bringing a message, she found me.  
Mama let herself believe that truth could come and a miracle happen.

Mama, I am on my way back home, back to my birthplace.  
I am going back home, back to where I came from.  
I am going back home, back to my birthplace  
I am going back home, back to where I came from, Timor Lorosa’e

Joviana Guterres on 29th August, 2019, with her moving song called ‘Labarik Lakon’ at the Konsertu Popular during the Solidarity Festival in Dili, Timor-Leste. The song describes the yearning of a child, who had been violently abducted to Indonesia during the occupation (1975 – 1999), to come home. Joviana Guterres works for [Ajar Timor-Leste](#), a human rights organization that tries to reunite families, alongside the Assosiasaun Chega Ba Ita ([ACbit](#)).

### Watch the Video



other young talents, like for example Izu. Before that, you only heard Cinco do Oriente. So many young bands like Alcatraz, for instance, they wrote many songs about the social issues of Timor-Leste. For example, young artists like Otopsy wrote critically about the corruption of the country. And Izu and some, like Alcatraz, wrote songs about how the people disrespect the heroes who contributed to independence. Joviana wrote a unity song to bring the “disappeared” children, who were secretly taken to Indonesia between 1975 and 1999, back to Timor-Leste. [Galaxy](#) wrote about LGBTI, and one of the artists, Leo Moniz, wrote songs about health issues, too. Some are writing about the environment, about education. Different artists contribute to different social developments.

## Mana Joviana, you belong to this new generation of singer-song-writers. Who or what inspires you?

I started doing music already while still in school. To me, music was and is a blessing. In 2016, I began to compose my own songs. My first song was about a very special person. It talks about how somebody could send many and important messages, but does not find the chance to act accordingly. I began to do my own music and sought inspiration. I had started working at AJAR Timor-Leste around that time. I interpreted and added sound to a text in Tetum about the children abducted to Indonesia. In the song ‘Labarik Lakon’ (*Stolen children*), I told the story directly from a child’s perspective who wants to find its mother and love to her again and who wants to return home (see the movie [called Nina & the Stolen Children of Timor-Leste](#)).

I took inspiration for the song ‘Feto Eroí’ (*Heroines*) from stories I heard from the women, from the survivors of the past struggle for resistance (see the [ACbit campaign in 2018 on East Timorese Women Survivors](#)). The organization called ACbit collected these stories and published them as a book. I then performed the song at the book release. I continuously gain a lot of inspiration from my work and from simply observing life, the people, the situations. I just have to describe them, I do not have to invent anything. My songs can all be located in fields that have to do with human rights work. At the moment, I am writing a song to commemorate the Marabia massacre ([Marabia Community Exhibition](#)) which took place on 10 June 1980.

Again, I will tell the story from the side of the survivors, including their sorrows and their grief. Music has played an important role during the resistance and it still does today.

How would you assess the politically motivated music scene? Do you think it will continue, and are young people getting involved?

I think that it will certainly continue. We have a lot of really strong bands nowadays, like Galaxy, Klamar, Naran-laek, and more aspiring groups. Many songs talk about love, but they all do have a message, to raise awareness of social injustice. I firmly believe that the politically motivated music scene will go on, there are a great many young people who want to make music and form bands. There are also some from the rap and hip hop scene who take up many social and political subjects. For instance, the group of musicians called Black Jesus has songs about LGBTIQ\*, about the stories of the survivors, the victims and human rights topics. A lot of young East Timorese are artists, even though they may not see themselves as such, but they are active. They do not study it, many are just naturally gifted at music, can play and sing. They often embrace songs from Ego Lemos, for example, with all the topics from his work. The songs are understood and spread. Music, to my mind, will remain an instrument to advocate human rights and other political and social issues, like social justice, discrimination or gender equality.

What is your dream, what does your perfect Timor-Leste look like in the future? And what makes you feel proud of Timor-Leste 20 years after the referendum for independence?

**Joviana Guterres:** I wish for a democratic Timor-Leste. One that is built upon an inclusive society. I am proud that we can determine our destiny and are free from colonization and foreign rule.

**Ego Lemos:** My dream for Timor-Leste is that people are aware of looking after the environment, so that we can live in harmony with na-



*Schedule of the Konsertu Populâr at the Solidarity Festival in Dili (Photo: Monika Schlicher)*

ture. I think nature is the most important resource that we have to protect. And my dream is for a young generation to understand and value the people's struggle for independence. Valuing Timor-Leste as a whole, the environment and the community, so that we could create a harmony for the whole country.

**Kiera Zen:** A heaven. We had already achieved this in 2002 to 2004. So no fights, no arguments, no clashes, it was so peaceful. And I would love to have that back.

The article was published in German language in the online magazine südostasien, 4/2019 (8. Dezember 2019), Die Kraft der Musik: Widerstand und Poesie

## About the Authors

Monika Schlicher is Director of the Stiftung Asienhaus and also in charge of the Focus Timor-Leste program. Since the end of the 1980s, the political scientist, historian and human rights activist has supported the people of Timor-Leste in a spirit of solidarity. She is engaged in public relations and lobbying in a lively exchange with East Timorese from the resistance, civil society organizations and politics.

Maria Tschanz worked with AGEH in the Civil Peace Service Programme in Timor-Leste from 2003-2007. She was employed by the women's organization Fokupers for psychosocial counselling, coaching and organizational development. Since then she has been committed to the country and its people.

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