

## The case for developing a destination brand for Timor-Leste

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The idea that tourism will play a role in the future development of Timor-Leste is not new (Cabasset-Semedo 2009, 216). Since Timor-Leste's formal independence in 2002, tourism has been promoted as a means to create jobs, build businesses, create income for national and local economies and improve regional economic imbalances (Timor-Leste Government 2011).

Timor-Leste's economy is heavily reliant upon offshore resources, specifically oil and natural gas, as well as agriculture, predominantly coffee and rice. The population is very young as a result of a 24-year occupation, with 41.4% aged 14 years and younger (National Statistics Directorate & United Nations Population Fund 2011). A flourishing tourism industry could create jobs for the growing population while at the same time, diversify the nation's oil-dependent economy.

The country is also blessed with natural and cultural resources, making it an ideal candidate for tourism. As the country's Strategic Plan 2011-2030, the most recent tourism planning document to date, proclaims: 'With Timor-Leste's natural beauty, rich history and cultural heritage there is great potential to develop tourism as a major industry to underpin our economic development' (Timor-Leste-Government 2011).

However in the decade since independence, progress has been slow. Data for tourism arrivals is scarce and in many cases contradictory, with the Timorese government producing vastly different statistics to the World Bank (The World Bank 2012). The country still works without an official 'Tourism Development Plan' and poor infrastructure, inflated prices, and limited choice of accommodation and restaurants further impede growth.

Due to its tumultuous history, Timor-Leste also suffers from a negative international perception. Despite a decade of relative peace and safety, the perception persists that Timor-Leste is dangerous and unstable (Carlos and Carlos 2011). The country lacks a strong, defined and *positive* image that can be communicated to prospective international visitors.

It is argued that in today's competitive marketplace, effective positioning and differentiation are critical to destination success (Morgan et al. 2003, 286; Anholt 2006, 1; Baker and Cameron 2008, 81; Vitic and Ringer 2008, 128; Pike 2009, 857). A uniquely identifiable 'brand' is seen by many as a crucial tool in achieving a competitive advantage (Balakrishnan et al. 2011, 5; Garcia et al. 2012, 646), particularly in the early stages of market recovery, where it can help resurrect international image and perception (Vitic and Ringer 2008, 129).

Branding is hailed by some as a key national asset (Kotler and Gertner 2002, 250; Baker and Cameron, 2008, 85) and the basis for survival within a globally competitive marketplace (Morgan et al. 2003, 286).

Further to this, brands are more than a logo and slogan, for which they are often mistaken. Modern definitions of brands claim they present a narrative to potential consumers, who then feel a connection (Morgan et al. 2003, 286; Konecnik Ruzzier 2012, 127).

While it would be unfair to say that branding Timor-Leste has not been attempted, one could argue that developing a powerful and lasting 'brand identity' for Timor-Leste is yet to be realised by successive Ministers and governments. A number of slogans were used during the early years of independence, a 'turismo Timor-Leste' logo was developed by an international consultancy agency and successive Ministries have each built new websites and produced new brochures. However, as Morgan et al. (2003) argue, destination brand building can be undermined by the 'short-termism' of chief political stakeholders, given that a destination brand's lifespan is a longer-term proposition than most politicians' careers (Morgan et al. 2003, 288). In the case of Timor-Leste, the marketing strategy has changed with successive Ministries, making it disjointed and often inconsistent.

Indeed, merely disseminating information about the country does not equate to managing and building the country's *image*. Nor do a slogan and a logo necessarily enable the destination to deliver a powerful,

targeted and unique destination *brand*, particularly if they are not widely and consistently used.

This paper will argue the case for developing a sustainable and strategic destination brand for Timor-Leste and contend that it could effectively stimulate tourism growth. The paper will then elucidate some useful principles relevant to the case of Timor-Leste that could aid the brand development process.

### **Nations and destinations as brands**

According to Anholt (2002) much of the wealth of the developed world has been generated through the effective positioning of individual nations and utilising sophisticated marketing techniques (Akotia et al. 2011, 123). While at the beginning of the new millennium some researchers still strongly objected to transferring the brand concept to the level of country or destination (Konecnik Ruzzier 2012, 127), the number of advocates of the country brand concept has grown dramatically over the last few years. The literature now concurs that to generate an effective position and positive image in the marketplace, countries, like products and services, can, and should be branded (Baker and Cameron 2008, 86; Osei and Gbadamosi 2011, 286).

Many authors argue that regardless of whether a country consciously brands itself, it will be already perceived in a certain way by people within and outside the country (Osei and Gbadamosi 2011, 286). According to Fan (2006) a nation has a brand with or without nation branding. For example, in the case of France, Olins' argues the nation has been, in effect, 're-branded' by various historical leaders for centuries, experiencing five republics, two empires and at least four kingdoms (Olins 2002, 242).

So in a sense, place or destination branding is often re-branding, due to the fact that all places have an intrinsic image (Hankinson 2007, 250). And in the case of Timor this is true – the country already has a 'brand', because it is perceived in a certain way, but because this brand is not being actively managed, it is not always positive and rarely equates Timor with tourism.

A major objective of any destination branding strategy is to reinforce a positive image already held by a target market, correct a negative image, or create a new image, (Gudlaugsson and Magnússon 2012, 115). Thus in the case of Timor-Leste, its negative image needs to be replaced by (or developed into) a new and positive one.

Brands have a functional dimension, consisting of practical attributes such as price, quality and amenity, as well as a symbolic dimension, which attempts to evoke a deeper emotion (Balakrishnan et al. 2011, 9). This is true of many tourism brands – for example 'Brand Australia', which promotes wild adventure, rugged outback and endless summer or 'Incredible India', which rests on being a spiritual, intriguing and mystical destination. In both cases, the brand takes on an emotional value above and beyond its functional dimensions, and promises a unique experience.

One could argue, however, that the perceived 'brand' of Timor-Leste will rarely incite positive tourism images. While quantitative data is unavailable, anecdotal evidence indicates that potential visitors equate the country to recent civil war, poverty and a bloody occupation.

So it becomes clear that providing snippets of information about the country's functional attributes has proved unsuccessful in overcoming the nation's negative image and providing visitors with targeted information on why they should visit. Hence we see the benefit of providing more than just information, but a clearly articulated brand.

Not only will a destination brand help replace Timor-Leste's negative image with positive tourism attributes, it will also help overcome visitors' concerns about negative attributes such as price, accessibility and infrastructure. Even if Timor lacks impressive hospitality, first-class hotels or well-made roads, if it can appeal to visitors on an emotional level they will often choose to visit regardless.

Indeed as Wager and Peters (2009) explain, while a competitor can copy a product, a brand is unique; and whilst a product can be easily outdated, a successful brand is timeless (Wagner and Peters 2009, 53).

## **Branding Timor-Leste**

Place branding expert, Simon Anholt (2004), describes the real world of international branding as a ‘bloody business’ in comparison to the academic perspective, indicating a disconnect between theory, research and practice (Anholt 2004, 10). Akotia et al (2011) further contend there has been very little research on the branding of developing economies (Akotia et al., 2011). Thus, while there is a case for developing a destination brand for Timor-Leste, the ‘how to’ may prove somewhat more difficult. As there has to date been no research into the application of destination branding to Timor-Leste, it is important to begin by looking at the branding particularities as they relate to this specific case.

In the following sections, three aspects of branding that are particularly relevant to Timor-Leste will be discussed: branding a Small Island Developing State, branding a post-conflict nation, and branding a ‘brand new’ nation.

### **Branding a Small Island Developing State**

Timor-Leste is classified by the United Nations as a Small Island Developing State (SIDS): a category of nations with shared socio-economic and political characteristics and a very low position in the international political economy (SIDSNET 2013; Yasarata et al. 2010, 345). Many SIDS are also heavily dependent upon tourism, given that they possess a rich cultural and natural heritage and oftentimes pristine coral reefs, rivers, sea and landscape (SIDNET 2013).

There is at present limited literature specific to the branding and marketing of SIDS. In *Marketing Island Destinations* (2010), one of few the publications to give considerable attention to this area, editors Lewis-Cameron and Roberts contend that in today’s highly competitive marketplace, SIDS must diverge from the traditional sun, sea and sand (3S) approach to branding (Lewis-Cameron and Roberts 2010, 13).

Indeed, ‘substitutability’ has become a major problem in the 3S markets (Pike 2004, 81; Baker and Cameron 2008, 85). While many island tourism campaigns make generic claims of sandy beaches, sunny climate and a laidback lifestyle (Dinnie 2008, 52) these claims are not unique to a particular nation (Harrison-Walker 2011, 137) and according to Morgan et al (2003, 286), such ‘wallpaper’ advertising renders all island destinations indistinguishable from one another. Campaigns for white sand beaches and clear blue waters are frequently of this type, for example rendering Samoa as indistinguishable from the Seychelles or the Society Islands.

At the same time, some commentators argue that tourists themselves now often seek more than the 3S’s. Modern tourists, who are often more experienced and discerning than the traditional ‘mass tourist’, see travel as not just about being at the destination but experiencing personal fulfillment and identity (Roberts and Lewis-Cameron 2010, 28). It’s less about lying around on a deck chair with a cocktail and more about experiencing the culture and, in some cases, even wanting to give something back. In this instance, destinations should not be branded by their purely functional attributes, but by adding texture and meaning to their identity (Daye 2010, 12). The challenge for marketers is to make the destination brand ‘live’ and allow visitors to feel the authenticity and uniqueness of place (Morgan et al. 2003, 287).

So there is a clear opportunity for Timor-Leste to promote itself to this modern tourist. Not only to stand out in the marketplace, but also because the nation has so much more to offer – for example cultural and historical richness – as opposed to just sun, sea and sand.

### **Branding a post-conflict nation**

Brand management seems to be even more challenging for emerging and post-conflict nations (Vitic and Ringer 2008, 128), and while a few nations have overcome their image problems and enhanced their brand, many still struggle (Gertner 2007, 4; Vitic and Ringer 2008, 128).

Negative stereotypes and prejudices affect destination image (Amujo and Otubanjo 2012, 89) and many tourists are reluctant to visit countries they believe to be prone to political strife and perceived internal problems (Ryan and Silvanto 2010, 536). However, in some cases, these images are based on inaccurate information or widespread stereotypes reinforced by the media, while in others these images are

founded on past political unrest, clouding the destination image much longer than it takes to overcome the actual problems (Vitic and Ringer 2008, 128).

This is true of Timor-Leste. People abroad, particularly those in Australia, have for decades read and seen news reports of civil war, occupation and violence. According to Tapsell and Eldenfolk (2013, 589), constant media attention in 1999, graphically describing the horror in Timor-Leste, was influential in finally instigating an international response. However, while this reporting was pivotal during the occupation in bringing about change, over a decade later the nation is no longer dangerous or war-torn, but its image has yet to be repaired.

But the first point of note is that a post-conflict nation is not necessarily a negative for tourism – it is just the image and perception of safety that must be managed, not the history itself. In fact the post-conflict nature of the nation can provide a tourism attraction in itself - nations such as Vietnam, Cambodia, Montenegro, Bosnia and the newly emerging Myanmar, have, and continue to manage this very well. In Timor-Leste, it is also very easy to see how this may be possible.

Significantly, the development of tourism in a post- conflict nation can have benefits well beyond the obvious economic ones. Research suggests that tourism marketing and nation branding can also play an important role in the process of social renewal and the transformation of sorrow (Causevic and Lynch 2011, 795). Similarly Pezzullo (2009) suggests that tourism marketing can offer the opportunity for nation rebuilding and enhance sustainable memories following a disaster or internal unrest (Amujo and Otubanjo 2012, 92).

Ultimately, branding is about communicating a sense of community, uniqueness and place distinctiveness (Gotham 2007, 839). On top of this, branding can unite disparate groups of residents and galvanise support for tourism as well as reconnect the locale with a sense of socio-cultural ‘belonging’ (Gotham 2007, 839). Therefore, if a tourism brand seeks to identify the positive symbolic and historical elements of the tragedy and develop empathetic messages for tourists (Amujo and Otubanjo 2012, 95), this in turn can actually help the country’s internal stakeholders, its people, ‘make sense’ of the past and begin a process of social renewal. Seen in this way, post-conflict branding is important not only to grow tourism but also to help unite a fragmented nation in the aftermath of internal unrest (Amujo and Otubanjo 2012, 96). This is one aspect of brand development that has clear relevance for Timor-Leste.

### **Branding a ‘brand new’ nation**

It is safe to say Timor-Leste has not been actively branded by either the government or tourism authorities across its eleven years as an independent nation. However, many authors purport that there is no such thing as branding an entirely new nation, as all nations already have an intrinsic image. Place ‘branding’ is in effect just place ‘re-branding’ (Hankinson 2007, 250) and regardless of whether a country consciously brands itself, it will be already perceived in a certain way by people within and outside the country (Osei and Gbadamosi 2011, 285).

So while Timor-Leste has not been ‘actively’ branded to date, one could argue it already has an intrinsic brand image. And given the nation’s status as a poor, developing state, recently emerged from conflict and civil war, one could further argue this brand would not be a positive one. However, as Mihailovich (2006) argues, ‘effective branding not only serves to reinforce positive images but also helps fight negative ones by shaping new images and associations’ (cited in Harish 2010, 154). Hence the need for actively branding and rebranding Timor-Leste is crucial.

In beginning to ‘rebrand’ a nation or destination, Anholt (2006) argues that ‘... people only change their minds about places if the people and organizations in those places start to change the things they make and do, or the way they behave. And that is the only sense in which a nation can start to exercise some degree of control over its image...’ (Anholt 2006, 1). In other words, support from key internal stakeholders is critical to creating and managing a new brand.

Indeed, many authors claim that satisfaction of the various destination stakeholders is one of the fundamental requirements of successful destination branding (Baker and Cameron 2008, 88; Wagner and Peters 2009, 56; Ryan and Silvanto 2010, 536; Akotia et al. 2011, 124; Garcia et al. 2012, 648). Brickell

(2012) contends that many brands struggle to succeed when they overlook the perspectives of the host population, in favour of 'expert' assessments of tourism development (Brickell 2012, 98).

This notion of 'internal branding' sees internal stakeholders as the 'first customers' of a brand and stresses the importance of encouraging them to internalise and deliver the corporate brand values (Sartori et al. 2012, 331). As internal stakeholders define the brand and provide the actualisation of the experience, it is important a new brand emerges from what the nation is about (Vasudevan 2008, 335). As Kapferer claims: "before knowing how we are perceived, we must know who we are" (Kapferer 1999, 71; Konecnik and Go 2008, 179; Wagner and Peters 2009, 55).

### Further research

In summary, this paper has argued that there is a strong case for developing a destination brand for Timor-Leste. More specifically, it contends that the following will be important in the final brand development process. Firstly, identifying the unique and authentic attributes of a destination is crucial for any branding strategy, but particularly in the case of Timor-Leste. Timor-Leste cannot compete with other destinations on the basis of price, amenity, quality accommodation, customer service and so forth, so it is crucial that a brand communicates something that is authentic and unique to the nation; something that is worthwhile visiting no matter what and that will help tourists overlook potential barriers to their travel.

Secondly, stakeholder involvement and community congruence will be crucial. They are to any brand, but in the case of Timor-Leste, a country with a difficult and a painful past, it is essential that stakeholders are consulted and feel comfortable with their nation's 'image'. Ultimately, it is the internal stakeholders who 'live' the brand and if they feel it does not fairly represent their nation, it is unlikely to be successful.

Third, prospective tourists need a consistent message to believe in a brand and if the government re-brands the nation, it must ensure consistency across all marketing channels and long-term consistency in strategy and message in order to see positive impact. At the same time, it must be supported by the nation's people and government.

And finally, there is no point branding the destination on something it cannot deliver. Any brand, and particularly for Timor-Leste, must be true of the actual experience or it will struggle to survive.

Further research is needed to identify the country's strengths and weaknesses as a tourist destination, including the unique attributes that set it apart from its neighbours. Based on these attributes potential target markets can be identified and destination brand concepts developed.

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