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Customary Governance in Post-Independence Timor-Leste

Spirit Ecologies of the House



ANDREW MCWILLIAM & LISA PALMER

with

Quintiliano Mok, Jorge Lopes, Balthasar Kehi,
Susanna Barnes & Josh Trindade

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	7
Contributors	9
Chapter 1. Spirit Ecologies of the House: Customary Governance in Post-independence Timor-Leste	11
Chapter 2. Fataluku Ritual Houses: Status, Relation, and Renewal	29
Chapter 3. Waima'a House Cultures: Emergence, Connection, Reconstruction	49
Chapter 4. Mambai Houses and Ritual Centres	71
Chapter 5. [Re]constituting the Ritual Domain of Ina Ama Beli Daralai Babulu Mane Hitu	91
Chapter 6. Houses of Koba Lima: Unity and Division	113
Chapter 7. Tara Bandu and Customary Governance in Post-independence Timor-Leste	135
Chapter 8. Ambivalent 'Indigeneities' in Timor-Leste: Between the Customary and National Governance of Resources	159
Chapter 9. Afterword: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity	179
Index	191

List of Figures

Figure 1: Map of Timor-Leste and municipalities	14
Figure 2: Restored Naja Ratu ritual house (<i>le ia valu</i>)	41
Figure 3: New House construction in Maina 1	43
Figure 4: Waima'a north-south transect and major springs	52
Figure 5: 'Carrying in the wood', Kubu-Bu'u Wai Dasu House complex	57
Figure 6: The Ocabai House	64
Figure 7: Maubisi-Mauloko House Complex and valley	73
Figure 8: Ermata Spring during <i>Ai Hulun Tartehi</i> Ritual	79
Figure 9: Mole Etu. Senior Daralari women wearing distinctive <i>krabi wa'i mee</i> , woven tube-dresses prepare rice for the ceremony in 2015	97
Figure 10: Returning from the summit to redistribute the sacrificial meat and dispense ancestral blessings at the White House and the Black House (N: <i>Uma Buta, Uma Ita</i>)	101
Figure 11: The Five Domains of Koba Lima	116
Figure 12: Fatumea House and <i>Makoan</i>	118
Figure 13: <i>Bei Feto, Bei Mane</i> and <i>Ai Tos</i>	120
Figure 14: Fataluku divination ritual	140
Figure 15: <i>Tara Bandu</i> mother pole	152
Figure 16: Traditional <i>lulik</i> circle	165
Figure 17: 'Xanana's Place', Nino Konis Santana National Park	170

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Spirit Ecologies of the House: Customary Governance in Post-independence Timor-Leste

Andrew McWilliam and Lisa Palmer

Abstract

The renewal and revitalization of complex social and cultural exchanges across Timor-Leste engages the co-production of custom and governance across scale; from the micro-social dynamics of household and domestic economies to broader issues of social alliance, resource entitlements, landed authority, and collective endeavour. These 'spirit ecologies' of practice, as we interpret them, incorporate each of these realms of activity and more. They reflect local orientations to diverse forms of agency, both human and non-human, that are fundamental to the multiple tasks of keeping life going and sustaining personal and intergenerational wellbeing over time. As such, they also raise important questions about the resilience and capacity of indigenous institutions to address governance gaps in post-Independence Timor-Leste and contribute to innovative forms of environmental governance with relevance to the wider region. By exploring the comparative and cross-scalar possibilities of these locally relevant spirit ecologies, this introduction frames spirit ecologies as relationships between people and place, and between customary approaches to nature on the one hand and national governance policies over land and waters on the other. In this regard, contemporary Timor-Leste offers an instructive Asia-Pacific experiment in nation building from the ground up.

Keywords: Timor-Leste, ritual house, custom, environment, governance

Introduction: Houses of Origin

A widespread feature of the post-independence landscapes of Timor-Leste has been the sustained revival of cultural practices as part of a well-recognised, 'return to custom' among the many rural communities that constitute the majority population of the country (Barnes 2017; Loch 2003; Hicks 2004; McWilliam 2008). These practices include a renewed focus on ritual exchange among extended family networks, typically expressed in the celebration of life cycle transitions, especially marriage and funerals, as well as a strong reassertion of practices associated with mythic origins of settlement, ancestral blessings and sacrificial veneration among different groups.

An integral component of this sustained cultural activity has been extensive rebuilding of many distinctive origin group houses, known generically in Tetun as *uma lulik* or ‘sacred’ houses, which serve as a focal point for social and sacrificial activities. Many of these iconic structures were destroyed by fire or fell into disuse during the resistance struggle or during the destructive withdrawal of pro-integration militia groups from Timor-Leste in 1999. Each of these specialised built structures from different origin groups across Timor-Leste reveals a rich architectural tradition and decorative diversity reflecting the distinctive ethno-linguistic cultural histories of their source communities. At the same time, the stylised and symbolically elaborated *uma lulik* designs, typically canonical in design, also highlight a wider and shared Austronesian heritage focused on the house: one that provides many points of comparison between language communities across Timor-Leste and the wider Austronesian world (see Fox 1980, 1997).

The ethnographic literature from the Timor region has long made clear the links between kinship, marriage exchange, social reproduction, and the ‘flow of life’ (Fox 1980; Traube 1986; Hicks 2004). Collectively, this literature shows how families of specific lineages are organised around origin group founding houses (*uma lulik*) that situate families in intimate, intergenerational social, political, economic, and spiritual relationships with their extended consanguineal kin and affinal relatives from other origin groups. Within this particular rendering of a kin-based, ‘mutuality of being’ (Sahlins 2013), each of these houses is embedded in a lifeworld of exchange, obligation, and reciprocity built around recurring socio-cosmic dualisms such as male/female, fertility giver/fertility taker, younger sibling/older sibling, indigene/settler, and political authority/ritual authority. The dualism includes a suite of socio-botanical metaphors such as trunk and tip, stem and flower—the harmonious (or conflictual) relations that ensure (or hamper) the ‘flow of life’ (Fox). Concomitant with the widespread use of these ‘metaphors for living’ (Fox 1980) is the Austronesian idea of a spiritual potency or life force flowing through all physical forms and phenomena, an idea that has been referred to by Fox (1987) as the ‘immanence of life’.

In this book, one of our aims is to explore the structural forms and performative practices of the *uma lulik* (and its many local language variants) as a site for the celebration of shared group identities, especially kin-based ties and ancestral protections in Timor-Leste (see Carsten and Hugh Jones 1995). Drawing on five broadly comparative case studies from different regions of the country, we highlight the specific character of different House structures and their mythical, moral, and spiritual dimensions, all of which facilitate the pursuit of intergenerational wellbeing among their interrelated memberships. *Uma Lulik* structures provide important focal centres for the celebration of enduring social alliances between related groups. In the process, they create a venue for making visible the shape

and strength of the constituent social relations, as well as broader-level customary governance on matters associated with resource claims and emplaced political and ritual authority. In different regions of Timor-Leste, customary political authority and associated governance structures are constituted in and through allied clusters of *uma lulik* groups. These political federations, typically founded in origin mythologies and reproduced through periodic ritual confirmation and public celebration, provide the enduring basis for the continuity of the ritual domain over time and the preservation of its ancestral environment.

In the years since independence (May 2002), the rebuilding of *uma lulik* structures has progressed at different rates in different regions across the country. The reasons for this phased recovery are complex and variable. But economic hardship and slow recovery have been a likely and strong contributing factor where households need to direct available resources and efforts to their immediate livelihood requirements and often delay collective work on rebuilding group *uma lulik* or making do with interim structures (*uma simples*) (McWilliam 2008; Fitzpatrick et al. 2012). For many communities, it is only in recent years with the convergence of enabling factors—the availability of resources, sufficient group enthusiasm, and a shared commitment to the common objective—that the re-emergence of so many striking and evocative *uma lulik* forms has been seen, appearing mushroom-like across the settled landscape. In the process, local groups and communities also exhibit varying degrees of innovation and creative redesign in their contemporary iterations of the ‘ancestral house’. Each reflects pragmatic solutions to perennial problems in the preservation of the unique and impressive constructions of posts, platforms, beams, and covering roofs.

Today Timor-Leste ancestral origin houses (*uma lulik*) are increasingly retaking central stage in local celebrations of marriage alliances, funerary rites, and seasonal ritual celebrations of life for house members and allied groups. On each of these occasions, varying combinations of agnatic kin and affinal relatives—networks of *fetosan no umane* (T.) relations—meet in celebration and obligation to express their connections to one another and reinforce their abiding attachment to specific places, and their constituent resources, spirit ecologies, and emplaced histories (Sousa 2010; Barnes 2011; Bovensiepen 2015). These emphatic statements of cultural revival with support for customary institutions and the abiding local authority structures which they instantiate, provide insights into local patterns of customary governance and a broad desire to build social cohesion across post-conflict Timor-Leste (McWilliam 2008).

To illustrate both the shared qualities of the ‘sacred house’ complex in Timor-Leste and the lively diversity of its structural forms, as well as material and political ecologies of practice, in the following chapters, we present a series of discrete house-based case studies. They reflect a considered selection of geographically

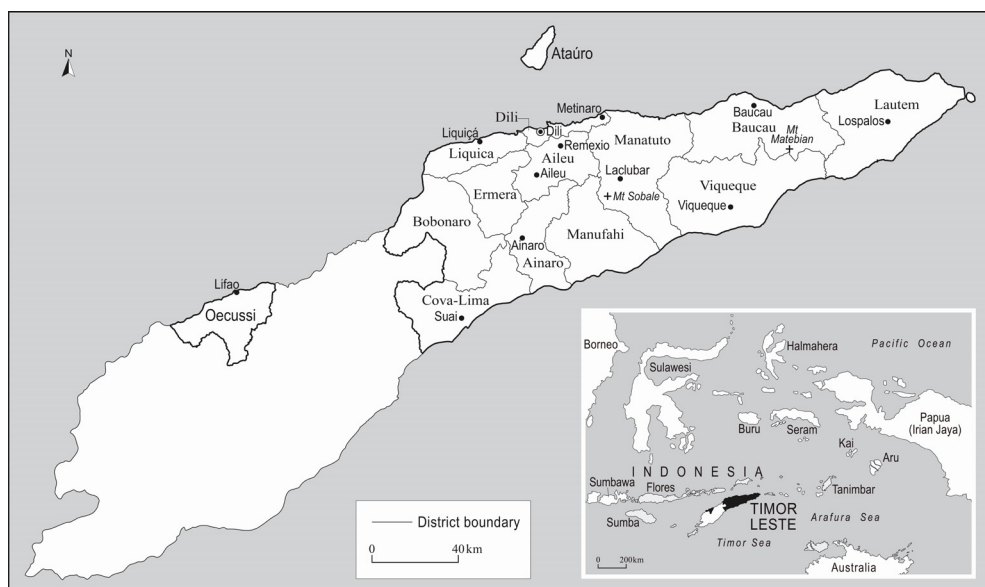


Figure 1: Map of Timor-Leste and municipalities. Credit: Chandra Jayasuriya.

dispersed locations and ethno-linguistic communities based on extended periods of field research and ethnographic analysis. The case studies include Fataluku *uma lulik* rebuilding in the far eastern municipality of Lautem, Waima'a house communities in Baucau, Uato-Lari performances from Viqueque, Mambai house renewal in the highlands of Ainaro, and the complex challenges facing house communities in Koba Lima in the western borderlands of Cova-Lima and West Timor. Each chapter presents an exploration of the relationship between different kinds of 'ritual or sacred' houses and the socio-spiritual connections that bind house members to one another. Collectively they express a celebration of their ancestral origins and the contemporary social networks of relation and mutual exchange that extend across the living landscape establishing enduring social ties.

Spirit Ecologies of Practice

The renewal and revitalisation of complex social and cultural exchanges across Timor-Leste engage the co-production of custom and governance across scale: from the micro-social dynamics of household and domestic economies to broader issues of social alliance, resource entitlements, landed authority, and collective endeavour. These 'spirit ecologies' of practice, as we interpret them, incorporate each of these realms of activity and more. They reflect local orientations to diverse forms

of agency, both human and non-human, that are fundamental to the multiple tasks of keeping life going and sustaining personal and intergenerational wellbeing over time. As such, they also raise important questions about the resilience and capacity of indigenous institutions to address governance gaps in post-independence Timor-Leste and contribute to innovative forms of environmental governance.

In seeking to address some of these questions, our second broader objective in this study has been to explore the comparative and cross-scalar possibilities of these locally relevant spirit ecologies. Specifically, and methodologically, we are interested in the ways that they can help frame relationships between people and place, and between customary approaches to nature on the one hand and national governance policies over land and waters on the other. In this regard, contemporary Timor-Leste offers an instructive Asia-Pacific experiment in nation building from the ground up and a striking version of what has been referred to in the literature as environmentalism of the poor (see Martinez Alier 2002).

A key component of this engagement has been the introduction of so-called 'best-practice' state management of social and environmental governance. However, like the experience in other parts of the world, these measures of impact frequently suffer from a critical blind spot. That is, they overlook and marginalise the interests, rights, and traditional entitlements of constituent customary communities. Consequently, they fail to consider how pre-existing bodies of knowledge, institutions, and praxis contribute to local and regional governance regimes (Jackson and Palmer 2012; Palmer 2015; Paris 2004; Zerner 2003). In the process, older established customary practices of land management are often marginalised and even criminalised in an ongoing political ecology of appropriation (Robbins 2012: 22).

A case in point for Timor-Leste is the complex of locally constituted resource regulations known in Tetun as *tara bandu* (literally 'to hang a prohibition' [usually on a post]). These customary practices are widely deployed to protect ripening crops, limit cultural burning, resolve conflicts, restrain transgressive behaviour, and even constrain the inflationary post-war effects of increased ceremonial exchange of animals in life cycle events. In the light of their local purchase, these cultural practices have found favour with state institutions in recent years, but too often the nature of the traditions is elided or ignored in favour of finding ways to appropriate them for broader, state-based environmental and political ends.

Conversely, we would argue that by identifying the depth and significance of customary approaches to social and environmental governance in Timor-Leste (and, indeed, elsewhere), we can generate a more nuanced comparative understanding of how these practices are being mobilised to address processes of social and economic recovery and resilience in complex environments. In our use of the term 'spirit ecologies' we are concerned with the ways in which human forms of sociality evolve alongside relations with more-than-human beings, including places in the landscape,

particular animals, spirits, and the enduring ancestral presence. We deploy the concept as a way of understanding the relational nature of personhood in Timor-Leste, and the ways that human and more-than-human networks of reciprocal obligation and interdependency are constitutive of 'house-based' societies (McWilliam 2005). We argue that rather than reducing these spirit ecologies to the sphere of 'belief' or 'religion', they should be understood as ways of 'being in the world' that underpin diverse modes of localised customary governance. In this respect, our research contributes theoretically to a body of work in Southeast Asian studies that has paid renewed attention to human relations with the 'more-than-human' environment (e.g., Lansing 2007; Tsinjilonis 2004; Allerton 2013; Arnhem and Springer 2016).

In Timor-Leste, Bovensiepen (2015) has demonstrated how ideas of personhood are configured and emerge through relations of separation and reunification with the landscape. Similarly, Palmer (2015) has investigated human relations with water in Timor-Leste and the ways that water 'management' rituals are integral to the beliefs and practices of localised spirit ecologies. In this book, we continue the task of mapping the relationship between Timorese conceptions of personhood (Bovensiepen 2015), ancestrally constituted house communities (Fox 2011), and the complex local ecologies upon which the livelihoods and the material and spiritual wellbeing of Timorese households depend (Palmer 2015).¹

In tracing the effects of these spirit ecologies on modes of Timorese social and environmental governance, we recognise the contemporary significance in Timor of a broadly shared Austronesian heritage of ideas and practices around fundamental notions of connected life processes. These relational fields are expressed through a rich repertoire of what Fox (1980: 333) has described as 'metaphors for living [...] encoded primarily in a pervasive binary form'. Prevalent among these customary associations are the many complex botanical metaphors of growth and renewal (trunk and tip, roots and climbing tendrils, rhizomic replication of sugar cane and bananas) and the rich spatio-temporal metaphors of journeys and well-travelled pathways (paths of origin, the wide path of alliance; see Fox 1997).

These customary ideas of life processes also resonate with the work of Tim Ingold (2011, 2012: 431) and his concept of the 'meshwork', which we draw on to follow the 'material flows and formative processes' of localised spirit ecologies. According to Ingold, places in this 'meshwork' are like 'knots', from which flow a multitude of relational threads:

A house, for example, is a place where the lines of its residents are tightly knotted together. But these lines are no more contained within the house than are threads contained within

¹ For consideration of these themes in relation to people and the marine environment, see Abbott (2024).

a knot. Rather, they trail beyond it, only to become caught up with other lines in other places, as are threads in other knots. Together they make up what I have called the meshwork (Ingold 2011: 149).

Ingold's concept of intersecting lines and pathways through places, 'houses', and a wider ecology of things illustrates the ways that life both comes into being and is continuously becoming through exchanges between living and non-living organisms, and between cultural meanings and physical forms. In this 'meshwork' of 'things' (which may encompass state institutions and practices) across 'generations', we show how the past, present, and future can be experientially coeval and how the properties of 'materials' and their continuous exchanges form a continuum of life, a relational coherence that grows and is grown.

In this conceptual schema, the flow of the living meshwork is also selectively shaped by processes of resistance and separation, of an active 'holding apart' of different types of matter that constitute fundamental features of the relationship (Palmer 2018). By investigating local struggles to influence and assert agency over the more-than-human, our aim is to make visible these flows and points of resistance and separation in localised spirit ecologies and the social and environmental governance in Timor-Leste. Our approach to elucidating Timorese spirit ecologies through a meshwork of matter connects an endogenous theory of more-than-human 'intergenerational wellbeing'. This theory extends beyond a generalised notion of human concern for future generations and/or the living environment to understandings of a broader more-than-human, kin-based sociality in Timor-Leste (Palmer 2015; see also Trindade 2008). Finding form in everyday practices is a way of being in the world, a state that focuses people's attention on the need to honour and attend to particular pathways of connection (Strathern 2014) between human beings (the living, the dead, and the not-yet-born) and their more-than-human relational kin (for instance, particular species of animals, lands, and waters constituted in myth) (see also Metzner Yoder 2011). As pathways towards wellbeing (and the associated constraints on these flows), they guide people's interactions with their local spirit ecologies and announce the basis for a continuous (re)constitution of people's relations with one another and with the wider world around them. In the associated ritual and ceremonial engagements, these performative practices work to 'bring forth, define, and empower social relationships' (Lansing 2007: 15). To this extent, our concern in Timor-Leste is with the multiple ways that objects and artefacts, 'natural' elements, and non-human living organisms, evoke meaning within relational human networks and are enrolled in the everyday and multiple tasks of keeping life going.

An account of these emerging networks and practices of environmental governance in Timor-Leste must also consider the strong influence of formal institutional religion, which exists in pluralist tension with ancestral forms of religious adherence. The historical power of the Catholic Church is highlighted by the fact that its influence overtly shapes approaches to religiosity and ritual practice, especially in urban Timorese contexts where ‘being modern’ has long meant being both educated and Catholic (Palmer, Barnes and Kakuma 2017, Silva 2013). Yet, to the extent that these Catholic, State, and ancestral practices intersect, we contend that it is these seemingly contradictory forms of sociality, relationality, and subjectivity that are inevitably and uniquely interwoven through a meshwork of practices, including religiously inflected ones.

Ann Salmond makes a similar point writing on freshwater governance approaches in New Zealand. Governance there implicates a more-than-human personhood and ontological complexity with slippage both within and between Maori (*indigenous*) and *Pakeha* (settler) communities, as she notes:

[i]n these people, practices, and places, ancestral Maori concepts are active and alive, adapting to changing conditions, including various modernist assumptions about reality. The process of juxtaposition and exchange has generative effects. It makes it possible to deal creatively with competing and shifting universalisms without feeling the need for an ‘eye of God’ account in which only one set of propositions about reality can prevail. (Salmond 2014: 301).

Spirit ecologies of practice in Timor-Leste exhibit similar contingent generative qualities and effects in the context of State attempts to integrate their institutional aspirations for environmental and social governance. By exploring the mobilisation and state support of customary, *tara bandu* regimes in the second half of the book, we show how, within this historically contingent and fluid space, local communities pursue creative possibilities for bringing into the conversation various and often juxtaposed, messy, and slippery dimensions of being and reality. This process includes an ontological dexterity that selectively brings things and matters together and, importantly, holds them apart. In the process, we identify some potential limits to this dexterity and the various exceptions and resistances that, for customary communities, are disabling rather than generative. For its part, the state and its bureaucratic apparatus is also struggling to reconcile its ‘built-in’ desire to improve, appropriate, and control governance processes (Li 2008), while at the same time seeking to benefit from the agentive power of these uniquely cultural approaches to nature and resource management (Simiao and Silva 2020).

Ritual Communities in Timor-Leste

The mountainous, half island nation of Timor-Leste contains a remarkable diversity of 32 spoken indigenous languages of varying population size; each reflecting long histories of assertive cultural identity politics and mutual accommodation.² The language diversity is itself a product of successive waves of seafaring Austronesian-speaking and Papuan-speaking settler populations carving out territories over centuries of occupation and interaction (Hull 1999, 2004; Schapper 2011). This deep history combined with the more recent disruptive impacts of European colonialism and subsequent Indonesian occupation has generated the complex mosaic of contemporary settlement patterns that we see today.

In post-independence Timor-Leste, linguistic differences are also reflected in the dynamic preservation and renewal of local customary practices. They include a widespread commitment to reciprocal gift exchange as part of a broader revitalisation of familial alliances—a reverence for the ancestral spirit realm and the customary management of environmental resources to ensure intergenerational wellbeing. At the core of these obligations is a commitment to the iconic clan-based, ritual houses known in Tetum as *uma lulik* ('sacred' house) with multiple language variants. Across the nation, Timorese communities are engaged in renewed efforts to rebuild and reinstate *Uma Lulik* with their distinctive structural forms, cultural protocols, and decorative features. Marked differences between ritual communities across Timor-Leste are expressed in the highly stylised variations of *uma lulik* architectural forms across the country (Cinatti et al. 1987). They also differ in the degree to which core *uma lulik* structures of politically allied communities are dispersed across ancestral landscapes or concentrated together into potent centres of ancestral origin. These spatial dimensions reflect varying historical trajectories of settlement and political continuity. In the following chapters, we focus on five language communities drawn from the eastern, central, and westerns regions of Timor-Leste, and each case study illustrates in different ways the continuing vital importance of the clan-based 'sacred house' and its role in customary governance.

Fataluku

Our first case study presents perspectives on the process of renewal and revival of customary traditions among the Fataluku-speaking communities in the most easterly Municipality of Lautem. In a region where the resistance movement against

² "Table 13: Population distribution by mother tongue, Urban Rural and District". Volume 2: Population Distribution by Administrative Areas, 2010 (PDF). Timor-Leste Ministry of Finance. pp. 205–206.

Indonesian occupation was particularly strong and prolonged (McWilliam 2020), Fataluku communities were subject to a variety of coercive restrictions on the conduct of customary practices and limits on social gatherings, as well as periodic reprisals against support for the resistance movement. The dramatic end of occupation in 1999 and subsequent achievement of independence has seen renewed attention accorded to the conduct of customary practices and their attendant obligations, including the rebuilding of the Fataluku ritual houses (*le teinu*) as sites of veneration and group status rivalry. Recent innovations to these 'sacred' structures highlight both Fataluku pragmatism and their adaptive readiness to accommodate change, while maintaining their commitment to ancestral spirit ecologies (Viegas 2019).

Waima'a

Across the western region of the Baucau municipality, Waima'a House custodians recount autochthonous origin stories of emergence through water or land and the subsequent ways in which intra-regional connections were forged with other Waima'a-speaking Houses. The water cultures upon which these Houses were established continue to orient more-than-human social worlds and land-based relations. The chapter investigates the challenges of rebuilding these Houses in the post-independence period and argues that these processes are challenged by the risks associated with negotiating complicated histories of House-based inter-relations, including that of a House with their original *lela ho'on* (E: fertility givers). These social and spiritual risks are usually outweighed by the desire to re-establish functional House-based governance norms and intergenerational wellbeing. The chapter gives us a sense of the deeply cultural, but also often fragmentary and tenuous ways through which people live with and negotiate intra and inter-house politics and wellbeing.

Uato-Lari

The chapter authored by Susanna Barnes and Josh Trindade explores the intricate web of social, spiritual, and territorial relationships within the ritual domain of *Ina Ama Beli Daralai Babulo Mane Hitu*, a predominantly Naueti-speaking community in the south-eastern sub-district of Uato-Lari. A communal ceremony known as *Babulo Mane Hitu* (E: The Seven Brothers of Babulo) acts as a focal point for exploring the dynamic interplay of human and more-than-human elements within specific landscapes, illustrating the reconstitution of reciprocal obligations and interdependencies among human and more-than-human entities against the backdrop of specific landscapes. The ceremony, commemorating the domain's founder-ancestors, embodies the community's efforts to sustain and negotiate its

social and moral frameworks amidst historical upheavals and contemporary challenges. Through detailed ethnographic insights, the chapter unveils the dynamic processes of renewal, contestation, and affirmation of communal identities, emphasising the pivotal role of ritual in maintaining the continuity of the social fabric. This narrative not only highlights the community's dedication to preserving ancestral ties and managing communal harmony but also reflects on the broader implications of such practices in shaping Timor-Leste's socio-cultural landscape in the post-conflict era.

Mambai

Our next case study focuses on cultural traditions of Mambai speakers, the second-most populous language community in Timor-Leste³ who occupy the central mountains of Timor-Leste. Mambai regard their lands as the centre of the world (T: *Rai Klaran*) one that is socially and politically constituted through complex mutual exchange relations within and between sacred house complexes across their traditional lands. The ritual domain of Maubisi-Mauloko in the central highlands of Ainaro provides a vibrant example of these interdependent relations. It includes within its borders the bustling eponymously named market town of Maubisi but is centred on the elevated ritual house complex of *Tartehi*, the *rai husar* (E: navel of the land). The case study explores the mythic foundations of the community, the rebuilding and inauguration of the seven core founding houses, and the annual agricultural ritual cycle that ensures the sustenance of the living community.

Koba Lima

Located in the far southwest of the country is the ancient politico-religious domain of *Koba Lima*, meaning the 'five betel nut baskets'. The cluster of constituent inter-married House groups identify their sacred centre as Fatumea, a fortified House complex situated in the central ranges near to the international border with Indonesia. Despite colonial and post-colonial challenges and population movements across this often-illusory border, the domain retains an abiding sense of unity reinforced through mythic narratives of origin, house-based rituals, and ongoing economic exchanges. This capacity of Koba Lima communities to retain their sense of shared origins and cultural identity is to some extent threatened by the border division and further challenges relating to the drift of their youth to towns and cities in search of more economically prosperous livelihoods. In this

³ Up to 130,000 native speakers (<https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/east-timorese-culture/east-timorese-culture-population-statistics>); 16.6% of 1,413,958 (2021) = 234,717 Mambai speakers.

chapter we examine the ways in which these House-based domains are negotiating and engaging with, the challenges and opportunities offered by the current two-state border solution.

Governance matters

In developing the concept of intergenerational wellbeing from its base in an ever-transforming customary realm, we also need to ask how these ideas and practices might be integrated successfully within secular state policies and government service delivery. To date, these issues of long-held customary practices and orientations have been largely ignored or quietly sidelined. Exemplifying this challenge in Timor-Leste is the customary practice of periodic prohibitions on harvesting or cultural burning deployed under the restrictive customary process of *tara bandu* (to impose/raise the ban). In this next chapter, we examine these multiple, locally enacted customary practices of ritualised prohibitions designed to regulate diverse place-based social and environmental relationships. Now officially valued and promoted by the state as a local mechanism to conserve and promote the preservation and sustainable use of natural resources, we argue that what is usually missing in this collaboration is an engaged respect by those in power for the context-specific, spiritually sanctioned, dynamic traditions and moral expectations that underpin local *tara bandu* institutions. Further, we find that these transformations and the implied renegotiation of power and ritual-political structures are being impacted by state-sanctioned intentions to harness or subvert their potential. In this protracted struggle for recognition, we locate a continued purpose and strength in the Timorese commitments to honouring their spirit ecologies. Chapter 7 presents an extended discussion of these customary practices and political ecologies in post-independence Timor-Leste with case material drawn from Fataluku and Waima'a ethnographies.

Indigeneity

In this chapter, we explore the broader aspirations and tensions between House-based orders and the bureaucratic impulse of successive Timorese governments to contain and co-opt these processes. Here, we consider the distinction between two key *Tetun* language terms that carry powerful emotional resonances. These terms include the concept of *rai na'in* referring to the traditional custodians of the land and that of the *rai Timor* which speaks to the wider nation of Timor-Leste. The tumultuous achievement of nationhood required the active involvement and

sacrifice of multiple traditional Timorese communities—*rai na'in*—to bring the new nation—the *rai Timor*—into existence (McWilliam and Traube 2011: 17). But while acknowledging the significance of what Ben Anderson (2003) has described as the triumph of ‘aggregated nativeness’, Timor-Leste’s nation-making agenda remains mired in the search for inclusive futures for its citizens. Too often, governments overlook or subsume the sub-regional collective claims of customary communities to political and cultural rights, within the wider frame of the national interest. In this penultimate chapter, we examine both the shifting ‘indigenous’ ontologies of local communities and the varied governmental recognition of ‘indigeneity’, thus illuminating the socio-political challenges of carving out spaces for plural identities and meaningfully diverse economic futures in Timor-Leste.

Notes on Methodology

The development of the present study brings together the results of long-term collaborative field research to present a series of richly nuanced ethnographic studies of customary communities in post-independence Timor-Leste. Three of the case studies, focusing on Fataluku, Waima’a, and Uatolari have been developed out of long-term research engagement and exploration by the authors, McWilliam, Palmer, Barnes, and Trindade. Much of this work, as noted earlier in the chapter, has sought to combine detailed and long-term studies of selected communities with productive analytical frameworks and comparative concepts to elucidate the cultural dynamics of Timorese society and their collective capacity for resilience and renewal.

The remaining two case studies of Mambai and Koba Lima communities reflect a more recent combination of research interests among the principal authors, but they too have been the subject of extended research covering multiple visits over a number of years. Their inclusion in this collection, we believe, extends our comparative understanding and appreciation of the range of variation that informs the house-based conduct of social politics across Timor-Leste. Two examples can help illustrate this point. It is often the case that the senior leaders of ritual communities are highly reluctant to divulge the mythic histories of their house-based groups. This is typically regarded as restricted or sacred knowledge and closely guarded by the senior practitioners. In the Mambai case study community in the mountains of central Timor, however, their openness to divulging and discussing the mythic foundations of the community and the ritual practices on which they are founded, was a striking contrast. As it was not hidden knowledge as such, this allowed for more extensive conversations to gain a deeper appreciation of the origins of myths and contemporary networks of the ritual community.

The second example draws on our experience of research in the mountains of Koba Lima with its ancient mythic connections to the former kingdom of Wehali: Wewiku and its turbulent colonial history in the context of Portuguese and Dutch borderland rivalries. The more recent and dramatic achievement of independence for Timor-Leste has resulted in a renewed process of dislocation among the ritual community, now living on both sides of the (international) border with Indonesia. In this otherwise highly disruptive context, the enduring values of the ritual house complexes of the domain and the need to periodically revitalise these links reveal their enduring capacity to sustain and renew its ancient ties with kin and affines across an otherwise formidable frontier. At this point, we wish to acknowledge the diverse and significant contributions of our key research collaborators, the majority of whom are Timorese. They have drawn on their own familiarity and cultural expertise of different language communities to contribute insights and expertise towards deeper ethnographic understandings. For this reason, we style the present volume as a multigraph (rather than a monograph) to recognise their contribution as co-authors and their nuanced understandings of Timorese life worlds. The latter aspect is highly significant as it facilitates a greater depth of translation and understanding to inform the analysis.

Finally, it is also important to note that the conduct and direction of long-term, intermittent field work among Timorese communities is very often shaped and guided by the expectations and accepted protocols of ritual leaders and cultural knowledge holders. In most Timorese communities, there is a marked gender distinction made in matters of public performances around ritual exchange and ceremonial activity. Senior men and leaders of ritual houses are prominent public figures and typically take on central roles in the conduct of rituals. In these contexts, researching matters of ritual significance tends to be guided, at least initially, by key male ritual figures who have the authority to speak. But it is quite evident that the performative aspects of House and domain-based rituals require the enthusiastic participation of all members of the ritual community, especially women who are symbolically and practically at the centre of these vital House communities. Our research has therefore sought to balance the perspectives and contributions of a diversity of contributors to generate ethnographic understandings and informed analysis.

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Fataluku Ritual Houses: Status, Relation, and Renewal

Andrew McWilliam

Abstract

Our first case study presents perspectives on the process of renewal and revival of customary traditions among the Fataluku speaking communities in the most easterly Municipality of Lautem. In a region where the resistance movement against Indonesian occupation was particularly strong and prolonged (McWilliam 2020), Fataluku communities were subject to variety of coercive restrictions on the conduct of customary practices and limits on social gatherings, as well as periodic reprisals against support for the resistance movement. The dramatic end of occupation in 1999 and subsequent achievement of independence has seen renewed attention accorded the conduct of customary practices and their attendant obligations, including the rebuilding of the Fataluku ritual houses (*le teinu*) as sites of veneration and group status rivalry. Recent innovations to these ‘sacred’ structures highlights both Fataluku pragmatism and their adaptive readiness to accommodate change, while maintaining their commitment to ancestral spirit ecologies.

Keywords: Timor-Leste, Ritual house, custom, Fataluku, governance

Fataluku Houses and Hearths

In the most easterly region of Timor-Leste can be found examples of the aesthetically striking Fataluku ritual houses, known generically in the Fataluku language as *le ia valu* (stilt houses). They provide contrasting and comparative examples of the vital role that ancestral house structures play in the enactment of social relations and the reproduction of alliance and spiritual relationships that constitute Fataluku living communities. Like the social qualities of many other Timorese sacred houses (generically: *uma lulik*), the dispersed membership of any Fataluku ritual or origin houses is defined through agnatic kinship to paternal male ancestors (F: *calu ho papu*).¹ They are derived in turn from a common founding figure and original mythic settlement site (F: *lata irinu*) which may be marked with an altar post (F: *ia*

¹ Systems mirrored in the matrilineal reckoning of Tetum-speaking southern coast communities and upland Bunak language groups where agnation follows female descent.

mari tuliya—footsteps of the ancestors) or other significant topographical features in the landscape. In this latter respect, people recognise a variety of large coralline boulders and rocky outcrops as the ‘fossilised’ remnants of ancestral sea-going boats (F: *loiasu mataru*) that ‘beached’ on Timor in the mythic past.²

The origins of the named ‘house’ community form the basis of authoritative claims to social and political authority over specified territories via inherited rights over land and its living resources (McWilliam 2011). Fataluku house communities, like their patrilineal counterparts across Timor-Leste, are exogamous, and daughters of the house marry out in exchange for elaborate bridewealth gifts (F: *valahana*). They marry into the houses of their new husbands bringing with them the prospect of babies to ‘strengthen the marriage house’ with new members. These processes of engagement and reciprocal exchange generate life-long bonds of alliance between the ‘marrying’ groups where all key life cycle transitions (especially births, marriages, and deaths) are marked with ritual exchanges and commensal feasting to acknowledge and reiterate the enduring reciprocal ties between them.

Fataluku stilt houses (F: *le ia valu*) are referred to by a variety of more specific names such as, *fia le*, *sei mecen-le*³, *tali sorok le*, and *le lohái*, which all reference different structural variations on a broadly shared design platform (see Lameiras Campagnolo 1975). Standing on solid ironwood posts and beams with intricately carved timber panelling and high roof structures, some of the larger examples of these houses can rise 6 metres or more above the ground, their steep roofs sheathed in tightly fixed layers of black *arenga* palm thatch (F: *fia*). The apex of the roof is usually decorated with a variety of house-specific elements including comb fans (F: *leu loporu*), shell strings with large nautilus shells (F: *liliru*) as well as carved wooden figurines or birds (F: *olo*) referencing their distinctive identity and origin. One variant of these house styles is the grandly decorated and symbolically gendered—male (F: *namí*) and female (F: *tupur*)—double-gendered houses with linked walkways (F: *le amarua*—‘twin’ houses) which are associated with specific, named group traditions.

Fataluku ritual house styles, and their diverse variants, are often assumed by non-Fataluku, to be local equivalents of the familiar sacred house (T: *uma lulik*) found across Timor-Leste; and there are some clear parallels with those traditions. For example, they provide sites for the conduct of sacrificial offerings and

² Most myths of named Fataluku *ratu* (E: clans) have their origins beyond the island of Timor and arrived by diverse forms of travel, including sailing *perahu*, walking along the ocean floor, hitching a ride on a crocodile, or as human transformations of various marine megafauna and other sea creatures (whales, dolphins, dugong).

³ This style of house has an enclosed box-like structure under the elevated main floor and was formerly used as a sleeping space as well as overnight confinement for household slaves (F: *akanu*).

invocations to group ancestors. They also serve as a focus for family celebrations of life cycle transitions, and their specific structural design and decorative built forms are the property of the origin group itself inherited from its founding ancestors. But there are also some important and fundamental differences that distinguish the Fataluku house from comparable *uma lulik* forms elsewhere (see later chapters). Two aspects, in particular, are especially pertinent here.

Firstly, ancestral or origin houses often serve as both a living space for senior households of the group as well as a symbolically charged repository of ancestral sacred objects (F: *falo*, *manuscrito*) and other protective regalia of the lineage (F: *ratu*). The most important element is and remains the installation of the sacred hearth (F: *lafuru tei* or *acakaka*), which is always secured opposite the hatchway (F: *wai hula*) in the corner above the eastern facing support pillar (F: *tutu kaka*)⁴ of the house. Indeed, Fataluku have commented to me at different times that the principal role of the ritual house was and remains being to provide a secure repository for the sacred hearth (F: *acakaka*). In other words, the ‘sacrificial hearth’ remains the primary focus for most households in communicative relation with their ancestors, and in many ways, more so in practice than the structure in which it is installed.⁵

In Fataluku cultural practice, the creation of a new sacrificial hearth is a gift from a father to his sons, typically following their marriage and the establishment of a separate household. The process of initiating a new *acakaka* requires the passing of a burning piece of firewood (F: *acakaka nana kafu*) from the father’s ritual hearth (or that of the most senior agnatic male relative) to that of his sons to ignite the new fire. This transfer is one replicated over generations of practice and means that conceptually and ritually, all sacred hearths (*acakaka*) of an origin group (F: *ratu*) are thus ultimately connected to the original hearth of the founding ancestor (the ancient hearth: *acakaka i irinu*). It also follows that there is considerable scope for replication of the house and (sacred) hearth structures among the typically disbursed agnatic group. In this context, it is usually the ‘eldest’ (more senior) hearth and house, that becomes the focus for group rituals. However, it is possible to maintain the integrity of the sacrificial hearth in relation to the collective spirit world without the need to build or rebuild an ancestral house (*le ia valu*) at all. This has been the experience of many Fataluku households following the end of Indonesian occupation when most of these houses were destroyed or had fallen into disrepair. In these cases, it was the sacred hearth (*acakaka*) that was retained as the vital sacrificial link to paternal ancestors. Here, male house members gather at the hearth (F: *acakaka na cuaré*) to seek ancestral protection and share sacrificial

⁴ The *tutu kaka* (E: elder sibling post) is the first to be ‘planted’ and provides what Jim Fox has described as the ‘symbolic attractor’ in the house where key rituals are conducted (see Fox 2006).

⁵ All houses also install a conventional internal hearth (*lafuru*) where meals are prepared.

meat (F: *leura tei :: ipilu tei*) with the ancestral presence. That said, and in terms of the received tradition and its obligations, there is a general and largely unvoiced expectation that, the ritual house (*le ia valu*) of the group—sometimes referred to as the ‘sacred house’ [F: *le tein(u)*—will eventually be constructed as a repository for the ancestral hearth and a site for the conduct of rituals associated with the life cycles of the agnatic kin group.⁶

Secondly, across many traditional politico-ritual structures in Timor-Leste, the domain or territory (F: *mua*, T: *rai*) is constituted in and by a set of original founding houses that provide the functional ritual and political governance of the community, each with its own specific set of roles (e.g., Clamagirand 1975; Forman 1980; Traube 1986). The enduring ritual centre of *Tartehi* in the Mambai domain of Maubisi Mauloko (see Chapter 4) is an exemplary case in point where clusters of ranked *uma lulik*, enjoined though myth and affinal networks of alliance, constitute the contemporary ritual governance structure of the domain. Fataluku customary domains, by contrast, tend to be more singular and smaller in their mythic constitution with relatively little group differentiation. Historically, the creation of settled places (F: *lata*) is generally attributed to the presence of a single founding ancestor or set of brothers. This founder (group) assumes the title of *mua ocawa* (E: lord of the land). Over time, through processes of sacrificial engagement and domestication of the spirit guardian/s of the land (F: *tei ma varin pai'i*)—also referred to as *mua ocawa* (T: *rai na'in*)—the relationship generates a powerful, mutually reinforcing authority over the land and its living resources (McWilliam 2011; Fitzpatrick et al. 2012). This doubly constituted nature of the *mua ocawa* (T: *rai na'in*) between a visible living owner/s and a largely invisible spirit guardian has qualities of consubstantiation—a shared coexistence of substance and authority, and for this reason, a bond that is difficult to usurp and dangerous to ignore.

Over time, others seek to settle and establish social and political relations with the land-owning *mua ocawa* household/agnatic founding group, very often through marriage. In so doing, subsequent settlers are usually granted rights to reside and utilise areas of land under the overall authority of the senior house (F: *mua ocawa*, T: *rai na'in*). Historically, this pattern has played out in variants around a common set of cultural ideas and practices, mediated by warfare and shifting alliances across the Fataluku lands of Lautem (McWilliam 2011). The result of this process of successive and nested partitioning of territory eventually established a diverse number of individuated ‘landowner’ groups (*mua ocawa*) with authority over their respective and geographically limited jurisdictions.

⁶ The Fataluku phrase, *le teinu* (sacred house), is these days usually applied to the Catholic church, but it is not uncommon to refer to the Fataluku stilt house in the same way, possibly to imply nominal equivalence in terms of the sacred.

Historically, the size of Fataluku settlements also tended to be small and relatively mobile. They were typically organised around semi-permanent residential sites, known as *ot(u)* which were composed of separate households and located close to bush gardens (F: *pala*) and other food resources. There was, to my knowledge, relatively little political differentiation and institutionalisation of roles and duties within these bounded domains and between resident lineage groups (*ratu*). But attention to social status differences was highly marked and provided some of the strongest distinguishing socio-structural features of these small settlements. Here, I would like to highlight three dimensions of these social distinctions, all of which have implications for the kinds of residential and ritual structures developed by different groups.

The first dimension is the segmentation over time of the founding kin group (*ratu*) into distinct sibling (birth order) lineages. In Fataluku reckoning, it is the oldest sibling group (F: *moco kaka*- first born), that carries seniority and precedence in terms of authority of the founding group or *ratu*. Younger sibling lineage groups (F: *moco ulu pen(u)* and youngest last born, *moco vehula*) remain integral members of the broader group (*ratu*), but subsidiary in terms of the overall status and seniority of the *moco kaka* lineage. The distinction is an enduring one and a vital point of difference and potential segmentation.⁷

Secondly, among Fataluku *ratu* (E: clan or origin group), membership is composed of three clearly defined classes or caste-like (inherited) categories of people referred to by the terms, *ratu*, *paca*, and *akanu*. They speak to an elite born status (F: *ratu*) a group of ordinary members (*paca*), and a subordinate or slave category of house member (F: *akanu*). These distinctions derive from the mythic past but continue to inform contemporary relations to varying degrees and retain their inherited, discriminatory influence until the present day. The relationship between *ratu* and *paca* is asymmetric and unequal but conventionally respectful and mutually supportive. They refer to one another as ‘siblings’ (i.e. common origins) (elder younger: *noko kaka*).⁸ But their respective standing is potentially a point of tension and resentment which can lead to social division. The slave category

⁷ It is the youngest son, however, who inherits their father's sacred hearth (*acakaka*) who is said to ‘keep it burning for him’.

⁸ The origins and meaning of the distinction between *ratu* and *paca* segments of the ancestral group are subject to much uncertainty and dispute. They appear to represent a form of dual structure within the descent group now much modified. Lameiras Campagnolo (1975: 43) has discussed one mythic version (among many) of the relationship in which one group (F: *paca*) were responsible for producing consumption goods from the land (food and palm liquor), while the counterpart group (*ratu*) were responsible for producing exchange goods, including the woven textiles (*lao* or *tais*) produced by their wives. The distinction was subsequently translated into enduring status distinctions which is reflected in the value accorded different woven designs (see also Forshee 2014).

(*akanu*) refers to households whose ancestors became war captives or had been made destitute by former colonial taxation regimes (*finta, capitação*) (Gunn 1999) and subsequently indentured themselves to a more powerful *ratu* benefactor. They are said to become ‘servers and helpers’ in the ‘house of the Ratu’ and remain low-status members of the group over generations.

The third key status distinctions are those recognised between the founding *ratu* lineage/s (F: *mua ocawa*) and subsidiary in-marrying (*affinal*) households from other *ratu* groups,⁹ which establish their own residential presence with the permission of the landowners. Elite *ratu* land-owning groups (*mua ocawa*) prefer to marry off their daughters to high-status, *ratu* settlers (in a local version of the stranger king mythology; see Sahlins 2008). In this way, subsequent settlers can secure rights in land, while both groups preserve their high social status and that of their children over generations of continuing marriage alliance. As in-marrying affines and cultivators of the land, migrants are said to enjoy the ‘oil and fat’ (F: *mina ho vai’a*) of the land controlled by their affinal land-owning hosts (*mua ocawa*). Conversely, a marriage with a *paca* or lesser-status family, is socially damaging particularly for a *ratu* woman and her subsequent children. For that reason, close attention is paid (to this day) to the history and quality of the ancestral pedigree of prospective marriage partners to ensure that young people marry partners of commensurate status.¹⁰

The point to draw from these closely observed status distinctions is that they also translate in de-facto customary terms, into implicit differential rights and capacities to construct decorated Fataluku ritual houses. Historically, for example, it was really only households with *ratu* status that had the relevant authority and economic wherewithal to build the larger and elaborately decorated stilt houses such as, *Le lohai*, *Fia Le* or *Sei Mecen le*. Similarly, it was expected that ‘younger brother’ (F: *noko*) lineages could not build larger houses than their elder sibling relatives (F: *kaka*), and these aspects of status became much more evident with the success of the Colonial ‘pacification’ campaigns in Lautem from the early twentieth century and the pressure to concentrate populations for purposes of control and governance (McWilliam 2007; Pélissier 1996). In the process, greater numbers of co-located customary house structures (*le ia valu*) were established, and the respective status of different households (and their implicit financial capacity) was signalled more publicly in the divergent scale and variable decorative splendour of the House structures that were subsequently built.

⁹ Many groups acquired settler rights in territory through political alliances or protection during former internecine warfare, which have been subsequently strengthened through marriage alliance.

¹⁰ One of the expressed concerns of parents with children taking up labour migration options to the United Kingdom and Australia has been that they might find love matches with a lower-status partner and bring loss of face upon the family.

Rebuilding Fataluku Ancestral Houses

Variations on the distinctive Fataluku thatched stilt houses were common sights in Lautem among the scattered villages (*suco*) and hamlets (*povoçao*) of the territory during the latter years of Portuguese colonial rule. But as elsewhere in Timor-Leste, the ravages of the Indonesian military invasion and subsequent armed struggle for independence along with the widespread use of intimidation for political purposes, saw many of these iconic structures destroyed—their membership displaced and resettled beyond locally claimed territories and into more concentrated settlements along main roads. During the repressive years of occupation with restrictions on gatherings and free movement, the capacity to repair or rebuild the iconic ancestral houses was severely constrained and often discouraged by successive governing administrations.¹¹

In the years since liberation, high levels of poverty and continuing poor employment prospects have also delayed the re-development of Fataluku decorated stilt houses. Indeed, for many years, most people elected to construct much simpler houses including a range of commonly seen residential dwellings such as the one room, rectangular stilt houses (F: *cu*)¹² of split bamboo cladding and palm thatch, or small concrete block houses (F: *le pitine*) sometimes with palm rib cladding and re-used corrugated iron roofs. Until recently, the difficulty of mobilising a group-wide commitment to re-construct economically and ritually expensive ancestral origin houses, has precluded such undertakings.

It is only in recent years that there has been a flourishing re-emergence of *le ia-valu* house projects. This has been made possible by a growing prosperity and improved household incomes, derived in part from the flow of government social transfers (for veterans of the war of liberation or their families) and old age pensions (Wallis 2019), but also from the flow of cash remittances delivered by youthful labour migrants working in a range of comparatively well-paid factory and shift work on Portuguese passports in the United Kingdom (McWilliam 2020).¹³ The impetus for this renewed enthusiasm for reinstating lineage-based ritual houses (*le ia valu*), I would argue, is a shared sense among House members of a

¹¹ Ironically and despite the loss of many of these structures, the Indonesian government often used the emblematic Fataluku ritual house as a symbol of East Timorese cultural heritage (see McWilliam 2021).

¹² The term '*cu*' (and *moh*) refers to different basic shelters. For example, *lupu cu* is a basic garden shelter and *Tua moh* is a resting place/shelter for distilling palm liquor.

¹³ A practice and opportunity now much attenuated following the implementation of Brexit regulations restricting migrant access to British employment opportunities. That said, many Fataluku households have relatives who remain in the UK and continue to send cash remittances (see McWilliam 2020, 2022).

need to create a focal point for the ritual celebration of life cycle transitions and a venue for periodic commensal engagements with the wider kin group and alliance network (see also Viegas 2019).

In the following examples, I highlight something of the significance of the Fataluku ancestral stilt house in these multiple dimensions. Their re-development and contemporary prominence provide an emphatic expression of the continuing value placed on the protective ancestral presence and the enduring sacrificial relationship that informs practical action in the world. They remain sites for the articulation of social status and the public celebration of relational group identity and social alliance. They are also a built form where innovation and adaptive modification to customary building practices reflect pragmatic contemporary choices and changing resource options.

Innovation and Renewal

The widespread interest in redeveloping an ancestral ritual house, observed in the increasing numbers of new and refurbished *le ia valu* appearing across the settled landscapes of Lautem, all reflect an extended process of negotiation and debate, that is entered into by members and affiliates of the House/Ratu group. Rebuilding a ritual house and especially installing the sacred hearth (F: *lafuru tei*), is conventionally a collaborative project between agnatic male members (F: *noko kaka*// *kaka ho pal*) and their affinal relatives (via married daughters and sisters of the House—F: *tupurmoko*, *leren ho moco*). The latter are invited to contribute labour and reciprocated gifts commensurate with exchanges played out in the context of weddings or funeral gifts and commensality (McWilliam 2011).

As a ritual focus and gathering centre for constituent households, the purpose-built stilt house (*le ia valu*) is linked through patrification to a core lineage group of ‘fathers’ (F: *palu*), brothers (F: *noko kaka*), and sons (F: *moco nami*). The activity brings together the normally dispersed house membership into a series of discussions to secure commitments pledged towards the House-building project. There are substantial financial and time commitments involved here, including the sourcing and cost of building materials, securing skilled practitioners to manage the construction, and committing to the high cost of sacrificial animals and commensal feasting that accompany the many stages of construction. The latter practices are crucial elements ensuring the integrity and strength of the building and the spiritual protection of its broader membership. The re-building and inauguration of a Fataluku sacred house (*le ia valu*) is therefore a major commitment for the relevant group of inter-related households, which in the process, makes visible the relational field of sociality that comprises the kin group and its affinal allies while reinforcing their group identity and standing in the community.

The widespread reconstruction of Fataluku ritual houses across Lautem reproduce many of the distinctive structural forms and decorative features of the traditional house styles. In many cases, carved panels and other decorative elements are salvaged from previous weathered structures and re-purposed in the new constructions, providing significant points of continuity with previous ancestral houses. However, Fataluku have also embraced two key innovations of the traditional design. The first of these changes is a shift away from solid timber support posts and cross beams that form the structural base of the house and towards the use of moulded concrete to replicate the structures. In a pattern replicated widely across the settled landscape, in place of the familiar, four, hand-carved and shaped support posts (F: *tutu*) topped with encircling rectangular, carved wooden disks (F: *sala fuka*) and massive timber cross beams (F: *fatu, pokala*), the whole base structure is now frequently fashioned out of moulded concrete. Similarly, instead of the thick black *fia* roof thatch traditionally fashioned from Arenga palm webbing, there are sheets of variably blackened corrugated iron roofing (T: *kalen*), designed to mimic the customary pattern of older-style buildings. In both cases, the effect is striking in its resemblance to the general appearance of the original timber and thatch models but has the distinctive advantage of being far more durable. The changes highlight the two principal points of weakness in the traditional timber and thatch structures that are susceptible to weathering effects and deterioration over time from the impact of borers and rot. Even with regular maintenance and repairs to the roof, the old-style structures can rapidly fall into disrepair within a decade or two.

A second motivating factor in the decision to shift away from the traditional building materials, has been the change in the availability and practicality of building resources. On one hand, the effort and specialist skills required for fashioning secure palm thatch roofing material has been in long-term decline raising the cost of the exercise. On the other hand, the widespread pattern of re-building residential dwellings across Lautem, financed by improving prosperity and particularly by the flows of cash remittances from youthful Fataluku participating in transnational labour migration (McWilliam 2020, 2022), has attracted greater supplies of concrete and corrugated iron roofing to local markets and trading centres. The result has been a confluence of beneficial changes that have facilitated a pragmatic shift to an alternative cost-effective house design modification.

These two design features of the traditional Fataluku stilt house are striking innovations to what are usually, long-standing stylistic conventions reinforced by customary sanctions against transgressive action. Elsewhere in Timor-Leste, for example, the idea of building sacred structures (*uma lulik*) with concrete and corrugated iron is generally strongly resisted, mainly out of fear of retribution from angry ancestors. There are similar kinds of sentiments expressed by some

Fataluku cultural advocates and observers of these developments who remain uncomfortable and unconvinced about the new trend. They consider the innovation to be a risky practice that may yet rebound on those involved in the form of illness, misfortune, and loss. Others appear more sanguine on these matters, such as my Fataluku colleague who explained that, “we don’t mention the changes in the house [to the ancestors]; we just refer to the *le tein* (*uma lulik*) and invite their assistance.”¹⁴ Either way, all perform the requisite divinations and sacrificial offerings to secure the agreement of House ancestors about the change and protect its residents.¹⁵ Another interlocutor observed that there was likely to be an element of prestige or pride in one’s extended family group and public, signalling that they are able to display a fine new *le ia valu*. The new streamlined and functional innovations provide a desirable way to achieve that result and garner community esteem in the process.

My friend, Edmundo, dismissed this trend as an indulgent household display of financial capacity and group aggrandisement where people are ‘looking for a name’. “It makes no difference,” he added sardonically, “because everyone knows who they are,” and in so saying highlighted the entrenched nature of inherited or inter-generational status differences that cannot be easily undone by wealth effects.¹⁶

Either way and judging by the prevalence of these new design features, it seems that a significant change to the long-established set of customary procedures and protocols has been realised and provisionally accepted. The developments announce, in a modified but celebratory way, a popular revival of the uniquely styled, Fataluku origin house, but also an openness to adapting and incorporating new materials into an old design.¹⁷

¹⁴ This is someone of a senior local status but whose ratu origin group have not yet re-built their own *le ia valu* or *le teino*, since the late colonial Portuguese period.

¹⁵ Part of this process involves placing small, forked sticks above the doorway on which are placed chicken eggshells (F: *o’o le’u utanatana*) that have been activated with protective mantras against the ingress of unwelcome or wild spirit forces (F: *ono e’e jete*).

¹⁶ Fataluku acknowledge the right to build large stilt houses with the phrase *Fia le moco, Taru le moco*, which might be glossed as ‘a child of a “great” house’, where *fia* is the Arenga palm thatch, and *taru*, the intricately tied forest vines that secure the thatch of the house.

¹⁷ These adaptations also find willing participants in other regions of Timor-Leste. Among the members of Mambai *uma lulik* (M: *fad luli*) in Ainaru, a rethinking of older practices in the reconstruction of their sacred centres has seen a recent trend to install reinforced concrete support pillars in their otherwise intricately worked traditional timber and thatch houses. The process, while radically different from the ritually complex acquisition of support tree trunks from the forests, still involves a lively participation of house group extended family members in the ritual ‘planting’ of the pillars in the required configuration.

Renewing a Naja Ratu ritual house

On the northern coast between the villages of Lautem and Com, several new settlements have been established over the last decade, carving out housing and garden space from the dense *gewang* palm forests (*Corypha elata*) on either side of the road. In one house yard, a fine new Fataluku *le ia valu* has been constructed and commissioned for use by a lineage group of the Naja Ratu clan. The core group includes two brothers, their sons, and families (now some 20 people), most of whom have relocated to the new settlement taking advantage of available land, road access, and electricity connections. Their decision to restore their *le ia valu* (sacred house) in the new settlement exemplifies aspects of the current widespread enthusiasm for reviving ritual structures.

The new ritual house is a variation on the general Naja Ratu (clan) House design (F: *fia le*) but reflects distinctive decorative elements that signify sub-group identity and reference the historical connection to a specific ancestral genealogical path of the descent group. It also features modern elements and reclaimed materials from the former ritual structure in the old settlement of Serenida on the Nari plateau (*Planalto do Nari*) some 8km to the south. A decision to relocate the structure to Ipairira was precipitated by the death of one of the senior group members and the dilapidated state of the ritual house.

The new House was built in several stages. The first and most significant ceremonial occasion was held at the original settlement site of the old Naja Ratu ritual house in Serenida, to 'inform' the house ancestors (F: *calu ho papu*) of the decision to relocate the structure. Sacrificial offerings of meat (F: *leura tei::ipilu tei*) were made in the customary way as well as the obligatory divinations (F: *lonia, mu'u fuka totole*) to confirm that there was no transgressive or moral impediment to the move. On this occasion, the group invited both sets of affinal relations to participate in the process, all of whom are expected to exchange gifts on the occasion. This included the relatives known as *omara* and *ara ho pata* (base and post) (T: *umane*), who represent the wives' and mothers' natal houses of Naja group men, as well as the *tupurmoko* (i.e., the daughters and sisters of the Naja ratu¹⁸ group including their respective husbands and children) (T: *fetosawa*). All attendees participate in the vital first stage of construction, namely securing the major timber support pillars (*tutu*) for the elevated house design. Beginning with the east-facing first post (*tutu kaka*), a large pig was killed as a blood sacrifice to 'strengthen the post', and the meat used in the sacrifice (F: *leura tei*) was consumed by male members of Naja ratu, while the remaining muscle meat was distributed to the representatives of the *tupurmoko*

¹⁸ Referred to formally as *Naja fanar* (women of Naja)

groups. Each subsequent post required another pig sacrifice (or goat) to ‘reinforce’ the supporting base for the series of cross beams that lock the structure in place.

In addition to a commensal meal to celebrate this stage of the construction, all the assembled *tupurmoko* affines, received a blessing from the ritual leader of the Naja group (F: *laficaru*), which comprised a betel nut and water mixture (F: *pua ira*) spat/blown onto their foreheads. Designed as an invocation for a ‘healthy life’ (F: *pupuko lauhé/lauhuté*), the action also references the blood of fertility that has been transferred from the wives’ natal group (Naja) to that of their husbands. At the close of the events, all the participants were also ritually cooled (from the potentially dangerous heat (F: *timiné*) of ancestral proximity), with a sprinkling of coconut juice and blood (F: *vata ira*). Here they used a coconut husk implement reminiscent of the liturgical aspergillum used in applications of Catholic holy water.¹⁹

For the Naja family group, a hiatus followed the completion of the first stage, as they continued to assemble the necessary materials to complete the upper section and roof. A second stage of building included completion of the roof cladding and installing the sacred hearth (*lafuru tei*). This work was undertaken by the immediate agnatic family members with assistance from some of their locally resident *tupurmoko* affines. In terms of building materials, and against the concrete trend, a decision was made to source timber for the house posts and structural beams (F: *fara*—ironwood).²⁰ The posts, however, were set within a concrete and stone platform on the ground in a variation on the customary enclosing timber base (F: *tuku*). Another innovation was the choice of a corrugated iron roof in place of the customary *Arenga* palm (*fia*) thatch (see McWilliam 2016). In this case, the roof was initially clad in multi-coloured sheets of iron (white and red) purchased from the Chinese trading stores in Lautem. However, subsequent divinations determined that ancestors were displeased with the choice, and the roof was then painted black to mimic the former thatch cladding style (see Figure 2).

The Naja group ritual house project highlights one example among many similar exercises currently under way across the Fataluku settlements of Lautem as part of the longer-term processes of post-conflict recovery. The re-emergence of these ancestral structures and their adaptive presence in the contemporary environment speak to the convergence of a combination of enabling factors and motivations. They include a gradual improvement in household incomes across the region, combined with a desire to provide a ritual focus for the celebration of life cycle transitions that inform kinship relations and networks of social alliance. They also confirm the continuing powerful and protective influence of ancestors on the lives of the living.

¹⁹ I have often queried the striking similarity in the application of *vata ira* (bloodied coconut water), but Fataluku generally disavow any connection to Catholic practice.

²⁰ The reasons for this are not clear but, in my experience, it is likely to be associated with the unfavourable result of divination signalling ancestral displeasure.



Figure 2: Restored Naja Ratu ritual house (*le ia valu*). Photo credit: Andrew McWilliam

The politics of house construction

Not all ritual house rebuilding projects go smoothly, however. On the deteriorating main road that winds up from the coast at Lautem towards the municipal capital, Los Palos 30km to the south, over several visits from 2018, I had observed the slow construction of a large new Fataluku stilt house (F: *fia le*). The structure also featured the striking design variations on the traditional form, namely the use of pre-cast concrete posts and beams that formed the key structural support elements and the fashioning of a steep black painted corrugated iron roof, mimicking the black *Arenga* palm thatch (*fia*). Discussions with local households in the village of Maina 1 revealed that they were undertaking a new construction of their former ritual house that had long since fallen into disrepair at their previous settlement of Pisa. They had been motivated to initiate construction following a chicken liver divination (F: *aca foté*) undertaken for a very unwell family member that had indicated the need to reinstate the sacred house (*le teino*) to facilitate recovery and ensure the health of the wider group. Over several decades, the group, which comprised the descendants of four brothers, had grown to nearly 100 members who, like the Naja Ratu house community, were motivated to redevelop the ancestral house as a focus for their life cycle celebrations.

Since the decision to recreate their ritual house, new foundational posts and beams had been installed and the appropriate animal sacrifices made to ensure their integrity and strength. The striking new roof had also been partially completed, and there was anticipation that the project would be finalised and inaugurated in the coming months. However, as it turned out, this enthusiasm was evidently misplaced as the project remained unfinished through the following year.

Sometime after my visit to the new *Le ia valu (fia le)* under construction, I was introduced to Snr Faustino da Conceição, who had a keen interest in the development in Suco Maina and was highly critical of the construction process. In our extended conversation, he relayed a complicated background story of its provenance and the reasons behind the then (2019) stalled construction. The new House it turned out, was indeed an iteration of the structure that had formerly stood in the settlement of Pisa, but the design recreated another, formerly revered sacred house that once stood at a place named Solo Resi overlooking the Malalada River which flows north to the coast of Lautem. More significantly, the sacred house at Solo Resi had been the focal ritual centre of the former ruling Fataluku family of the area named Uruha'a Ratu which, as far back as 1701, had been recognised by successive Portuguese colonial governments as the ruling house (*regulo*) of the Fataluku Kingdom of Sarau (see Leitão 1948). This former 'kingdom' encompassed the northwestern coast and hinterland of the contemporary Lautem Municipality, and the ruler had been closely allied with the Portuguese colonial government. The



Figure 3: New House construction in Maina 1. Photo Credit: Andrew McWilliam

last ruler of Sarau, a man named Dom Paulo, governed until the early twentieth century. He was a member of the Uruha'a Ratu clan group and had been baptised with the Christian family name of Da Conceição.

The wholly dilapidated state of their former sacred house and the absence of a suitable replacement was a key motivation for the agnatically related Uruha'a families in Suco Maina to relocate and rebuild the house at a new site in the village (itself established in the 1980s during the Indonesian period of governance (1975-1999). Here, they sought to cater for the members of four agnatically related sibling groups who were looking to enact life cycle rituals and secure the ancestral protection offered by the presence of their own ritual centre within the settlement.

However, according to Faustino, the protagonists in the plans to reconstruct the ancestral house of Uruha'a lacked the authority to lead the process. They belonged to a younger sibling line [*moco ulu pen(u)*] of the main descendants of Uruha'a ratu and therefore required the expressed permission of the senior (oldest brother) agnatic lineage, the *moco kaka* of Uruha'a Ratu, in order to complete the house. More pointedly, Faustino suggested in fact that the protagonists were originally a refugee group (from one of the internecine wars of the late nineteenth century) named Latu Loho Ratu, who had been integrated into the greater Uruha'a Ratu ruling group for political protection. The inference here was that their claims to even a subsidiary sibling status in the origin house were potentially suspect. Either way, when the Maina group belatedly sought the support of their patrilineal 'cousins' (their 'older brothers'—*noko kaka*), a dispute erupted around the protocols and customary authority with the result that their blessing and permission to proceed with the project were withheld resulting in an acrimonious impasse and deferral of any further construction of the house.

At the time of my discussions with Faustino (September 2019), there was no clear resolution in the making. He observed that really the only way forward was for the Maina group to speak 'from' (i.e., on behalf of) Uruha'a Ratu, as a kind of delegated status. "Otherwise," he said, "there will be no one with the rights to make offerings at the sacred hearth (*acakaka*) and eat (sacrificial meat—*leura te'i*) on the platform above"—as is customary for senior members of the ratu. Faustino's comments here speak to the ritual etiquette of sacrifice in relation to the elevated Fataluku *le ia valu*. The entitlement to share and consume sacrificial meat (*leura tei*) that is cooked and presented to the ancestors at the sacred hearth (*aca kaka* or *lafuru tei*) is restricted to male members of the relevant ratu group. But due to the constrained space within the elevated ritual house, it is the higher-status (*ratu*) members of the lineage who take precedence in the ritual enactment. Fataluku allude to this distinction with the metaphor of 'eating (the meat) above' (*le hia nana i leura*) while subsidiary *paca* status agnates and other patrilineal relatives

consume the sacred meat (*leura tei*) below (*mua na'ana*), that is, under the house and its immediate surrounds.²¹

But Faustino also urged patience in the matter and said, “let’s see what happens; already, someone close to them has died suddenly!” And in so saying, he was alluding to the supposed illegitimacy of the protagonists of the Maina village house project and the death that surely signalled the displeasure of their ancestors. Resolution of the dispute was clearly some way off.

Indeed, it was not until late in 2020 during the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic that a path to resolution was negotiated and ultimately resolved. As is often the case with issues of disputes ‘within the house’, at some point there needs to be an acknowledgment of wrongdoing that opens a pathway to acceptance and agreement. Fataluku use the phrase, *horo cuare*²²—a coming together—to resolve their differences. In this case, the senior status of Uruha’a Ratu prevailed and the *uma lisan* (*le’i ia valu*) could be completed along with the gifting of five head of cattle by the ‘younger sibling’ group as restitution.

The stalled plans to develop an ancestrally charged *le ia valu* in Suco Maina are illustrative of a broader range of social and politically charged issues that need to be taken into consideration when deciding to recreate and reinstate any group’s own elevated ritual house. Of critical importance is the need for consensus and participation across the wider lineage of the dispersed *ratu* membership. At the same time, having made the commitment, the emergence of delays and disputes that postpone the completion the project are equally fraught and likely to have serious, often spiritual, consequences that include sudden illness or deaths among the related House group membership. The stalled *Uruha’a ratu* building project in Maina 1 was a case in point where social divisions and status rivalries damaged the prospects for unity within the agnatic community and undermined inter-generational wellbeing.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the resurgence and reappearance of the iconic Fataluku ancestral *le ia valu* stilt houses across the landscape of Lautem over recent years reflects the growing prosperity of households. Many have benefited from government social transfers (pensions, veterans’ payments) (Wallis 2019) and a

²¹ This group can include allied *ratu* men who share agnatic mythic origins but subsequently separated into two descent groups and still refer to one another as siblings (*noko kaka*).

²² The term has similar connotations to the Tetun phrase, *Nahe biti* (rolling out the woven mat of reconciliation).

vibrant flow of remittances from youthful Fataluku labour migrants working in the UK (McWilliam 2020, 2022). The redevelopment of ancestral ritual houses is thus part of a broader process of post-conflict social and economic recovery in the years since the end of occupation and national liberation—one that is directed towards age-old religious and cultural concerns around the health and wellbeing of extended family networks.

The *Ratu* (clan or origin group) specific design features of these distinctive *le ia valu* stilt houses derive from the mythic histories of ancestral groups and reflect their group identity and prominent social status as ‘high’-born members. In this respect, the reappearance of prominent *le ia valu* speaks to both the continuing importance of ancestors and ritual sacrifice/commensality in the life of the agnatic community, but also to a reassertion of prescriptive social status in the public sphere by senior lineage groups—all keen to showcase their ancestral credentials and contemporary economic capacity. As part of this process, Fataluku have been integrating innovative structural elements into the formal designs of their ritual houses. In particular, the use of moulded concrete basal posts and crossbeams along with black-painted corrugated iron are now common features of the characteristic Fataluku *le ia valu*. I interpret these modifications of long-established ancestral designs in terms of a cultural pragmatism and willingness to innovate in at least two vital areas of House design that are susceptible to weathering and decay. In the process and subject to ancestral divinatory agreement, house communities can significantly extend the longevity and utility of the buildings. In these and related ways the Fataluku ‘return to custom’ via the celebratory acknowledgement of sacrificial rituals and revitalisation of ancestral religious practice, reinforces the intimate connections between living households, agnatic communities, and the spiritual blessings derived from ancestral territories and the bountiful natural resources on which their lives and livelihood still depend.

A striking example of these enduring, intimate connections or co-presence (Viegas 2019b) sustained between the living and the ancestral dead may be observed during funerary proceedings honouring the death of senior members of the agnatic group (*ratu*). During such gatherings, a narrative performance known as F: *nololo* (or *nere ca’a*), which can be loosely translated as ‘recounting the path’, is directed towards the spirit of the recently deceased. The intent of this speech performance is to honour the deceased and convey the newly instantiated ancestral spirit (F: *i huma’ara*) back to the ancient founding settlement of the agnatic ancestral group. In this respect, *nololo* recitations represent a kind of spoken rewinding of the deceased’s biography and the significant places and people who figured in their lives along the ancestral path from which they and their kin have come. Performed prior to the burial procession to the graveyard, usually by a senior member of the deceased’s *ratu* group, the hovering spirit is urged to return ‘home’ via the

circuitous pathway of successive former settled places where they will meet their ancestors (*kaka ho palu:: calu ho papu*)²³ and all their immediate family who have pre-deceased them, and remain there at rest and in peace.²⁴ In this way, Fataluku *nololo* eulogies to the dead represent an imaginative reverse recounting of the agnatic (*ratu*) path of origin and of the curation of group identity and affiliation over generations of memorialisation. The performative aspect of *nololo* also reinforces the understanding that the creation of ancestors is not an automatic property of death, but a ritually prescribed process of active intervention by the living descendants to nurture and generate ancestral wellbeing in return for which the ancestors provide a watchful and protective oversight of their living progeny.

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²³ Translated as 'Elder brothers and fathers, grandfathers, and great grandfathers'.

²⁴ In an allusion to this same concept, anthropologist, Maria Lameiras Campagnolo, observed that Fataluku sometimes say of the death of someone that 'they have gone to plant coconuts in the land of the first village' (1975: 75).

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Waima'a House Cultures: Emergence, Connection, Reconstruction

Lisa Palmer and Quintiliano Mok

Abstract

Across the western region of the Baucau municipality, Waima'a House custodians recount autochthonous origin stories of emergence through water or land and the subsequent ways in which intra-regional connections were forged with other Waima'a speaking Houses. The water cultures upon which these Houses were founded continue to orient more-than-human social worlds and land-based relations. The chapter investigates the challenges of rebuilding of these Houses in the post-independence period and argues that these processes are challenged by the risks associated with negotiating complicated histories of House-based inter-relations, including that of a House with their original *lela ho'on* (fertility-givers). These social and spiritual risks are outweighed by the desire to re-establish functional House-based governance norms and intergenerational well-being. The chapter gives us a sense of the deeply cultural, but also often fragmentary and tenuous ways through which people live with and negotiate intra- and inter-house politics and wellbeing.

Keywords: Timor-Leste, Ritual house, custom, Waima'a, governance

Waima'a house cultures are elusive. Forming a corridor of connection across the western north-south transect in the Baucau municipality, the custodians of these houses tell deeply autochthonous origin stories of emergence, often through water and subsequent inter-regional connections with other Waima'a-speaking houses (Palmer 2015). More recent waves of migration from the Matebian foothills mean that many of these Waima'a houses are now Makasae speaking. Yet the water cultures upon which these houses are founded continue to orient both more-than-human social worlds and wider sets of landscape-based relations.

In this chapter, we examine the continuing salience of the house for inter-connected Waima'a communities and investigate the challenges of rebuilding these material structures in the post-independence period. While the customary governance role of the house continues to be central to local lifeways, as material structures, their reconstruction is considered both desirable and necessary whilst simultaneously socially and spiritually risky. One reason for this sense of risk is the need for house-building rituals to confirm and reconcile the great time-depth of

house-based inter-relations, in particular, that of the original affinal fertility givers (W: *lela ho'on*, T: *umane*). For this reason, in this chapter, we examine the role of fertility givers and by association the role of women in 'bringing the house' (W: *i'ee isi umo*, T: *fo tuir uma*) into being. Many Waima'a houses and the wider sets of social relations which they encode were decimated around the time of the Indonesian invasion (1975). Across the north–south transect of the Baucau municipality, these houses and their associated social relations are now being rebuilt and repaired.

In considering the importance of the house as an institution for Waima'a speakers, we begin this chapter by paying attention to the patterns of relatedness which emerge from selected house-based origin narratives and then examine the relationship of these houses to wider spirit ecologies, including that of spring waters. Exploring what people emphasise in these retellings and why, we consider the territoriality of the house complex and ask how this has changed over time. We argue that this deeply social understanding of territoriality is embedded within a meshwork of relationality wherein houses attend to recognising and honouring a range of affinal and agnatic kin (W: *wa'i-wari*, T: *maun-alin* and W: *lela-wasan*, T: *fetosa-umane*). We focus in particular on how this orientation encompasses affinal fertility givers and women, and we investigate the relational implications of these socio-natural assemblages and how they are worked through, manoeuvred and/or elided.

We further consider the status and importance of the institution of the house in comparative Waima'a context. To do so we focus on the range of materials, structures, resources, ritual processes, symbolism, and kinship relations central to the rebuilding of two Waima'a house complexes in the Bercoli domain in the south of the Baucau Municipality. Here, we examine the relationship of these houses to their wider spirit ecologies and show how the house domain and accompanying land unit revolves around the natural springs and water flows of the karstic terrain which simultaneously connects people to each other and the maintenance and entitlement to viable agricultural livelihoods. Within these patterns of relation, we emphasise the role of women who marry out, stay within, or return to their natal house and the ways in which alliances forged through and by women enable houses to expand their membership and by association their vital political and economic relationships. Every Waima'a house is a microcosm and centre of bespoke social networks.

Corridors of connection

A feature of the Waima'a north–south house transect zone is its relatively autonomous house histories. House origin stories feature a range of more than human actors—eels, snakes, buffalo, and dogs whose adventures either bring houses into

being or connect them to other houses across the landscape. Ethnohistories connect houses from opposite ends of the Baucau plateau and often concern the discovery and exchange of water and fire (symbolising life and vitality), highlighting the resulting patterns of cross-plateau alliance and/or avoidance relationships which result from these exchanges.¹

In 2018, Roberto Watu Labu,² the custodian of the words (W: *ki'i lia*, T: *lia-na'in*) of the Kubo-Buu Wai Dasu house on the southern edge of the Baucau plateau, relayed to Palmer the story of a tripartite house arrangement in the Bercoli region (comprising sibling relationships [W: *wa'i-wari*] between the domain-founding houses of Kubo-Buu, Wai Teki, and Ocabai). According to Elidio da Costa (per comm. 12/1/17), the senior custodian of the words for the Kubu-Buu-Wai Teki-Ocabai tripartite, house complex, in the beginning, the people of the Bercoli area had no houses. They ate only raw foods. They worshipped their springs, forest, and rocks

¹ In 2018, the custodians of Kubo-Bu'u Wai Dasu and its tripartite sibling houses asserted custodial responsibility for 37 springs spread across the drylands and escarpment edge of the Bercoli region. In 2018, Roberto Watu Labu gave the following account of life before the discovery of water in the drylands of the plateau:

In the past our ancestors didn't know about water. They only knew about fire. They wore only areng palm (*tali metan*). They would make fire by rubbing together two pieces of bamboo over palm fiber.

One day our ancestor Kubo-Bu'u sat together in the savanna with a man from Au Baca. They both had wild yams (*kumbili*) to eat. They exchanged pieces of their yams. Au Baca ate Kubo-Bu'u's and exclaimed 'why is it so sweet?' 'Because of fire,' said Kubo-Bu'u.

Au Baca's yam was raw. They knew about water, but they ate their food raw. Their mouths were all hairy inside. Kubo-Bu'u tasted Au Baca's it was terrible. It was not cooked.

But Au Baca taught him about water and it made him feel good, cool and content. They made a contract to exchange water and fire.

The next day Kubo-Bu'u went to Au Baca's house. Au Baca gave Kubo-Bu'u water. Au Baca brought out a basket with cotton seed and palm fiber inside. Kubo-Bu'u made fire with the bamboo sticks and Au Baca placed the fire in the basket in the roof of his house.

Kubo-Bu'u set off home, accidentally spilling water and creating springs as he walked. When he looked back he saw that Au Baca's house was burning down.

Much later the old man from Au Baca sought his vengeance. He went to visit Kubo-Bu'u. They sat together and talked and got very drunk. Then Au Baca got out a hidden stick he had sharpened and stabbed Kubo-Bu'u in the head. Kubo-Bu'u died straight away.

So, friends became enemies. But we are not allowed to be angry with each other. (Kubo-Bu'u Han Tasak, Aubaca han matak, Recorded 1/9/18 at Uma Kubo-Bu'u Wai Dasu).

In 2010 Palmer recorded the paired story of the discovery of water and fire from Loi-Osa the *lia na'in* of Kai Leki house at the northern edge of the plateau. Kai Leki is the custodial house for the nearby spring of Au Baca and its origin story begins with an emergence of three brothers from the spring of the same name (Palmer 2015, ch 3).

² His grandfather was in a sibling relationship with the Ocabai house. His grandmother was Joao Lere's sister (see Palmer 2015).

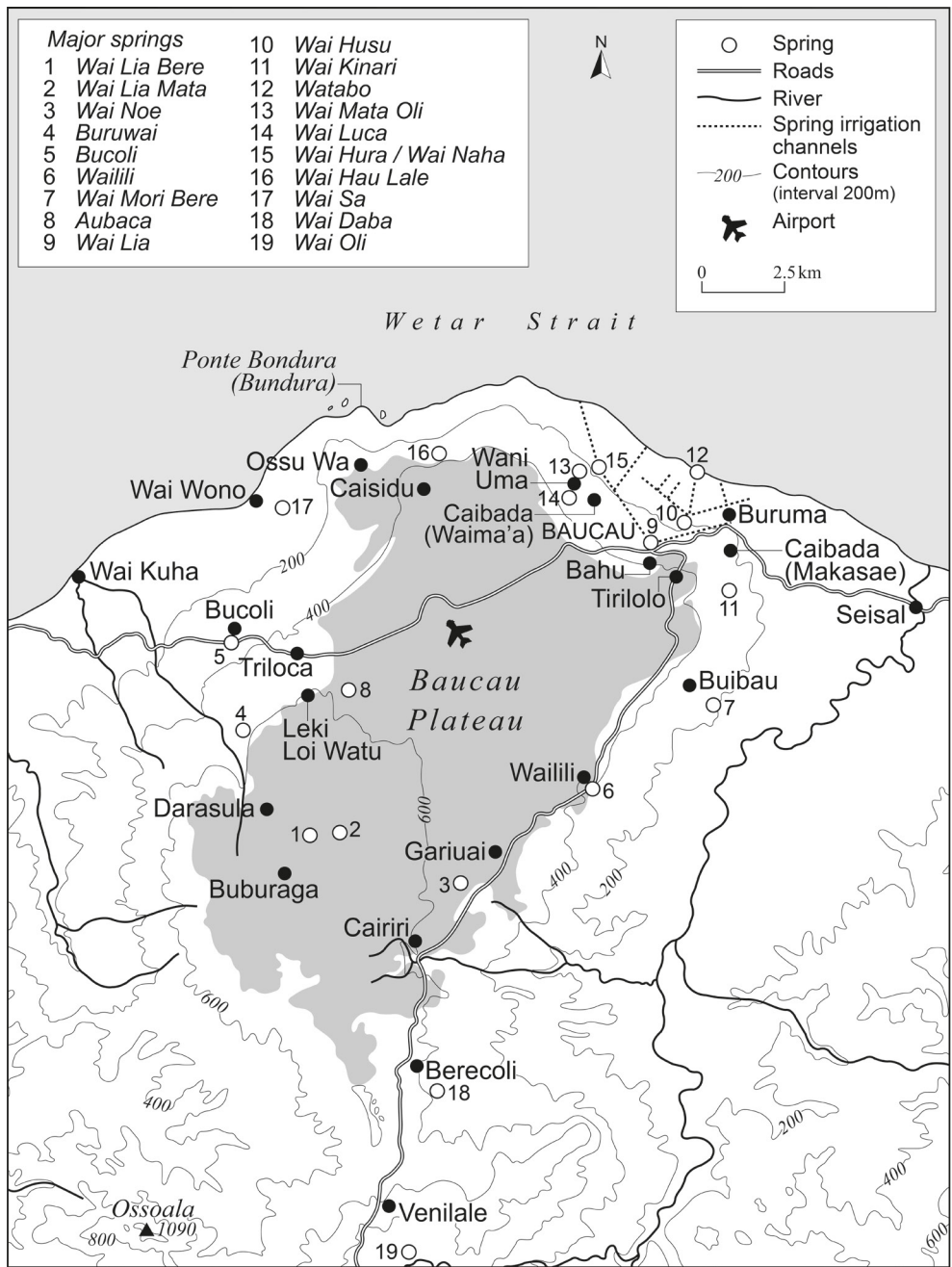


Figure 4: Waima'a north-south transect and major springs. Credit: Chandra Jayasuriya.

and carried out their harvest rituals by rock altars. As people increased in number, they began to build houses and spread out across the zone. They were also without metals until mud was baked inside a bamboo length and miraculously transformed into metal. Their houses were eventually built in permanent locations and over time, the three houses began to intermarry with other houses and form governance arrangements across the zone which stretched from Bercoli to Caisidu on the northern coast (the north–south corridor).

Houses and their kin

The Waima'a clan house is called *umo ba'i* or *umo lisan*, and while it is a centre for clan identity, its force and vitality emerge from the lines of connection forged with its paired *lela-wasan* houses (fertility givers–fertility takers). A house is made up of an inner network of sibling alliances embedded in a wider network of marriage alliances. Of particular significance are the primary or long-standing fertility-giving houses, the so-called *lela ho'on* (T: *umane-hun*, Makasae: *bobu-dada*). These are the fertility-giving trunk houses which give life to the house at the time of its founding, namely houses that give their daughters in marriage and in doing so are said to 'bring the house' into being. As a result of this founding role in most life cycle exchange rituals (W: *mata-lia*, *mata nihitu'u-mata tebari'a*, T: *lia mate lia moris*), the *lela ho'on* will be given gifts/exchanges first by the hosting house (W: *whatima'a rai kuo*, T: *kesi sasan uluk*). These gifts will be followed by exchanges with more recent fertility givers. Next come gift exchanges with the *wasa'e bo'on* (the long-standing fertility takers (T: *fetosawa*) followed by other (more recent) fertility takers who will also be given gifts/exchanges. Continual care and labour are invested in properly honouring the relations of a house with its *lela ho'on*, and this relationship is central to the functioning of the house. In contrast, the long-standing fertility takers or *wasa'e bo'on* may over time be recognised as only distant relations. Yet, in these cases, people will always state that while 'the body is no more, the blood ties remain and there is still a path' [that connects them] (W: *ki'i ma'a lo*, *woituo bo'on dala mutu lo*, T: *isin lolo lae*, *mais raan iha*, *dalan se iha*).

While Waima'a houses are ostensibly patrilocal, there is a long tradition of *kaben-tama* (W: *dena'a*) or male in-marrying. Waima'a houses retain the prerogative to transfer their land to unmarried daughters or those daughters whose husbands marry into the house. In some cases, marriage exchange processes between houses may be actively avoided or delayed indeterminately to retain the daughters of the house (and their children) within the house's protective jurisdiction. In these cases, a husband is welcomed to the house but his rights in land and to the children of the marriage are dependent on those of his wife (the daughter of the house).

While it is possible to break the path (W: *lo mutu dala*—to break the relation) established with long-standing fertility takers (W: *wasae bo'on*), doing so is usually a result of a new political alliances or inter-familial conflict. 'You are no longer my in-laws (fertility takers)' is a serious insult when deployed in property disputes. These sensitive situations are difficult to manage given that even when an alliance is severed, the blood ties between past, present, and subsequent generations remain (W: *rá doe*, T: *raan se iha*). As a result, there always remains the possibility of reforming an alliance or alternatively of inciting a worsening of relations. These conflicts with fertility takers typically arise when people assert property rights beyond the limited use rights that the fertility-giving house domain had granted them following the marriage alliance.

House styles

Waima'a house structures and material styles are variable with the starkest difference observable between coastal and inland houses. Houses closer to the coast have their roofs made of palm fronds (W: *tali*), with side panelling of palm stems (W: *aka ha'a*). Inland houses have roofs made from grass (W: *ha'e*), sometimes in combination with Arenga palm (W: *wunu*), with panelling fashioned from split bamboo (W: *kai-resa*). All houses use timber for their main pillars and supports, and these are tied together with ropes fashioned from Arenga palm fibre. While all houses are circular, some are raised higher off the ground than others and some are enclosed down to ground level. House roofs are either peaked or more commonly set around a wide cross beam. Houses of significant ritual importance may include a decorative cross beam in the shape of buffalo horns (W: *umo kaisoru*) with a star pattern fashioned from Arenga palm comprising the eyes of the house (W: *mata wan*) at both ends of the cross beam. Roof structures of some houses located closer to the coast may feature angular details resembling the stern of an upturned boat. Some coastal Waima'a houses have narratives of human emergence from the island of Timor followed by seafaring sojourns and an ultimate return (see Palmer 2015, chapter 3).

Across the north–south transect of the Baucau Municipality, harvest rituals connected to a house are very similar. Some of these houses will also be custodial houses for natural springs. In this case, harvest ceremonies also take place first at an altar by the spring, moving to the house for the final stages of the ritual. In all these cases, the offerings made at the altar involve the presentation of symbolic bundles of five and seven prestations (whether rice and meat, betel leaf and nut, or coins). In this cultural context, the number five symbolises offerings made to the more recent ancestors of the house, while bundles of seven are for the long-deceased ancestors now referred to as *dai* (T: *malae*) and viewed as synonymous with nature spirits (P: *natureza*).

There is considerable diversity in the configuration of Waima'a houses. Some are stand-alone structures; others are paired and co-located. In this double configuration, the larger house is usually the main site for house members and guests to gather for ritual celebrations and commensal meals. This includes newly in-married women and in-married men who are yet to be fully incorporated as house members. The counterpart and primary structure is maintained as a house of the ancestors (W: *umo maharere*, T: *uma matebian*) which is a space restricted to fully incorporated members of the agnatic House who share ritual foods and offerings with their ancestors.

House relations

The houses themselves may be symbolically male (W: *umo maharere*, T: *uma matebian*) and female (communal, known as W: *umo dai*, T: *uma malae*). Houses will also usually be incorporated into a wider alliance of geographically dispersed older-younger male sibling houses. Larger co-located house complexes may comprise a set of parent-and-child (including sons-in-law) houses. In terms of their wider governance configurations, stand-alone houses and/or houses within co-located complexes may be responsible for specific governance roles such as the ruling house (W: *umo uo*, T: *uma rota*) and/or spring water custodianship (W: *waimatabu*, T: *bee na'in*).

While sibling houses by definition have shared origins (W: *ho'on*, T: *hun*) and usually recognise a prior parental (W: *woi bai*) house or houses, in many cases, this declared connection derives from a distant time such that the precise details of the relationship with the parent house are no longer remembered nor why the sibling houses may have decided to go their separate ways. As houses are rebuilt and ritual practices reinstated in the post-independence era, the status of these putative sibling relationships are being negotiated at multiple levels: when people gather for harvest rituals, life cycle events, and house construction ceremonies. House rebuilding rituals, as discussed below, are an especially potent and risky time for members as they require the revelation, negotiation, and reconciliation of tightly controlled histories that extend in lines of connection beyond the house and across a meshwork of allied fertility giving/fertility taking groups.

Rebuilding houses

In 2018, the house of Kubo-Bu'u Wai Dasu in Bercoli began to rebuild its complex of 'seven sacred houses'. The house complex draws its vitality and sustenance from the springs of Wai Dasu (lit. Dog Water) to the north and Naa Lale to the south. The complex is also said to be directly associated with another thirty smaller springs

across its dryland and escarpment edge zone. Considering themselves in a sibling relationship with two other house complexes (Ocabai-Bu'u and Wai Teki-Bu'u), the custodians of Kubo-Buu Wai Dasu have oral histories connecting them to seven other interconnected Waima'a house complexes.

Like Kubo-Bu'u Wai Dasu, all other houses of the Bercoli domain are connected to each other through natural springs, said to be thirty-eight in total. In their account of their house's founding relationship with the Wai Dasu spring, it was the ancestor Kubo-Bu'u's dog that found and led his owner to the spring. Similar Austronesian stories of dogs and water are refracted across the zone, and both dogs and water are central enablers of life and connection (Palmer 2015).

The founding ancestor of the Kubo-Bu'u Wai Dasu house confirmed their jurisdiction over their large dryland domain (W: *kubo-bu'u*—savanna) by dislodging a spear (W: *lai*) stuck in the ground. While others had unsuccessfully tried to wrench the spear free, the ancestor, Kubo-Buu, simply did so with his two fingers. The border of Kubo-Bu'u's autonomous domain stretched from the Bercoli drylands to the western border with Vemassee and the Waima'a house of Loi-Lobu. At this border, the Loi-Lobu house was constructed with sixteen wooden pillars: eight of which came from Bercoli, and eight from Vemassee.

The founding spear of the domain was stored in the parent Kubo-Bu'u Wai Dasu house. During the early years of the Indonesian invasion, all seven houses in the complex were burnt down and destroyed. As a result, the spear and the houses' other ancestral sacra were lost. Now, almost twenty years after the tumultuous Indonesian departure, the people of Kubo-Bu'u Wai Dasu have amassed the resources and momentum necessary to rebuild and restore all seven houses of the complex.

In September 2018, a formal ceremony known as the 'carrying in of the wood' (W: *ratama-kai*) signalled the commencement of the rebuilding process. The task involved the simultaneous reconstruction of seven houses and was an undertaking requiring enormous piles of hand-cut and carefully stacked timber, several hundred metres of stacked grass, Arenga palm fibre, countless lengths of bamboo, stacks of wood, huge pots for cooking, and many livestock. Local minibuses arrived in a continuous flow to the site with locally sourced supplies. Hundreds of people—house members, their extended families and in-laws—gathered to help with the myriad of activities associated with the build: moving materials, making ropes, carrying water, slaughtering animals, preparing and serving food, washing dishes, guarding the sacra, and dispensing the sacred betel. Amid the busy activity, people also found time to sit and talk, bringing to life the stories of the houses and, most importantly of all, undertaking the necessary gift exchanges that would carry forward the lives and relationships of all those invested in the resurrection of the houses.



Figure 5 'Carrying in the wood', Kubu-Bu'u Wai Dasu House complex. Photo credit: Lisa Palmer

Leading the rebuilding operation and assuming his role in the ritual sibling relationship was the custodian of the house of Ocabai (*Ocabai-Bu'u*). His role was to lead discussions around the ritual organisation of the construction and to 'speak' on behalf of the senior house members, talking through the obligations and responsibilities of the different parties and especially negotiating exchanges with their affinal houses. Previously, there had been some uncertainty among house custodians regarding how to proceed with certain aspects of the house-building ceremonies, and as a result, they decided not to proceed with some ritual elements. All of the new houses were structurally identical in their configuration of sixteen timber support pillars with grass and black Arenga palm fibre thatch rooves.

In total, six houses were co-located at the site with one built further to the south where the members of that house now lived. The house complex had more than sixty fertility giver and fertility taker houses associated with it. Of the seven houses, the largest was the mother–father house (W: *Ine-Ama*, T: *Inan-Aman*) which was rebuilt on the furthest edge of the plateau, facing directly across the Seisal River valley to the mountains of Matebian. Perched splendidly on these cliffs, this was the parent house of the other 'child' (W: *ana*) houses, including son-in-law houses and the ritually important *umo dai* and *umo maharere*. The parent house was an *umo kaisoru* featuring a roof beam shaped and adorned with buffalo horns and painted stars—the eyes of the house.

The *ratama kai* ceremony involved moving the collected materials by hand from their main storage site to the house complex one hundred metres away.

This latter site was inside the *luli* (sacred) zone, a place peppered with large and sacred limestone megaliths. Only those in the appropriate affinal fertility giver/fertility taker relationships to the house complex were permitted to carry in the materials. A specialist sacred house craftsman (W: *badae*) from the local area had been secured to oversee the process which would take over a year of sustained work. During this period, dozens of the house members remained on site to assist the specialist craftsman. Hundreds more people reconvened in a year's time to complete the final stage of thatching (W: *masa umo*).

Given that the house's heirlooms had been burnt or looted in the chaos of the Indonesian era, house members had been working for many years to find local artisans who could make replicas. These recrafted objects needed to be fashioned in an identical manner to the lost items and a series of complicated ritual processes were necessary to ensure that the new objects would be correctly inspirited (W: *lohei luli*) and fit for purpose. On the building site, inside a temporary bamboo shelter that represented the parental house, and which contained the stones of the sacred hearth, sat an elderly woman and her husband who were charged with guarding the amassed objects. Above them on a raised bamboo platform, were many metal and wooden chests (W: *kaisoite*) filled with the sacred objects to be distributed between the houses. The chests contained male and female woven cloths (W: *nuru ulu*, *nuru lolo*), metal breast plates (W: *belak men*), coral necklaces (W: *kai wa'a*), and headpieces (W: *klawasoru*), most of which had been acquired recently. These objects were now, in communication with the ancestral realm, going through a process of inspiriting. All food cooked on the sacred hearth would first be placed on plates in front of each of the chests, as offerings to the ancestors of the houses who were now actively re-inspiring the objects. Below the bamboo platform, there hung twenty or more swords that had been gifted by various fertility-taking houses (W: *wasae bo'on*).

When we visited the completed house complex in 2022, these swords were secured underneath along the main altar of the house with the woven cloth placed in woven baskets and metals chests on one of the offering shelves. Above the main altar was a small shuttered internal window facing east toward the peak of Mount Matebian. The shutters are opened during ritual occasions to receive the greening coolness (W: *iluwai*, *mahta'an ninin*) of the sacred mountain winds. The main house entry was via a south-facing door, with a secondary west-facing internal door which remained permanently open to allow the spirits of those who had died during the war (but whose bodies had never been recovered) to find their way into the house. At the end of a five-year period, the wider house community gathered for one final house rebuilding ceremony and ceremonially closed the door. This secondary door would now be used as the entry point to ritually welcome into the house daughters-in-law whose marriage exchange commitments are complete.

Risking reconstruction

In 2018, at the time of the Kubo-Bu'u Wai Dasu rebuilding, there were firm plans emerging for the Wai Daba Ocabai house to be rebuilt. When it was finalised, the senior members of the Kubo-Bu'u Wai Dasu house complex stated that they would be there to 'speak' on behalf of the senior Ocabai custodian and to reciprocate the services which he had provided through the rebuilding process, negotiating the exchanges of gifts between the house and its affinal houses. 'We are family,' they told me, 'When he rebuilds his Ocabai house, it will be our job to help him build community.'

Yet the rebuilding of the Kubo-Bu'u Wai Dasu house was not completed without its own challenges and misfortune. While the reconstruction of the houses was an important statement of belonging and connection, the loss of specific knowledge, in particular traditions and sacra, made it especially risky to embark on the process. This was confirmed barely a month after the houses were completed in 2019, when the wife of the senior Kubo-Bu'u custodian passed away suddenly. A few months after that, his younger brother also passed away. The talk in the village was one of '*malisan*' or karma resulting from a problem in the sacred house-building process. At the man's funeral, someone whispered to me that it was due to the house custodian's decision not to include a drumming ceremony to open the building process. 'They thought they were modern and didn't want to do this practice from the past,' she said. The senior custodian from Ocabai also suggested that the negotiations between the fertility-giving and fertility-taking houses had not proceeded smoothly, and the ancestors had been angered. Everyone now needed to come together to consider how to resolve these issues.³

In 2019, with many other houses in the Bercoli domain yet to be rebuilt, the misfortunes of Kubo-Bu'u Wai Dasu weighed on people's minds. Beyond the sheer mass of resources required for house rebuilding, many other issues also require attention. In some house complexes, there is a particular order in which houses should be rebuilt. The *umo uo* (or ruling house) is often required to be rebuilt first. Likewise, decisions need to be made about the siting of the house(s). Most houses have moved location several times and the opportunity to move again (and be closer to roads and other access points) is an issue that often needs to be discussed

³ The use of specific materials is another contentious issue. Unlike elsewhere in the country, Waima'a house cultures have resisted the reconstruction of *umo ba'i* with modern materials such as tin roofs, nails, and cement. Elsewhere in Baucau, especially among Makasae populations, this has not been the case. However, in 2017, an important Makasae-speaking ritual leader involved in house reconstructions across the Baucau region (including the Watu H'o house in 1991) died following an injury. Some suggested that his death was due to the fact that he authorised many sacred houses (including most recently his own) to be rebuilt with nails and tin roofs.

and worked through. Disagreements amongst house members frequently emerge over the style in which the house is reconstructed (design, materials, associated sacra). In some cases, these disagreements may mask deeper social and political frictions that can result in ritual separation amongst sibling groups.

Beyond house styles and locations, bringing together all the fertility givers and fertility takers for a given house reconstruction is a massive logistical undertaking. In these comings together, familial histories and relationships need to be negotiated and reconciled. Where there is conflict, there is also a risk that reconciliation may not be possible. Tracing pathways of connection can be difficult, revealing them and reconciling them even harder. In some cases, historical agreements and exchanges between houses need to be revisited and renegotiated. As a result, house rebuilding means that these histories cannot be suppressed or ignored.

Rebuilding the Ocabai House: Two houses, one trunk

House rebuilding is highly political both in a macro (domain) and micro (house-level) sense. As with funerary rites (Hicks 2003; Bovensiepen 2015), it is a period of heightened tension as various parties vie for control and influence over the ritual exchanges within and between houses. People pay close attention to who attends and who is absent and why. The absence of one party or house at a particular ceremony may signal a rupture or closing juncture in the history of the relationship. At the same time, the opening up of historical connections may provide new opportunities for relationships between agnatic and house-based kin (W: *lela-wasan*, *wa'i-wari*) to be reunited or reconciled. Below, we consider the role of fertility givers (W: *lela ho'on*), fertility takers (W: *wasae bo'on*), and sibling relations in the rebuilding of the Ocabai house.

Issues in the rebuilding phase

Not long after the rebuilding of the Ocabai house began in 2021, some kin-related issues began to emerge. The house complex comprised two sibling houses, each supported by a total of sixteen pillars: eight main pillars (four male/four female) sunk into four large holes in the centre and a further eight pillars providing the outer rim supports for the house.

The custodians of the primary fertility-giving (W: *lela ho'on*) houses, namely those houses with the original women who produced the Ocabai offspring, were invited to dig the holes and place the central supporting pillars of the house. After the senior house in the Ocabai pair had its first four holes dug and four central pillars erected, a prefabricated inner chamber which would house the sacra was placed atop the

pillars. Within hours, the four central pillars began to lean noticeably, leaving the inner chamber askew. No matter what the leading craftsman did to adjust the pillars, the inner chamber could not be brought into balance, leaning first one way, then another, and so on. Friction emerged among the senior Ocabai house custodians and the specialist craftsman. As desperation set in, a *matan dook* (T. diviner, W: *mata hu'u*) from a coastal Waim'a settlement was called to the site to discern the cause.

From his ritual inquiries three issues emerged. The first related to the *lela ho'on*, those early fertility givers who provided their daughter and first brought the house into being. The *lela ho'on* of this senior house was the nearby house complex of Wai Dao; yet confirming exactly which house in the Wai Dao complex was the true *lela ho'on* was not known by the present-day Ocabai custodians. But it turned out that one senior custodian of a house within the Wai Dao complex was unhappy that his house's role in bringing the Ocabai house into being had not been specifically acknowledged. It was, the diviner discerned, the bitterness (W: *ba'ii*) of this custodian that had caused the pillars to move in one direction—specifically the pillars that his own sacred house complex had been invited to ritually erect.⁴ Negotiations took place over a number of days with the adult children of this custodian and eventually a buffalo was promised by the custodians of the Ocabai house to recognise the status of aggrieved house as the true *lela ho'on*.⁵

The second issue that had contributed to the instability of the pillars was identified by the diviner as emanating from the inner domain of the Ocabai house itself. The resting place of the spirit of one of the senior house's deceased custodians needed to be brought closer to the house. This man, Susu Lai, had been murdered in the Portuguese era, and his body had never been recovered. Many years earlier, his spirit had been called ritually to rest among a rocky tree grove close to the Ocabai house's most ancestrally potent rice fields. With the house now rebuilt, Susu Lai's spirit needed to be relocated to a grove closer to the house site. An old frangipani tree growing amongst the pre-Christian graves of the house's long-deceased ancestors was identified as the appropriate resting place, and a goat was sacrificed to enable Susu Lai's spirit to move to his new resting place.⁶

The final issue that the diviner discerned needed addressing also related to the spirit ecology of the house. The apical ancestor of the Ocabai house, Ono Daba, had emerged from an eel (W: *thuno'o*) into human form at the nearby Wai Daba spring. It was Ono Daba's descendants who had founded the original house of Ocabai (at

⁴ This is carried out via a ritual ceremony which involves the exchange of objects (woven cloth and swords), clearing the ground, digging the hole, and lowering in the pillars.

⁵ Some speculated that the lower social status of this contemporary house meant that the Ocabai custodians had overlooked them in their negotiations.

⁶ A goat will now need to be sacrificed at this tree once every five years.

some point this original house was swallowed up by the rising lake waters). The diviner reminded the present-day custodians of the house about the prohibition against catching and eating eels from the lake, a practice which had been tolerated during the hungry times of the Indonesian invasion. Falintil troops and paraphernalia, including key documents associated with the leader, Xanana Gusmao, had sheltered and been stored in the rocky outcrops of the Wai Daba Ocabai grove, and in these times of dire insecurity, food was sourced via whatever means possible. This ambiguity around the prohibition had continued into the independence era with some local farmers continuing to take eels and fish from the lake. It was time, the diviner declared, for the reinstatement of a full prohibition. The house custodians concurred, recalling a past era when their ancestors would scoop up eels found floundering in the spring-fed paddy fields and carry them like babies slung in sarongs back to the waters of the lake. Alternatively, if eels were discovered lying dead, they would be buried inside the sacred grove alongside the graves of other Ocabai ancestors. Like the human ancestors of the senior Ocabai house, these eels were prohibited from being buried in coffins.

The Ocabai house and the wider Bercoli domain

The ancestral link between the Wai Daba and Ocabai spring complex and the Ocabai house domain also constitutes a founding relationship with the wider Bercoli domain. Ocabai house oral histories recount their ancestral travels to the great southern domain of Luca (see Barnes et al. 2017) where they received sacra associated with the right to rule. In one story, the Ocabai ancestor had been the only one of several members in a delegation whose cup, fashioned from leaves, had held the sacred Luca waters. Through this process, the ancestor was declared the true custodian of the water, returning to the Bercoli domain with the power to rule across the central island zone of the island from the Matebian mountains in the east to the mountains of Aileu south of Dili (see Palmer 2015). This sacra took the form of a basket (W: *aubaku*), an object eventually passed from the Ocabai house to the present-day ruling house of Wai Tunao in a transfer involving the marriage of two Ocabai daughters, Dona Isabel and Dona Maria, into the house of Wai Tunao. It was these women who carried with them to Wai Tunao the sacra and the right to rule. In a twist to the ‘stranger king’ mythology, where an outsider comes to rule by marrying the daughter of the senior landowners, in the beginning, it was Dona Isabel and later her daughter Dona Maria, who ruled as ‘Queens’ in their own right (Hägerdal and Kammen 2016; Ferreira 2011).

At the same time, during this later period of Portuguese colonial rule, the Bercoli domain began to have its territorial extent and power diminished. Incursions from Laleia and Dili to the west led to the introduction of ruling sacra derived from

Portuguese regalia (Roque 2010): the drum (W: *bobokasa*) and the sword (W: *be'eu*). These sacra are now held in the village office storehouse, and whoever is elected village head must recognise the role of Wai Tunao as the current custodian of this sacra and then carry out a ritual to call the ancestral house names at the Wai Teki spring located near the village administrative office.⁷

The junior Ocabai house

The sacred grove where the Ocabai house was rebuilt was the site of the former house that had been burnt to the ground in the tumultuous events of the 1974 civil war (the cause of the fire is unknown, but the intra familial alliance politics of the wider domain is a matter alluded to continually). In 2021, a decision was made to rebuild the original Ocabai house along with another more junior second house. The original fertility giver (W: *lela ho'on*) of this newer junior house was the dryland plateau-based house of Naulale. It was estimated that the Naulale house had over the generations given seven of its daughters to the house of Ocabai. While this lineage had begun with the great, great grandmother of the current Ocabai custodians, most significant in this history was the decision of their former pregnant great grandmother, Dume, to abandon the nearby Bahawake house of her husband and return to her natal house. As her older brothers (*au bou*) of the Ocabai house refused permission for their sister (W: *ma'en*) to return, Dume made her way to her mother's natal house in Naulale where she was taken in. There, her son, Bosi Duu, was born. Bosi Duu eventually married a maternal cousin in Naulale house and returned to live within the Ocabai house domain. The scandalous severing of an alliance between the Bahawake fertility takers and the Ocabai fertility givers resulted in a necessary rearrangement of the Ocabai lineage. As the older brothers (W: *au bou*) of the original Ocabai house produced no offspring, it was Dume and her son Bosi Duu who ensured that the Ocabai lineage continued. In 2021, the agency of the women of Naulale in this history led to the creation of a 'younger sibling' Ocabai house.

In the past, the affinal connection between the Ocabai and Naulale houses had been acknowledged in a co-located rest-house (W: *warda*). In 2020, the completion of marriage exchange relations concerning the current senior Ocabai custodians' long-deceased mother created the pathway for this rest-house to transform into a

⁷ In these movements of the sacra, the Ocabai house has remained something of a silent centre. Drumming and singing are banned from the grove and house complex. When, in the early independence era, the country's president, Xanana Gusmao, returned to the region to pay his respects to the sacred grove that had periodically hidden the Falintil during the resistance era, the drumming that accompanied his visit from the administrative centre of the village was halted at the roadside well above the sacred grove.



Figure 6: The Ocabai House. Photo Credit: Lisa Palmer

newly built buffalo-horn-adorned *oma kaisoru*. While junior to the senior Ocabai house, for both houses it is their *lela ho'on* or primary fertility-giving houses (Wai Dao and Naulale) who are understood to have brought the Ocabai house complex into being (W: *i'ee isi umo*).⁸

In 2021, none of the marriage exchanges involving the wives of the current generation of senior Ocabai custodians had been completed. This meant that during communal rituals in the house complex, these women stayed in the company of their natal families in rest-houses adjacent to the main house complex. These daughters-in-law were not allowed to enter the house itself. When their marriage exchange rituals are complete, the final offerings (buffalo, goats, horses, swords) from the Ocabai house to these woman's natal house will be tethered to the base of the Ocabai house. The reciprocal offerings (sacred baskets and woven cloth) that the woman's house has transferred to the Ocabai house will be stored in one of the lower side compartments of the house (this storage process will occur whether the woman is living or already dead). After the final exchange between the affinal houses, the woman and/or the gifts from her natal house will be taken

⁸ The senior house in the complex has a spear (W: *lai*) by its main altar, as does the parent house in the dryland Kubo-Bu'u complex.

into the house proper via a ladder leading to a secondary door in the main house. While the Ocabai house is now complete, it is expected that negotiations with the current senior generation of wives' houses (the *lela morin* or new fertility givers) will remain ongoing or protracted over many years.

Modernising houses and dynamic traditions

Across Timor-Leste, the widespread post-independence rebuilding of sacred houses has resulted in a range of government and donor funding initiatives (Boldani 2020). At the time of the rebuilding of the Ocabai house complex, the Timorese Directorate of the Secretary of State for Culture had invited house custodians from across the country to apply for funding to assist with these processes. While the eldest son of the senior Ocabai house custodian submitted a proposal for funding, the eventual amount offered by the government was a contribution of \$1,500. Other senior members of the Ocabai house considered this to be insignificant in relation to the amount required and decided that it was better to finance the rebuilding entirely with private money. At the completion of the process, they estimated that the total cost to rebuild the two houses (including the cost of the animals necessary for the *lela-wasan* exchanges) to be in the order of US\$80,000. As one senior custodian stated, 'It was very expensive, but we had to do it now. If we did not, the next generation would lose out. Now they know the path.'

In contrast to some other sacred house rebuilding processes within Timor-Leste, there was never a suggestion that the Ocabai house would allow modern materials (tin, nails, cement, iron) to be used in the construction. The materials used were those specified to have been used in the past. This included locally sourced timber (eucalypts, acacia, rose wood), Arenga palm fibres for ropes and grass for thatching. There was brief consideration given to moving the house site to an alternative location closer to an access road, but the ancestral permission-seeking rituals indicated that the ancestors did not acquiesce to a change of location.

The housebuilding process took approximately ten months from the time the first timber was felled. The senior craftsman who oversaw the construction was paid US\$1,500 to build both houses. During the construction period, this craftsman lived on site in his own temporary house next to another temporary house known in Tetum as the *parlamentu* (W: *ri'i ulo manukasa, nunulo gagadi*). This was the location where the senior Ocabai house custodians and other elders would gather to discuss the ritual business of the house, negotiate the exchanges with fertility givers and fertility takers, and receive and make cash payments. Nearby were two temporary kitchens where ritual food was prepared and the replacement sacra for the house was stored and inspirited (W: *ló luli*). Other members of the Ocabai house

and the various fertility taking and fertility giving groups who gathered for the ceremony had their own temporary shelters built around the perimeter of the site.

When the timber was felled for the house pillars, rituals involving prayers and offerings of betel nuts took place in the forest. When the land was cleared to enable the house building, an exchange of woven cloth (W: *nuro*) and swords (*be'eu*) was required between the house custodians and the primary fertility givers (*lela ho'on*). For the hole digging ceremonies, a goat was sacrificed for each house, its blood sprinkled in the hole containing the central pillars. Prior to the roof thatching, a buffalo, a pig, and a goat were sacrificed for each house. It was the task of the original fertility takers (W: *wasae bo'on*) to carry the grass to the top of the roof first. During the thatching period (W: *suko umo*), six buffalo were slaughtered to feed the gathered families. A set of horns from the slaughtered buffalo would eventually adorn the roof of each house, with the other horns and bones sequestered in the nearby forest grove. In order to carry the sacred fire, ancestral sacra (a spear, swords, baskets, plates, and bowls) and storage baskets filled with woven cloth and clothing into the house, a long line of young male custodians of the house passed these objects along to the senior male custodians waiting at the house door.⁹ On the same morning, water for the earthen pots placed on house altars was gathered by a senior custodian at 4 am (in secret) at the Ocabai spring. Following this, all the ritual cooking to feed the ancestors took place inside the house. On the final day of this ritual process, everyone involved in the house building gathered at the closest river to bathe together and wash away any lingering ritual heat. Last to leave the river were the senior craftsman and the senior house custodian who had together felled the timber for the house pillars. The coolness of the river water ensured that both would be strengthened and protected from any misfortune. While the final ceremony would be held at a later stage to close the west-facing door of the house, this ritual at the river meant that the houses were now able to host the annual rice and corn harvest rituals. Any illnesses afflicting house members or conflict within the house would also be addressed at these ceremonies.

A number of other outstanding matters were suggested as desirable improvements by some senior house members, although they received mixed support from the wider group. Some custodians and their immediate families suggested that the single large stones marking the ancestral graves (W: *mata rata*) in the vicinity of the house site should be refurbished in the fashion of modern Christian graves. They reasoned that the ancestors would be angered by being left in simple rock graves while more recent generations of Ocabai dead were buried in elaborate concrete graves. Other custodians disagreed and argued that these long deceased ancestors

⁹ When I visited the inside of the houses in 2022, there were also old mobile phones placed on the offering platform for the ancestors.

had been buried according to ancestral traditions which must be honoured and preserved. Another proposal by a senior custodian mooted the idea of constructing a marble wall plaque outside the house to display the names of all the known ancestors of the house, adding subsequent names as people passed away. Their intention was to ensure that future generations would know the names of all the house ancestors. A further initiative carried out by a younger generation of Dili-based house members involved the production of large colour banners featuring photos of families associated with the house (these photos prioritised families who lived in Dili or overseas). These banners were displayed in the space under the house, causing consternation for some who associated it with the type of banner displayed during political campaigns or at government-sponsored events.

One of the senior house custodians produced a remarkable, thirty-five page document entitled '*Relatorio Uma-Lisan Ocabai*' (A Report on the Ocabai House). This report documented all the known exchanges that had occurred (of cash and animals/goods) from the felling of timber to the completion of the roof ceremony. Carefully documenting the ritual exchanges and contributions from a range of individuals and groups at every stage of the process, it meticulously noted who contributed and who received what. These exchanges totalled approximately US\$30,000 of monetary transactions and US\$50-60,000 of exchanges involving animals and other goods (rice, beverages, and other foods necessary for exchange or to feed people). The report was reproduced and shared among all of the main financial contributors to the house reconstruction.

The house of Ocabai is by Timorese standards a relatively wealthy house. The senior custodian who produced this exchange report has his own construction business, and many other house members run small businesses, are salaried government employees, or are living and working overseas. While the house has large landholdings (held under customary title) there is also a sense that it is somewhat depleted in relation to the number of house members who have stayed in the village and who are actively farming on these lands. Bringing together a wider array of more distant kin through the house-building process and enabling exchanges with other houses was also a way of strengthening the custodial network. While for some more distant kin there was a certain resistance or hesitancy expressed toward attempts to enrol them in a process of exchange aimed at achieving their full house membership (some preferring the more ambiguous status of incomplete exchanges), others made it clear that they relished the opportunity to reconnect with and learn more about the Ocabai domain.

For those house members who remained resident within the Bercoli area, these types of highly networked exchanges and interactions are not optional. They are time consuming, resource intensive, and frequently fraught. Yet, in common with others around the country, people in Bercoli assert that it is the house that provides

them ultimate protection from ill-health and misfortune. It is to their house that they can turn when ailments or issues arise which are beyond the capacity of non-house-based institutions (the government, the church, the market, the health system). As one senior female custodian of the Ocabai house stated: 'People are always travelling from the urban centres of the island (or even from beyond), to seek out the assistance, healing, and life-giving capacities of their house.' For her, the rebuilding of the Ocabai house reinforces and completes the annual agricultural ritual cycle that the house members participate in: 'culture brings us together, we think together.'¹⁰ As one male custodian remarked: 'If we carry out these rituals, no one can attack us. We will prevail in any conflict.' The house completion is also considered to be a type of public declaration, reinforcing Ocabai house culture, boundaries, and expected behaviours to those outsiders or partial house members who share space in the fields with the house custodians. In this way, it is asserted that the completed sacred house constitutes a type of certificate (*sureti*) for the land and a focal point for relations with outsiders (whether this be other houses or the government). In turn, for those who work the land and belong to the house but remain outside full house membership, the completed house structures are a place where they will make annual offerings of some portion of their agricultural harvest (see Palmer 2020).¹¹

For the house's most senior male custodian, the completion of the Ocabai house has 'changed everything'. It has reactivated the relations between houses and between siblings within house complexes which were long neglected and/or disrupted. Outstanding marriage exchange processes, long on hold due to war and conflict, can now be attended to. The completed house, he asserts, 'has opened the doors for wealth to start recirculating.' This process, which he states, 'has only just begun,' is considered his and his contemporaries' bequest to the next generation. 'It has given them pathways to ensure the health of the house and all its future generations.' It is now even possible, he adds, that the marriage pathway to the fertility-taking house of Bahawake (Bosi-duu's father's house) might be reopened.

¹⁰ As a rice and vegetable farmer, her daily life involves agriculture and looking after several of her young grandchildren whose parents are working in the United Kingdom in the remittance economy. She speaks on video call daily with her daughter as the latter walks to her urban factory job. She worries that her grandchildren might be asked by their parents to move there too.

¹¹ House custodians continually reiterate that it was the house which paid tax to the government in colonial times (see also Davidson 1994: Ch 4).

Conclusion

While the institution of the house continues to be central to Waima'a customary governance and lifeways, as material structures, house reconstructions are simultaneously desirable and risky. One reason for this is the need for house-building rituals to confirm and reconcile the complicated time-depth of house-based inter-relations, in particular, that of the original *lela ho'on* (fertility givers) but also *wasa bo'on* (fertility takers) and any historical schisms between sibling (W: *wa'i-wari*) splinter groups. A house reconstruction will necessitate that these relations are revealed and renegotiated. As the case study of the Ocabai house has made clear, a detailed reckoning with the role of women and the house's embedded status in broader spirit ecologies is central to these processes.

The various examples discussed in this chapter give a sense of both the deeply cultural, but also often fragmentary and tenuous ways through which people live with and negotiate intra- and inter-house politics. By continually attending to and striving for harmonious inter-relations, house reconstruction rituals create a heightened level of social and political intensity wherein risks must be taken, and relationships renegotiated with carefully observed consequences. Leaving out or including certain others (houses and their people, stories, sacra) has the potential to lead to unpleasant or irreconcilable events. Senior house custodians proceed with great care and often great trepidation.

For younger generations, many of whom desire, aspire to, and access lives of greater modernity, houses also matter. They are proud of their house membership and reveal this in the opportunity to share with others these newly rebuilt material structures. At the same time, they are often embedded in and influenced by education, vocational, and urban networks which stretch well beyond the house domain. As other spaces continue to open for the negotiation of marriage and other relations, new renderings of these Waima'a house networks will also emerge.

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Mambai Houses and Ritual Centres

Lisa Palmer, Andrew McWilliam, and Jorge Lopes

Abstract

Our next case study focuses on cultural traditions of Mambai speakers, the second most populous language community in Timor-Leste who occupy the central mountains of Timor-Leste. Mambai regard their lands as the centre of the world (*Rai Klaran*); one that is socially and politically constituted through complex mutual exchange relations within and between sacred house complexes across their traditional lands. The ritual domain of Maubisi-Mauloko in the central highlands of Ainaro provides a vibrant example of these interdependent relations. It includes within its borders the bustling eponymously named market town of Maubisi but is centred on the elevated ritual house complex of *Tartehi*, the *rai husar* (navel of the land). The case study explores the mythic foundations of the community, the rebuilding and inauguration of the seven core founding houses and the annual agricultural ritual cycle that ensures the sustenance of the living community.

Keywords: Timor-Leste, ritual house, custom, Mambai, governance

Introduction

In the scenic Maubisse valley set in the mountains of Ainaro (Central Timor), two decades of independence have seen gradual improvements in services and infrastructure for the Mambai residents of the region. The local economy has benefited once again from the favourable conditions for coffee and horticultural products as well as the resealed highway passing through the valley that connects the area to markets and trading opportunities in the cities and towns beyond. The unwelcome impact of COVID-19 in 2020 and subsequent destructive cyclonic storms in 2021 have created temporary setbacks, but the broader recovery and emergent prosperity remains on track. And one striking and very visible indicator of this process is the re-emergence of the distinctive Mambai thatched ‘sacred houses’ (M: *Fad lulin*; T: *Uma lulik*), focal centres of local patrilineages, that have mushroomed across the mountain region. Their physical reappearance reflects both a collective resolve among Mambai communities to celebrate shared traditions of ritual sociality and exchange, and the financial commitment to restore their ancestral connections.

The mountain landscapes of Ainaro provide the setting for our third case study focusing on the long-established ritual domain of Maubisi-Mauloko—one of the key ritual centres of the region. Our study highlights significant features of Mambai landed traditions, including its mythic origins and the pivotal role of the sacred house (M: *Fad luli/Fad lisa*) as a core medium for articulating and mediating social relations between related groups. Both narrative and material structures are informed and framed by Austronesian linguistic and cultural leitmotifs, often expressed through a diverse range of what Fox (1980) has described as ‘metaphors for living’, or ‘symbolic operators’ (Fox 2009) that are typically encoded in pervasive dyadic form (see Fox 1980: 333).

Maubisi-Mauloko is the traditional name for the domain that includes the eponymously named regional capital, Maubisse, within its boundaries. To the west of Maubisse town centre is the central ritual complex of the domain, organised around seven founding ritual houses (M: *Fad lulin* – sacred houses) and known by the name, Tartehi (or more formally, *Tartehi-Telituku*). The senior founding house of this complex, *Fad Liurai*, is the symbolic ‘male’ ruling house, which is paired with the symbolically ‘female’ source or root house of *Tau’it*. Together with the other five subsidiary house groups, *Fela-fu*, *Asumeta*,¹ *Hatudosa*, *Gorfu*, *Hatiliu*, and *Liurai*, the cluster constitutes an enduring ritual and political alliance providing the collective authority over the domain (one land – T: *rai ida*). Tartehi is the umbilical centre (M: *husar nor neran*, T: *rai husar*) of the domain and its constituent *Fad lisan* (M) (T: *Uma lulik*) sacred houses. Across the domain, up to 40 distinctive subsidiary groups relate to one another as ‘child houses’ (M: *fad ana*) or progeny of the Tartehi centre and/or *feton no naan* (sister-older brother) houses. The latter might also be glossed as (T) *fetosan no umane* referring to the conventional relationship formed between the marriage house of a man’s sister (and her children) and the house of the man’s patriline (and his children). In English, this can also be glossed as a relationship between marrying or affinally related groups. These house relations reproduce their ancestral alliances through marriage exchange and the conduct of an annual cycle of sacrificial rituals at the ritual centre of Maubisi-Mauloko² to celebrate the fertility and abundance of the land. In this archetypal conception of the mythically constituted domain, there is also an abiding orientation to the island of Timor itself. Tartehi-Telituku and Maubisi-Mauloko are located at the centre of the (is)land (the T: *rai hussar*—*rai klaran*, umbilical land—middle land)³ and as

¹ This ritual house is actually constituted as a double house with the male component *Asu Meta* (black dog) having been incorporated into female *Fela-fu* in the past due to its declining membership.

² Full name is *Maubisi-Mauloko :: Sidao-Lakoda*

³ As people say, T: ‘*Ami rai klaran Maubisi ida ne*’ – ‘We are the centre of the earth here in Maubisi’. See Bovensiepen 2011: 49 for a comparison.



Figure 7: Maubisi-Mauloko House Complex and valley. Photo Credit: Amin Barreto

such they assert the prestige and renown that their primary geographical position affords. Maubisi-Mauloko's status as the 'centre of the world' (T: *Rai Klaran*) carries with it a strong sense of social and political seniority over surrounding domains.⁴

From their prominent hilltop site, the ritual leaders, the *lia na'in* of Tartehe, are keepers of the mythic origins of the domain and the source of their enduring customary authority over the land and its resources. In recounting the origins of the domain, it is recalled that life came into being in the black stone scree slope on the adjacent hillside known as *Slata Fu'u*.⁵ It is at *Slata Fu'u* that the first living beings emerged in snake form, followed by fire and eventually two human brothers. The brothers set off on a journey to find a suitable settlement which would be signalled by a shining light in the perpetual darkness. They first headed south visiting Hatubulico and the high mountain peak of Ramélau. At one point, the younger brother left his older sibling in darkness and the muted light of stars, returning to *Slata Fuu* where, on the adjacent hill of Tartehe, the younger brother became bathed in the shining light of the moon. This revelatory event signalled the primacy of the younger brother in his quest for 'enlightenment' and in this way, Tartehe became the potent ritual centre of the domain overlooking a broad mountain valley where flood waters covered most of the arable land.⁶

⁴ The notion of *Rai Klaran* is recursive as Mambai view themselves as central *Klaran*—in relation to other language groups.

⁵ Full reference in *Slata fu :: Dede Rema*

⁶ The older brother ceded his authority to his younger brother at Tartehe, but his continuing importance and acknowledgement of status is signalled in the ritual celebrations of the domain that ends at the former settlement site of the older brother (*Manu Sae Nolo Hela*).

In these early mythic times, the people struggled to make food gardens and at this point, a sacred agreement was struck between the human settlers and two large ancestral rats to dig a channel through the deep valley of Lefa Dai and permit the great banked-up floodwaters to flow out and drain to the south coast. The people agreed to pay them the gold and silver stored in their houses for this service. The rats dug a deep channel to the south where the floodwaters drained away, but then they refused payment of gold and silver, opting instead to eat from the ripening crops of the people as they worked. The people agreed and from that time on, the rats eat the ‘mouth’ (M: *batan ibun*) of the maize, while the people gain the larger portion of the cob. From this mutually beneficial act of cooperation, the mountains emerged ‘to guard the sacred waters, the sacred rocks and origin houses’ of Tartehi (pers comm. Joaquin Mendonsa 24/8/19).

The first structure of Tartehi was the symbolically male house of Liurai. Liu-rai is ritually paired with the ‘female’ house of Tau-it. Liurai is the origin house for the *rota* (ruling staff) which is now bequeathed to its child houses (*fad ana*) in the upper and lower reaches (M: ‘*kone lau—kone rema*’) of the Maubisi-Mauloko domain. The relationship between Tau-it and Liurai is one of fertility givers and fertility takers (also characterised as *feton* (younger-sister) to the *naan* (older brother) house). In this pairing, the female house signifies the earth and all things related to fertility (crops, people, forests). The male house, which was ascendent when the below and above realms separated, is responsible for the sky that feeds the earth and fertility. The unity of these now separate realms is referred to in Mambai *linkai-norama* (T: *avo feto-avo mane*, E: grandmother and grandfather).

Another ritually powerful centre in the domain is the female house of Fela-fu. Its *lia na’in*, Manuel Mendonsa, is a renowned ritual specialist (M: *kukusaen*, or T: *ibun koalialia*) otherwise known in Tetum as *matan dook* (E: eyes that see far). The *lia na’in* of Fela-fu travels the domain to oversee ritual activity, returning to the centre with gifts of tribute. The *lia na’in* of Tau-it, Joaquin Mendonsa, guards the sacred hearth and feeds the ancestors. During annual ritual ceremonies at Tartehi complex, sacra from the house of Liurai are both hung and placed at the bamboo and stone altar in front of the Tau-it house. The *lia na’in* from Liurai (Antonio) and Fela-fu (Manuel) will eat with the gathered *lia na’in* on this altar platform while Joaquin will eat inside the ‘female’ house of Tau-it.

Other named houses form part of the ritual complex of Tartehi. These days, Fela-fu is combined in name with two other symbolically male houses of Asu Meta(n) and Hatu Dosa. Both subsidiary House group suffered population depletion in the past, and their physical ancestral house structures have not yet been rebuilt. Gor-fu is a symbolically ‘female’ house while Liurai-Hatiliu are two combined ‘male’ and ‘female’ houses. Each constituent house has a dedicated role in the governance and political decision making of the realm. As well as the founding

role of distributing political rule and delegating power, Liurai-Hatiliu's present-day ritual responsibility is to oversee the cycle of agriculture and ensure the continued feeding of the 'ancestral rats' in recognition of their critical role in the creation of the domain.⁷ While all originate from the *fatuk mak ai* (the rock and tree), the original sacrificial centre (Traube 1986), the altars in front of Liurai-Hatiliu and Tau-it are ancestrally designated to comprise rock and seven-pronged bamboo (rather than the larger three-pronged logs which constitute the altars of Fela-fu Asu-Meta and other houses in the domain).

Constituting the wider domain

The house of Liurai provides the founding mythic narrative for the constitution of the domain of Maubisi-Mauloko. The ancestral hero of Liurai is remembered as Koi Lasu—a giant of a man who vanquished the rival domain of Lori Lau which comprised four sacred houses (*Fad luli*) located on another prominent hill across the valley. As the rulers of Lori Lau gathered their support base, Koi Lasu strode across the valley and challenged them to a dual of strength. The first challenge was to lift a large boulder which the rulers of Lori Lau failed to budge. Koi Lasu picked it up with one hand and smashed it into pieces. Then he grabbed his adversaries and lifted them onto the peak of their ritual domain of Lori Lau. There he made them suffer and cut off their ears. In anguish and unable to hear the lament of the people's voices, the rulers of Lori Lau relinquished their attempt to rule the valley, and in the colonial era, were forced to abandon their hilltop stronghold and relocate to the hills further north. Today, this site is known as *Lori Lau Kikitura* (the deaf Lori Lau, 'those who did not listen')⁸ and provides the current location of the former colonial Portuguese fortified garrison and the present site of the renovated Pousada Guest House.

Koi Lasu meanwhile had four sons. The eldest three left the ritual centre of Tartehi and made their own Liurai 'child' (*fad ana*) or branch houses elsewhere in the valley. The eldest built his house on the adjacent hillside, another went higher into the mountains, and the third went lower down into the valley. This third house, Hautlolo, has long held the political leadership of the associated *aldeia* (hamlet) of Lekitehi, but in recent years, competition 'within the house', that is, between the 'brothers' of the Hautlolo house, has seen this title transferred to a nephew in the neighbouring, allied 'female' house, of Hautlele (T: *uma feton*).

⁷ To this day, members of the Liurai-Hatiliu house (the *uma laho*—house of the rat) feed a pair of red and white rats three times a day to placate their desire to eat the people's crops.

⁸ And so, it is said that even to this day, when there are local elections in the municipality, the candidate from Tartehi always wins against the opponent from Lori Lau Kikitura.

Thus, the contemporary Tartehi domain now comprises forty *fad lisan* spread across three *aldeia* (Telituku, Lekitehi, and Rileku). Within this set of bordering domains, most of these *fad lisan* will be ‘child’ houses of Tartehi, many with their own ‘branches’ that form intermarried *feton-naan* (sister–brother) alliances. Branch houses have their own ritual altars (M: *um lesk galaun*) with the three-pronged, ritual post (M: *lisa loba*) where they conduct invocatory prayers (M: *keo no lira*) and present sacrificial offerings (see Traube 1986 for comparison). The ritual rule of Tartehi also extends to *fad lisan* (patrilineal kin groups) in at least two other *aldeia*, namely *Koi Lalu* and *Fatu Luli*. While these houses have spread further up the valley and assert their own autochthonous narrative origins, they defer to Tartehi-Telituku as their traditional politico-ritual centre. The *Kukasaen* (ritual leader) of Tartehi, Manuel Mendonsa, asserts that Tartehi’s rule extends across all twelve *suco* (E: villages) of the Maubisse sub-district and as a result, most of the houses in the sub-district will be in, some kind of varying, near or distant *feton-naan* (marriage alliance) relationship with one another.

People say that the ritual altars of the collective branch houses ‘must carry the culture’ (T: *tenki lori kultura*) of the respective kin-based communities, but each house always references and acknowledges their generative origins to the seven founding houses of Tartehi-Telituku and the wider domain of *Maubisi-Mauloko* :: *Sidau Lakoda*. As a result, the task of maintaining and rebuilding the respective *fad lulin* (T: *uma lulik*) is continuously negotiated and requires the mutual assistance of related family members of other houses (the work of *fetosan-umane*) expressed through the exchange of labour and reciprocal gifts of livestock and rice to complete their projects. In so doing, these practices continuously reinforce the extended networks of sociality that constitute emplaced Mambai communities and the networks of sociality that link house groups to one another.

Celebrating and Strengthening the Domain

The domain of Tartehi-Telituku and contemporary Maubisi-Mauloko is constituted as a unified ritual and political centre and sustained over time through an annual cycle of ritual celebration and commensal feasting. Three principal collective rituals of agriculture undertaken over a three-month period from February to April are performed to offer up thanks and acknowledge the bounty and blessing of the land. The first event recognises the harvest of the red bean crop (M: *Mambuika*, T: *Saur koto*—*koto mean*); the second in March signals the completion of the main staple maize (M: *Lusar*, T: *Saur batar*) harvest. Then in April the ritual centre of Tartehi-Telituku hosts a large three-day ceremony known as the *Ai hulun* (E: literally ‘tree root’, source). At this time, the sound of rhythmic drumming and gongs floats across

the valley inviting people to celebrate the end of the three-month harvest period and the beginning of the new agricultural year.

A major purpose of the *Ai hulun* ritual is to assemble all the domain's child (progeny) houses (*fad ana*) and their constituent dispersed agnatic membership, to celebrate their origins and shared ancestry. At the same time, over the three-day event beginning with the night-long celebration of the agricultural cycle and honouring the moon and the stars (T: *haree fulan*, *haree fitun*), the community seeks to ensure the continued fertility of the land and future abundant rains.

On the second day, the assembled crowd celebrates the power of the most sacred and powerful object known as the *biut besi* (or M: *biut haut mau besi*, which literally means the feet that kick the rock, referring to a ritual act that takes place during the *Ai Hulun* ceremony). *Biut Faut besi*, a small round piece of ironstone (which, over the course of the ceremony becomes 'longer and larger'), is located within a ritual space next to Tartehe's ritual altar and linked to the triumph of Koi Lasu over the rulers of Lori Lau. Koi Lasu himself was a descendant of the first ruler of Tartehe, Maubisi (E: Iron brother) who is associated with the ironstone and metals that emerged along with original fire from Sлата Fuu. During the *Biut bisi* ceremony, Liurai-Haitliu bring out their sacred ancestral objects (breast plates, coral bead necklaces, words, spears) and place them by the *biut besi* ironstone, the original 'maubisi'.

Along with the *Faut bisi* itself, the focal point for this ceremony is the altar (M: *um lesk galaun*)—a stone altar (representing mother earth) and a seven-pronged bamboo pole (representing father sky) and the supreme binary deity (father sky/mother earth: *ina ka aman*). The seven prongs, each of which link to one of Tartehe's seven houses, are used during the ceremony to present the textiles (*tais*) and other ritual sacra (swords, coral-bead necklaces, and breast plates) that are brought out of the cult houses (*fad luli*) and revealed on the altar. The important collective *lia na'in* of the domain sit in a circle around the circular stone altar consuming palm liquor during the ceremonies.⁹

On the third day of celebration, the focus of the ritual is a thanksgiving ceremony to the water cycle, specifically the sacred springs (M: *ermata*) of Ermata and Ertama, the source of life for Tartehe. After presenting offerings and circling the *Biut Bisi* seven times, the *lia na'in* led by *Kukusaen* Manuel enter the house of Tau-it to join with *Kukusaen* Joaquin in a prayer of thanksgiving to the ancestors. As the male and female elders leave the arena, dancing and drumming take place around

⁹ The continuing importance of the *Ai hulun* celebratory ritual of thanksgiving and reconnecting with social networks is highlighted by the annual participation of Tartehe family members from the town of Atambua in Indonesian West Timor where up to 100 people from Telituku live as Indonesian citizens.

the altar before the hundreds of people, now congregated from across the valley, follow the leaders of the Tartehei houses on procession to the two water sources. There they give thanks to the ancestral ‘male and female’ waters of Ermata and honour the site of Mau Loko before proceeding to the ‘male and female’ springs of Ertama. Mau Loko, whose name has now been carried to the top of Tartehei, is a prominent rock transformed from the body of a large mythic buffalo that emerged with its herd from a cavity in the spring to bequeath riches and the possibility of marriage alliances to the domain of Tartehei. Fearing for their crops, the ancestors of Tartehei chased these beasts back into their underground world, but the leading buffalo—*Mauloko*—became stuck by his horns when attempting to re-enter the earth.

Rejecting the gift of buffalo bequeathed to them from the underworld, the buffalo herd re-emerged from the underground in the east of the country (Baucau, Lautem, and Viqueque), and since that time, the people of Maubisi receive the returning buffaloes through marriage alliances that span the *lorosa’e* (eastern) landscape. The myth alludes to the ritual authority of the *Rai klawan* (middle land) reclaiming the wealth that was lost. Their allies from the east bring with them *bua no mole* (E: areca nut and betel leaf) to be ritually blessed with the life-giving power of *matak malirin* (E: cool green) at the origin hearth of Maubisi.

The centre of Tartehei is an outward-looking one in orientation. When its far-flung children and progeny return, they bring with them wealth from the outside and receive in return the life-giving powers of the sacred centre. At the conclusion of the *Ai hulun*, all participants participate in invocatory prayers (T: *hamulak*) to receive the cooling/life-enhancing blessing of *matak malirin* given material form as sacralised betel nuts (M: *bua no mole*) to carry home with them and thereby ensure the wellbeing of those to whom they are returning. Before returning, they gather once again at the base of Tartehei hill for one final meal at one of the ‘skin’ houses (M: *Ai lita fada*; T: *ai-kulit* (with *dapur lulik*—sacred ‘hearth’) of Maubisi-Mauloko. For other House groups such as Fela-fu, Asu Meta, and Hatu Dosa, the ‘skin house’ location is Mon Metan, while Gor-fu, Hatiliu-Liuirai, and Tau-it gather at Keo. In these ‘skin houses’ (a kind of facsimile of the original), final invocatory prayers are requested, seeking blessings and the longevity of agricultural animals along with the general wellbeing of all concerned. The forty or so houses that comprise the core domain of Maubisi Mauloko also carry out their own site-specific agricultural rituals independently at their respective house’s external altar platform and their sacrificial hearths within the ritual Houses. During these ceremonies, all the participants will join in to invoke the name of Tartehei: Maubisi-Mauloko-Sidau-Lakoda.

Within the Maubisi-Mauloko domain, there is a core distinction between uphill and downhill house communities. In Mambai, this distinction is referred to as ‘*kone lau-kone rema*’ (T: *leten ho kraik*). *Kone lau-kone rema* ‘work together’ (T: *servisu hamutuk*) in recognising and supporting the authority of the politico-ritual



Figure 8: Ermata Spring during *Ai Hulun Tartehe* Ritual. Photo Credit: Lisa Palmer

governance of Tartehe-Maubisi Mauloko-Sidau-Lakoda. The latter is responsible for 'looking after' (T: *hein ita*) all houses within the domain.

In the *kone lau* ritual community of Kolala, there are nine constituent houses in total. These houses have their own autochthonous origins and their own *kuku saen* to oversee house building and other rituals. They relate to the ruling centre of Tartehe-Maubisi Mauloko Sidau Lakoda through a network of marriage alliances (brother sister ties, M: *bin ho naan*, T: *feto-mane*). Rather than referring to themselves as branches of Tartehe-Maubisi Mauloko-Sidau-Lakoda, the houses of Kolala characterise the Tartehe complex as simply, *boot liu* (greater) and defer to its governing power and their alliance connections to them through marriage. This recognition of the unchallenged status of Maubisi Mauloko as the governing peak of the domain is embedded and affirmed in the mythic history of Koi Lasu and the defeat of the house complex of Lori Lau across the Maubisi valley. The annual exchange of betel nuts (M: *bua no mole*) at the *Ai-Hulun* ceremony continually reaffirms this relationship. A similar set of alliances stretches across the Maubisi valley to the domains of *kone lau-kone rema* including the ritual complexes of Liurai, Rai Kiik, Ai Tutu, and Edi. Through these networked cultural relations (*lisan*), house members strengthen and respect each other's kin status and house hierarchies: 'This is our wealth. From this we can grow our families and connections' (Chefe Aldeia Kolala).

Reinstating the House

During the long and difficult years of Indonesian military occupation, many of the imposing thatched, sacred houses of Maubisse (M: *Fad luli*) were completely destroyed or suffered structural damage and neglect as the local population was subject to restrictive movement policies and rules against large gatherings. Houses in the uplands (M: *kone lau*) were particularly affected by the violence and reprisals during the resistance struggle. Many houses suffered major declines in membership due to the combined effects of the armed struggle, disease, and the ravages of hunger. In addition, large numbers of residents (est. 100 people) from the Aldeia of Telituku, for example, joined the pro-integration Militia group *Mahidi* in the latter phase of occupation,¹⁰ and in the chaos of the post-referendum period, dozens of households relocated to Atambua in West Timor and have not returned to live in Maubisi.¹¹ House groups with few resident members were then often integrated into related House groups to enable their continued participation in life cycle ceremonies and spiritual protection. In the years since independence, the process of reconstituting depleted House communities has remained a negotiated work in progress.

Since independence, however, many of the ancestral structures (*Fad Luli*, *Fad Lisan*) have once again become a familiar sight across the mountain ridges and slopes of Mambai lands. Their striking thatched domes signal the efforts of many disbursed agnatic kin groups who assembled the means and collective conviction to rebuild their ritual centres. Remoteness and difficult livelihood circumstances mean that many *kone lau* houses are only now being rebuilt.

Since independence, *Kukusaen* Manuel has overseen the rebuilding of many of the houses in the Maubisse valley. For example, in 2018, he guided the completion of seven houses, and a further three in 2019. Some house rebuilding ceremonies were carried out during the Indonesian period, including several of the central houses in the Tartehe complex. From the 1980s, local authorities were able to give notice to the Indonesian military and authorities of their intention to hold a house rebuilding ceremony. Even so, a major difficulty in this process was the ability of house members from afar to obtain travel permits to participate. *Ai-Hulun* ceremonies were not carried out during the Indonesian period for the same reason. Thus, the opportunity and possibility of rebuilding some ritual houses allowed Maubisi house society to regain a sense of social exchange and solidarity, but these

¹⁰ The head of the notorious Mahidi militia in Maubisi, for example, was a member of the Tau-it Uma lisan.

¹¹ Members of these families do however return to attend the harvest festivals and seek the blessings of invocatory prayers.

efforts were tempered by the resident Indonesian military presence in the town, constant military surveillance of remote areas, and the suspicion associated with any civilian social gatherings. Mutual suspicion among the extended communities of Maubisi was also a corrosive presence for many years, divided as they were by their varying public and private support for national independence or continued Indonesian rule.

During the Indonesia period, a ritual event took place at Maubisi-Mauloko to tame the power of the *lulik* of the site. The *Kukusaen* of Tau-it ordered the cutting of some casuarina trees and laid down the large stones formerly standing in the ritual centre. These objects were deemed too powerful and were making people sick. To help in this taming process, the *Kukusaen* of Tau-it invited the Catholic church into the sacred centre of Maubisi-Mauloko. As a result, the former site of the house of Hatu Dosa (located between the houses of Tau-it and Fela-fu) now contains a small chapel and Catholic graves (between Tau-it and Fela-fu). The religious intrusion reflects the expansion of Catholic conversion in the area during Indonesian occupation.

Despite this ‘reformation’ event in the heart of Maubisi-Mauloko, one that reflected the broader politics prevailing at the time, in the post-independence period, it is the rebuilding of traditional ancestral houses that has gathered pace. These developments reflect the improvements in the economic resources of constituent House members, and a widespread sense that rebuilding the *Fad luli* ritual centres is an integral step in rebuilding Maubisi society. Houses are social and ritual centres because they formalise weddings and marriage alliance and hence the socially constituted governance relationships across the domain. In their absence, there is a sense that vital cultural obligations and authorisation remain incomplete.

House rebuilding is often initiated even if some members are unable to contribute immediately. In most cases, there is a significant lag time between the building of the house and its inauguration. This allows people time to amass the required resources while also enabling people to come together and begin the series of rituals that accompany the process. In some cases, house members seek government funding to support the rebuilding. While the application process is convoluted and usually too slow to be useful, people seek out this government support as much for the symbolic recognition as for the material support. As one man stated, ‘We seek government help because house building is part of our national identity, but if they can’t assist, we will just start.’ Remarkably, during the global COVID-19 pandemic in the period 2020-2022, the domain of Maubisi-Mauloko was able to reconstruct three of the constituent Tartehe houses: Fela-fu, Liurai, and Gorfu. Despite the restrictions on travel and the need for travel permits outside of the government-mandated ‘sanitary fence’ during much of this time, the house domain received permission

for the local community to come together and for grass thatch and timber to come from subsidiary houses in Edi across the expansive Maubisse valley. Around 400 people gathered to assist with the reconstruction.

In 2019, during our fieldwork in Maubisi, the house of Laek Odamata was being inaugurated (M: *Fad Mera*, E: Red or Raw House). The imposing timber and thatch house had been burnt down in 1975 during the early period of occupation, and then after a long hiatus, it was rebuilt over four months in 2017.

When the rebuilding began in 2017, all the *fetosan-umane* (affinal allies) connected to Laek Odamata came together to decide on the process. The commencement of the rebuilding ceremony was an important way to bring together house members and alliance partners (sisters and daughters) who had dispersed or whose links had weakened due to conflict and population dispersal, most notably to the capital, Dili. Since then, a group of six senior Laek Odamata men have been appointed to finalise the construction. The process is overseen by *Kukusaen* Manuel, who is a member of the *Fad luli*, Fela-fu, and whose group maintains an alliance with Laek Odamata through marriage with the daughters of the house (i.e., Fela-fu is a ‘sister’/*fetosan*’ or ‘fertility taking’ House).

Mambai society favours continuing marriage exchange between houses with long-standing alliances that are frequently repeated over generations of continuing exchange relations. These alliances generate, over time, a dense laying of affinal connections and attendant reciprocal obligations that bind house communities to one another in life-long relationships of exchange and inter-dependency. Sociologically, the product of this flow of women out from their natal Houses (*Fad lisa*) (M: *naan*, T: *umane*) into those of their husbands (M: *feton*, T: *fetosan*) is a branching formation constituted by lines of maternal affiliation (Traube 1977: 98).

Under the Mambai kinship traditions, preferred marriage partners are those children of cross-sex siblings (i.e., sisters and brothers), and more specifically, unions between an actual or classificatory Mother’s Brother’s Daughter (MBD), and a Father’s Sister’s Son (FZS).¹² In other words, when a man’s sister marries into another House, there is an expectation or aspiration that his own daughter and his sister’s son, might in due course marry, and continue the alliance relationship established with the initial union.¹³ Over time, Mambai house communities have maintained a range of these kinds of alliances, creating long-standing

¹² Children of same-sex siblings (male and female) refer to each other as brother and sister, respectively, and consequently cannot marry.

¹³ The converse marriage of Father’s Sister’s Daughter (FZD) and Mother’s Brother’s Son (MBS) while possible, is not regarded favourably because it has the effect of reversing the path of marriage of the parent’s alliance, therefore confusing the category distinctions and so the obligations established between allied Houses.

‘sister–brother’ (M: *feton-ho-naan*) relations that bind the groups in a complex web of mutual obligations.

For example, Laek Odamata house, at the base of Tartehi hill, is paired with the house of Koi Leki in a *feton ho naan* (sister–older brother) continuing alliance relation. Koi Leki, the older brother house and ‘fertility giver’ to Laek Odamata, was rebuilt in 2004. Laek Odamata is a fertility-giving house to the house of Maosk (located at the base of Tartehi hill) and as noted above, to Fela-fu (at the top of Tartehi hill). The houses of Liurai Hatiliu (also atop Tartehi Hill) are fertility-taking houses from Maosk; that is, in marriage, sisters and daughters move from Laek Odamata through either Maosk or Fela-fu to the centre of the Maubisi-Mauloko domain. The name, Laek Odamata (T: *Loke Odamatan*), means to open the gate. The ancestors created the house as a place of sharing, to bring things out into the open and gather others together.

In 2019, it was time to inaugurate the new house (*Fad Mera*). All agnatic members and interconnected alliance house representatives travelled in from far and wide. This stage of the ceremony effects a ritual conversion of the rebuilt house from a *Fad Mera* (transitional or raw house) to *Fad Erang* (T: *Uma be’en*—a juice, or a living house). The reconstruction of the building for the most part followed the traditional pattern and use of materials that is laid down by ancestral custom. An exception was made, however, to the strategic installation of the house’s nine support pillars which were all fashioned out of concrete rather than the customarily carved timber posts. At the entrance to the house, two of these study pillars had been ornately rounded and fashioned to emulate the wooden originals. Elders of the house had made the strategic decision to use these concrete supports due to the difficulty of sourcing large logs in the region and the persuasive argument that concrete was both the economical and far more resilient building material of choice. A ritual was carried out to request ancestral permission for this innovation, which was evidently granted,¹⁴ but unlike other parts of Timor-Leste where house communities are now using cheap zinc roofing (see Chapter 2), the roof of Laek Odamata was fashioned out of thick grass thatch. Maubisi has abundant grasslands, and elders decided that the process of gathering thatch was too important to forego because of its social benefits. While house members are responsible for sourcing and cutting the grass thatch, carrying the bundles to the house and the actual task of securing the thatch (and periodic

¹⁴ In the case of the Fela-fu, Liurai, and Gorfu houses which were reconstructed in 2021, there were clear signs that the use of concrete was rejected, and so all the material used is timber or grass/palm fibre cord. Likewise, one of the Maubisi-Mauloko domain’s *fad ana*, Hatudosa, sought to use only concrete pillars for their new house but this was not acceptable to the house ancestors. However, they were apparently less concerned if there was a blend of timber and concrete supports, which is how the house is now constructed.

rethatching) brings together all *feton ho naan* groups in a lively sociality of work and commensal feasting. It reiterates anthropologist, Elizabeth Traube's observation that the primary purpose of Mambai ritual is the reproduction of both society and cosmos (and the regeneration of life) (1980: 112). The Mambai origin house (*Fad luli*) is oriented with its single door always facing the house's external altar.

The Mambai origin house (*Fad luli*) is supported by twelve short symbolically gendered female poles reaching only to the floor of the structure, while nine long sturdy, symbolically gendered male posts supporting a raised timber floor and a conical grass thatched roof reaching all the way to the ground (M: *ai ri hine-ai ri mane*). Child poles ring the perimeter of the house to provide additional support for the outer circular rim of the house with its extended roof line and horizontal lattice of tied lengths of bamboo lattice. Inside the house is the main wooden altar post where the horns of the animals sacrificed in the various stages of the house building ceremony are hung (smaller horns and animal bones are stored by the central pillar below the house's wooden floor). Mambai ritual houses have gendered hearths located in the central elevated wooded platform. A male hearth is placed oriented to the right where meat is cooked and the *fetosan* (fertility takers) gather, while a 'female' hearth is constructed directly across the central space. It is here that women of the house cook and prepare rice for assembled guests. Around the inner perimeter, a resting platform encloses the edges of the circular structure. During ceremonial events, visiting *feton* (fertility takers) are ushered in and invited to sit along the right (or upper) side (male side), while the *na'an* affines (fertility givers) and household members mingle and sit in the opposite (or lower) space. The main supporting floor beams must be the paired halves of a single log, positioned to face each other under the floor to the left and right of the house entrance. The house's single door and entrance ladder is positioned in front of an outside stone and wooden altar. In preparation for the *Fad Mera* ceremony, the large drums of the house are also carried outside to the circular sacrificial platform in preparation for the festivities.

At the time we visited in 2019, the preparations for the *Fad Mera* ceremony had already been underway for two months. *Kukusaen* Manuel's son, Fransisku, offered an explanation for the stages for completing the house transitions from its incomplete status to a fully finished and 'authorised' living house (M: *Fad Erang*, T: *Uma Be'en*): A summary of these steps is listed below in Tetum.

1. *Tesi ai*: Animals are sacrificed at the site of the timber felling and their blood is sprinkled on the stumps. These trees should be manually carried to the house. If, as in the case of the Laek Odamata house, the pillars are concrete, these same offerings will be made when the concrete is poured. In both cases, the shorter female pillars are cut or prepared prior to the longer male pillars.
2. *Ke kuak mos harii ai riin feto ho mane*: Digging the holes and erecting the main pillars.

3. *Fokit duut, lalin duut*: Cutting and manually transporting the grass for the thatch.
4. *Suku uma*: Thatching the roof; this process is begun by a representative of the *umane* houses first, followed by a representative of the *fetosan* houses. When the first grass is tied, this is called *buup nor besha* in Mambai (T: *du'ut se resin*—there is still more grass). Each day of the thatching process involves an animal sacrifice.
5. *Fetosan umane sira tama hotu*: Gathering together the fertility givers and fertility takers. The temporary structure by the main house where the *fetosan umane* come to negotiate or settle their offerings is called *Lai Biti Na Bora* in Mambai (T: *nahi biti boot*—the large mat). More colloquially, this structure is known as the *Parlamento* and requires a goat sacrifice once constructed.
6. *Kuku Saen ba kakuluk hatun fahi larus ho manu*: The *Kuku Saen* ascends to the top of the roof with cuts of pork (T: *fahi larus*) and a live chicken. The chicken is killed by striking its head on the apex of the roof and both the pork and the chicken are thrown to the ground. At this point, the house transitions from *Fad Mera* to *Fad Erang*. The fertility takers waiting below scramble to catch the pork.
7. *Haree manu nia ain ho ulun ba ne be*: Everyone stops to examine the direction in which the chicken's head is now facing on the ground. This indicates how long the house will last and when they will need to gather again to rebuild it. The chicken is given to one of the fertility-giving houses.
8. *Hotu simu bua malus*: All *Fad Mera* ceremony participants receive ritually blessed betel nuts. The betel nut is now sourced from Besilau, Aileu (in the past the *bua* (E: areca nut) was sourced from Viqueque and the *malus* (E: betel vine) from Liquica).
9. *Fahi larus foti ba fetosan*: Other cuts of pork (*fahi larus*) are shared among all the fertility takers.
10. *Karua kuda ba Tiun sira (umane)*: Buffalo, horses, and goats are given to the fertility givers.
11. *Selu badain sira*: The master builders of the house are paid (through goods or cash).

During our fieldwork in 2019, we were invited to an evening ceremony inside Laek Odamata to mark the beginning of stage five of the house building rituals: the arrival of the *feton ho naan*. This ceremony gathered all the members of the house and involved animal sacrifices (a piglet, chickens, and a dog), and the sharing of betel nuts, palm wine, and a commensal meal together with the ancestors. Both male and female members of the house were participants. *Kuku saen* Manuel presided over the ritual and led the discussion about how the members of the house

should prepare for the celebrations and how they should behave and look after their various house delegations and other guests arriving for the *Fad Mera* ceremony. The men ritually slaughtered the animals in front of the main wooden altar, inside the house and roasted them on the male fire. The pig's liver was studied closely for any unfavourable indicators and then hung above the altar. A Christian cross hung to its left. Large amounts of rice were prepared by women of the house on the female fire. The generally amicable atmosphere was punctuated at times by stern warnings from *Kukusaen* Manuel that everyone needed to work hard and behave themselves during the forthcoming *Fad Mera* ceremony.

The core group of senior custodians of Laek Odamata discussed with *Kukusaen* Manuel's son, Fransisku, the ways in which local authorities would be notified of the ceremony. These authorities include the administrators of Maubisi and Aileu, the various village and hamlet heads, members of the clergy, and catechists. *Kukusaen* Manuel played a less active role in these discussions, turning instead to talk with the senior ritual leaders seated near him. When the group discussion shifted to the future of the house, *Kukusaen* Manuel returned to lead it. He told the assembled members of the house of Laek Odamata that they needed to find an appropriate couple to take care of the house and live in it. 'It can't be left empty,' he cautioned, and 'these custodians (those that *hein uma* (T.) or take care of the house) needed to be allocated some fields and coffee plantation so that they could support themselves.'

The evening ceremony would usher in the following day's activity: the setting up of the many temporary shelters needed to host the arriving delegations of *feton ho naan*. It was also an opportunity to request that members of the house spread the news the following day, through the local markets informing the various *feton-ho-naan* groups of the specific day that they would be expected to arrive to participate in the *Fad Mera* ceremony.

The following evening, another pig, two chickens, and a goat were offered to the ancestors of the house. This ritual marked the commencement of the final round of *feton-ho-naan* negotiations between Laek Odamata and their various alliances with other houses. As the primary *feton* house for Laek Odamata, Fela-fu should lead the *feton* negotiations. After another week of negotiations, the *feton-ho-naan* delegations from the district and as far as Dili began to arrive with their formally negotiated exchanges. The *naan* (older brother, T: *umane*) houses arrived first bearing pigs, palm wine, and rice, all symbolically female gifts. The *feton* (T: *fetosan*), abiding by customary protocols, came the following day bringing with them their offerings of buffalo, horses, goats, chickens, dogs, and cash (symbolically male gifts).

The following day involved a busy round of slaughtering of pigs, goats, and buffalo in the courtyard of the Laek Odamata house and constant rounds of cooking and food preparation for the visiting guests. The ceremony culminated on the final

day with *Kukusaen* Manuel clambering up the roof of the house with sacrificial gifts of pork and chicken and fixing them in place on the top of the structure. At this point, the house was inaugurated and became *fad erang* (*uma been*)—a ‘living’ house and one conducive to health and protection for its members.

Over the period of a week or so, the festivities continued with rounds of drumming, dancing, and feasting. Younger men were placed in charge of the drumming, while older women played the gongs. Older women and all the men joined in the dancing wearing their finest black *tais* usually purchased from Atsabe. To give a participant perspective on the significance of the events, one of the older female members of the Laek Odamata House (*Fad Lisa*), Maria, provided the following summary of the ceremony and its role in Maubisi social life:

We learnt this ceremony and our role in it from our ancestors. They showed us the way. We come together to sit with all the Kukusaen and have our discussions about whether we will be receiving a son or a son-in-law (T. umane or fetosan). We discuss how we will play the drums, how we will play the gongs, and dance. We do all of this to express our happiness that the house is ready. Our ancestors showed us how to do this. We continue to dance through the ceremony. The umane (T. Brother's house) come first. We dance and sing to receive the umane. When all the groups of umane have entered, we will prepare to receive the fetosan (T. sister's house). Then we will kill the pigs, buffalo, goats, and the chickens to make the house 'uma be'en'. We serve pork to the fetosan and buffalo to the umane. We eat and drink until the ceremony is finished, and then we go our separate ways. To finish, we dance, pay the builders, and receive the betel nut from the Kuku Saen. Then we return home. We rest. Then we plant corn, beans, and cabbages. When the rains come, we need to start work. For the harvest ceremonies (saur batar, saur koto) we hold our ceremonies here at the house. We also go to Tartehi for the final Ai Hulun ceremony, where we dance (bidu) at the house and at the springs. We do this to feed the spirits of the water. In the process, we form two groups. Men dance and call out. We women bidu. Just like there is one female water and one male water. We receive each other.

Conclusion

The long process of social and economic recovery in Timor-Leste has been both arduous and variously experienced across the hinterlands and mountain settlements of the fledgling nation. In this chapter, we have sought to provide insights into the customary forms of attachment and continuity experienced by Mambai members of the prominent politico-ritual domain of Maubisi-Mauloko in the central mountains of Ainaro. This task requires a collective commitment to uphold the ancestral traditions upon which the foundations and fortunes of the domain depend.

This case study of a central Mambai ritual domain highlights the continuing vital significance of House communities in Timor-Leste, particularly their sustained focus on the importance afforded social networks of exchange and alliance. The annual agricultural cycle brings together all the constituent agnatic social groups to celebrate their shared origins and re-confirm their ties to one another, through the enactment of a sequence of sacrificial offerings and invocatory prayers to the ancestors and the land. The importance of this spiritual celebration of ‘people in place’ is well expressed in the following commentary from one ritual leader:

We do this ceremony (M. Ai hulan) every year so that we can look after people and grow their number. We don't worship other things, just the Fatuk ho ai (Rock and Tree) and the bua malus (T. betel nut). It's all about our crops and the rain... and keeping the bee matan (T. spring) going. The water can flow to the sea, but we need to keep some of it here for ourselves. We worship the rock and tree and the spring... as a mother breastfeeds her child, we cannot leave the spring for it would dry up. Once a year, all the houses have to bring a chicken (for sacrifice) to Tarteji and receive the bua malus ... the matak malirin (T. cool green fertility), and they will have strong healthy children.

These ritual practices of renewal and growth, we argue, provide the foundational psycho-social support and constitutive acts of identity and belonging for the households of Maubisi-Mauloko. In a nation still struggling to overcome the dislocations and turmoil of the recent past, participation in these familiar and cyclical rounds of collective celebration and exchange provide an enduring source of strength and comfort for the times. More than this, as anthropologist Elizabeth Traube has observed,

The people (*povu*) also understand that agricultural productivity—traditionally associated with ritual leaders—is the precondition of a vibrant nation. Where the agricultural rites staged by ritual leaders symbolically reunite the realm as a whole, the unified nation is constructed by the people in the liberation struggle. Above all, the people resemble ritual authorities through their productive suffering ... (Traube 2011:135)

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[Re]constituting the Ritual Domain of Ina Ama Beli Daralai Babulu Mane Hitu

Susanna Barnes and Josh Trindade

Abstract

The chapter authored by Susanna Barnes and Josh Trindade, explores the intricate web of social, spiritual, and territorial relationships within the ritual domain of *Ina Ama Beli Daralai Babulo Mane Hitu*, a predominantly Naueti-speaking community in the south-eastern sub-district of Uato-Lari. A communal ceremony known as *Babulo Mane Hitu* (The Seven Brothers of Babulo) acts as a focal point for exploring the dynamic interplay of human and more-than-human elements within specific landscapes, illustrating the reconstitution of reciprocal obligations and interdependencies among human and more-than-human entities against the backdrop of specific landscapes. The ceremony, commemorating the domain's founder-ancestors, embodies the community's efforts to sustain and negotiate its social and moral frameworks amidst historical upheavals and contemporary challenges. Through detailed ethnographic insights, the chapter unveils the dynamic processes of renewal, contestation, and affirmation of communal identities, emphasizing the pivotal role of ritual in maintaining the continuity of the social fabric. This narrative not only highlights the community's dedication to preserving ancestral ties and managing communal harmony but also reflects on the broader implications of such practices in shaping Timor-Leste's socio-cultural landscape in the post-conflict era.

Keywords: Timor-Leste, Ritual house, custom, Naueti, Makasae, governance

This chapter is concerned with the performance of emplaced sociality in post-independence Timor-Leste. Drawing on an exegesis of a communal ceremony in honour of the founder-ancestors of the ritual domain of Ina Ama Beli Darlari performed in 2003 and 2015, we provide an ethnographically grounded example of how human and more-than-human relations of reciprocal obligation and interdependency are [re]constituted in relation to specific landscapes. The ceremony called Babulo Mane Hitu takes place every 10 to 15 years and involves the ritual re-enactment and representation of histories of origin, migration, and settlement that underpin social and spatial relations within the domain. It provides a vivid visual medium for understanding the role, function, and status of each house-based group and the nature of the relationships within the 'spiritual landscape' that constitutes the ritual domain.

In 2003, ritual reconnection with the founding ancestors was deemed essential to restore the ‘proper order of things’ after decades of conflict and displacement. The sustained commitment seen in 2015 emphasises the community’s apparent dedication to preserving the social and moral framework that defines the various house-based groups, along with their emplaced rights, responsibilities, and duties. We argue that the Babulo Mane Hitu ceremony constitutes a site of renewal and sometimes contestation of the intricate web of rights and obligations that sustain the social fabric of house-based communities in the face of changing times and historical challenges.

The ritual domain of Ina Ama Beli Daralari Babulo Mane Hitu

The ritual domain (N: *rea luli*) known as *Ina Ama Beli Daralari Babulo Mane Hitu* (Mother, Father Beli Daralari Babulo Seven Brothers) is centred on the paired sacred houses of the Daralari origin group: the *Uma Buta* (N. White House) and *Uma Ita* (N. Black House) located at a settlement called Uato Soba on *Baha Liurai* (lit. The King’s Mountain) in Uato-Lari sub-district.¹ Distinct ‘origin’ groups or lineages, each sharing a common ancestor (either through real or fictive links) and centred on a common *uma luli* (sacred house) comprise the core membership of the ritual domain. These core origin groups include the hamlets of Beli, Daralari, Aha Bu’u, Kota Nisi, and Roma.² Naueti is the predominant language spoken in these communities although Makassae is also spoken. Each origin group is sub-divided into a number of lineages or sub-lineages (N/T: *uma kain*), often with their own ‘branch’ or subsidiary cult-house.

The people of Beli and Daralari share common ancestors, the ‘Seven Brothers of Babulo’ (T: *Babulo Mane Hitu*), who are the founders of the ritual domain of Ina Ama Beli Daralari Babulo Mane Hitu. As direct descendants of the Seven Brothers of Babulo, male members of the most senior or ‘eldest’ (N: *kaka*) houses of Daralari are sometimes addressed as *rea netana* (N.) meaning ‘Centre’ or ‘Source’ of the land. As Source of the Land, they claim ritual authority over the domain and over-arching stewardship rights over its land and natural resources. These claims to power and authority are grounded in the histories of arrival and settlement of the founder-ancestors who provided the first harvest and continue to provide for their descendants (see Amaral 2001; Barnes 2017a, 2018).

¹ Throughout this chapter, we refer to this domain as the ritual domain of Babulo or *Babulo Mane Hitu*. *Mane Hitu* is the Tetun for ‘Seven Brothers’ or ‘Seven Men’. In Naueti ‘Ana Hitu’, ‘Seven Children’ is used (Amaral 2001).

² The names of the origin groups that underpin the hamlet structures are sacred and not spoken in public.

Daralari elders affirm that originally, the territorial boundaries of the domain stretched from the north coast to the south coast, encompassing large territories to the east and west of the present-day suku or administrative village of Babulo. However, as the Portuguese colonial authorities extended their control over the territory, often with the support of powerful neighbouring kingdoms, they slowly encroached upon the land, making it increasingly ‘narrow’ (T: *klot*) and obliging the ancestors to go to war to secure their borders. Eventually, the ancestors decided to ‘retreat into darkness’ and delegated the tasks of ‘ruling over the land’ and ‘governing the people’ to the descendants of the Burmeta. Since that time, the descendants of the Babulo Mane Hitu founder-ancestors have maintained ritual authority over the domain, and the descendants of the Burmeta have exercised political power. Today, the ritual domain of Babulo Mane Hitu is overlaid by the administrative village unit of Babulo, and a member of the house of Aha Bu’u holds office as village head.

The descendants of the Burmeta are the people of Aha Bu’u and Kota Nisi and derive from a common ancestor called *Boru Buti*. The people of Roma hamlet are migrants from Quelicai brought into the village by a descendant of Burmeta (see Trindade and Barnes 2018). Although representatives from Liasidi, Abadere, and Asa Muta (which now form part of the administrative village of Babulo) participate in ritual ceremonies at Uato Soba, they do so as affines and are collectively referred to as *ki itana* (N. people of the black). Another group of affines, who also participate in these communal rituals, are collectively known as *ki butana* (N. people of the white), comprising various origin houses from Baha’o Baha Buga and Balabasiba (Wailabasiba) pertaining to the administrative village of Vessoru.

Almost half of the population currently residing on the lands that are considered to form part of the ritual domain of Babulo Mane Hitu are originally from the neighbouring village of Afaloicai, also in Uato-Lari sub-district. The majority of people from Afaloicai were forcibly displaced from their upland settlements following the Indonesian invasion of East Timor in 1975. Nevertheless, a sizable minority was part of earlier migratory movements from the Matebian region to the coastal plain. Although many of the people from Afaloicai have long been settled in the area, they continue to maintain links to their own ancestral lands (returning on a regular basis to their place of origin to participate in collective rituals or house-based activities) and make a clear distinction when speaking about their place of residence and place of origin. Despite the fact that they also ‘officially’ live within the territorial boundaries of the administrative village of Babulo, the people of Afaloicai remain under the jurisdiction of their own hamlet and village officials.

Since 1999, the Daralari elders have been at the forefront of a revival of customary relations and practices, investing heavily in rebuilding their main sacred houses, re-invigorating ceremonial relations of exchange, renewing rituals

associated with the agricultural calendar, and celebrating their ancestral attachments to land. Daralari elders lament the fact that many people living on their land, including members of subsidiary houses of the Daralari origin group, do not perform the necessary rituals to ensure the continued fertility of their land and prosperity of its people. They also claim that many people do not know the history of the land or the correct invocations to be made, and some ‘outsiders’ continue to invoke ancestors from their places of origin rather than the local emplaced ancestors and more-than-human entities. According to the elders, this ‘chaotic’ situation has been the cause of so many trials and tribulations over the past thirty years.

Locally, some people have criticised the Daralari and accused them of being motivated by a desire to achieve social enhancement and political influence for their own economic benefit. It is possible to suggest, however, that the Daralari are motivated by something greater than the pursuit of power, prestige, and wealth. Daralari elders describe the sacred knowledge bestowed on their lineage by the ancestors as both a privilege and a burden. Through this knowledge, they have become privileged intermediaries between the ‘light’ (N: *meena*) and open world of the living and the ‘dark’ (N: *itana*), hidden world of the ancestors. They affirm that this knowledge binds them to the community and compels them to serve. The effort and resources invested by the Daralari in the process of post-conflict recovery and renewal of customary relations and practices reveals a commitment to their role as intermediaries between those who live on the land, the ancestors, and the non-human forces that reside in it, to ensure the prosperity of their domain and its people as a whole.

[Re]constituting the domain

Key to the revival of customary forms of relations and practices in the ritual domain of Babulo Mane Hitu has been the reinstatement of domain-wide ceremonies centred on the Uma Buta/Uma Ita house complex on Baha Liurai.³ Rituals undertaken at these sacred houses are performed on behalf of all groups living within the ritual domain and are directed towards the founder-ancestors who are responsible for providing for the wellbeing of subsequent generations. There are two main types of ritual performed at this ritual centre. The first is the less frequent and more exclusive ceremony called *Babulo Mane Hitu*. This is a ceremony that brings together the core origin groups of the domain and select affines ‘to serve and

³ In common with dualistic forms of organisation found across the Austronesian world (see Fox 1996), the Uma Buta (White House) represents ritual authority, and the Uma Ita (Black House) represents political power.

pay homage' (N: *serbi, hanai*) to the founder-ancestors. The second are the more inclusive rituals in which all origin groups that farm and live off the land of the domain partake. These ceremonies are associated with the agricultural calendar, the most important being the rice harvest (N: *masi hare*, to sweeten the rice) and the maize harvest ceremony (N: *masi eka rae*, to sweeten the maize).

Both types of ceremony involve invocation, sacrifice, commensality, and the [re]distribution of ancestral blessings in the form of ritually transformed areca nuts and betel-pepper leaves (N: *iluwai malubu*).⁴ The Babulu Mane Hitu serves to organise and reaffirm the organisation of core origin groups that historically made up the domain (compare to Lewis 1988). Critically, it constitutes the 'renewal' of the bond that exists between these groups, the founder-ancestors of the domain, and their descendants. In return for their service and tribute, the people of the domain receive ancestral blessings and spiritual protection. The emphasis of the agricultural rituals is on closing a period of prohibitions characterised by heat and danger and inaugurating a period of prosperity and peace associated with coolness and fertility. These rituals include members of all origin groups and their constituent houses whose livelihoods depend on the bounty of the land of the domain. This type of ceremony is replicated at the origin group and individual house level throughout the domain.

In this chapter, we first provide a description of the Babulo Mane Hitu ceremony to explore how social hierarchies and relationships are performed and manifest in the ritual setting. We then examine the nature of relations that bind the core origin groups that are the main protagonists of the Babulo Mane Hitu ceremony. We describe how, historically, these groups were incorporated and accommodated by the Source of the Land into the ceremonial order of the domain. In particular, we draw attention to the way in which strategies of keeping and giving serve to simultaneously draw origin groups into the ritual domain, while reaffirming the social, political, and ritual distinctions that exist between founders and newcomers. Second, we turn our attention to those groups excluded from the Babulo Mane Hitu ceremony who nevertheless take part in the agricultural ceremonies of the maize and rice harvest, as 'those who farm the land' and/or by virtue of marriage exchange relations (N: *oasae/uma-ana*). We argue that ceremonies held at the ritual complex of the White House and the Black House constitute a site of renewal and sometimes contestation of the intricate web of rights and obligations that sustain the social fabric of house-based communities in the face of changing times and historical challenges.

⁴ The expression *iluwai malubu* in Naueti, literally meaning spit (*iluwai*) betel nuts and leaves (*malubu*), is equivalent to the Tetun matak-malirin. It refers to 'a state of good health and productive life energy'.

The Babulo Mane Hitu Ceremony

The ceremony called Babulo Mane Hitu takes place every 10 to 15 years and involves the ritual re-enactment and representation of histories of origin, migration, and settlement that underpin social and spatial relations within the domain. It provides a vivid visual medium for understanding the role, function, and status of each house-based group and the nature of the relationships with more-than-human beings that constitute the ritual domain. In 2003, ritual reconnection with the founding ancestors was deemed essential to restore the 'proper order of things' after decades of conflict and displacement. The sustained commitment seen in 2015 emphasises the community's dedication to preserving the social and moral framework that defines the various house-based groups, along with their emplaced rights, responsibilities, and duties.

In November 2003, hundreds of people converged on the White House and the Black House to take part in a domain-wide ceremony that had last been performed in 1974. The central part of the ceremony consisted of a pilgrimage to the ancestral burial ground of the founder-ancestors of the ritual domain of Babulo Mane Hitu located on the summit of Baha Liurai. The central rituals of the ceremony featured animal sacrifice, an overnight vigil, and a shared communal meal. Only members of the 'core' origin houses of the ritual domain and select 'witnesses' were involved in this part of the ceremony. Members of affiliated 'commoner', servant, and client houses who 'farm and live off the land', were not part of the ceremonial activities at the ancestral burial ground. However, they did receive ancestral blessings in the form of holy water and betel nut spittle at the end of the ceremony at the White House and the Black House.

Before the ceremony began, the spokesperson (N: *Makai Luliki*, T: *Mak Kaer Lulik*) for the Source of the Land, sitting with a group of senior Daralari men and women (all 'people of the source of the land'), explained to a camera crew from the national broadcaster Radio Televisão Timor Leste (RTTL) that the purpose of the ceremony was threefold: to visit the burial site of the ancestors and communicate with them; to thank the ancestors for watching over the people living on their sacred land; and to ask for their continued protection and generosity. To the cameras of RTTL, the spokesperson emphasised that those participating in the ceremony were not there to fulfil obligations relating to marriage exchange or kinship ties, but to pay homage to the sacred king of the holy mountain (T: *liurai lulik*, *foho lulik*), overlord of the ritual domain of Babulo.

The ceremony began during the early hours of the first day. Women played a central part in these initial stages of the ceremony, handling elements, objects, and foodstuffs, all associated with generative power. At dawn, a woman from the Black House (N: Uma Ita) took a special ceramic pot (N: *cova*) to draw water from the



Figure 9: Mole Etu. Senior Daralari women wearing distinctive *krabi wa'i mee*, woven tube-dresses prepare rice for the ceremony in 2015. Credit: Josh Trindade.

spring at Luka Nu. A portion of ceremonial rice was cooked in this pot. The same woman then went to fetch wood from an area of old-growth forest at the foot of Baha Liurai.

As participants began to arrive at the White House and the Black House, senior Daralari women pounded ceremonial rice, also a symbol of fertility, in the 'sacred space' between the White House and the *kai bira* (N. sacred post, lit. *kai*—wood, *bira*—magic)—the sacred post on which offerings of betel nuts and ears of maize are hung prior to ritual transformation.

As groups continued to arrive at the ritual centre, a careful account was made of who brought what for the ceremony. Each participant was 'marked' on their chest and forehead with betel spittle and 'blessed' with holy water. These blessings were to ensure ancestral protection for all participants during the course of the ceremony.

Once prepared, cooked rice, betel nuts, and betel leaves were carefully redistributed into baskets representing first the 'sibling' Beli and Daralari origin groups and then other core houses of the domain. When the baskets had been filled, those participating in the central part of the ceremony—representatives from the senior houses of the core origin groups of the domain and select neighbouring affines who acted as witnesses—were summoned in a specific order by the *Kaburai* (E:

overseer of the land), who is responsible for protocol and order during the event. During the early phases of the ceremony, discussions emerged around the 'order of things', including the order of precedence (see Vischer ed. 2009; Barnes 2017a) among the different house groups present. This disagreement was partially due to the absence of the elders who had previously guided the ceremony, leading to uncertainty about the proper sequence of events. But it also reflected the complex dynamics and latent tensions between origin groups and sub-groups residing within the domain. As such, the ceremony at Baha Liurai served as a stage where representatives from different origin groups sought to renegotiate their roles within the larger community.

Before proceeding to the ancestral burial site, the Source of the Land, the appointed elder known as the 'Iron Rod of the Earth' and 'Stone of the Land' (N: *Rea Mumu* and *Rea Watu*), along with the guardian of the sacred house at Burlalu, guided by the insights of senior women, delivered brief speeches on the rules and prohibitions to be observed during the course of the ceremony. Out of respect for the ancestors and the potent more-than-human guardians of Baha Liurai, participants were instructed to walk in single file, avoid slipping on rocks or snapping twigs and branches, maintain silence during the walk, and speak only softly or in whispers during rests. In order to 'follow the path of the ancestors' (N: *to'osi dala bu'u luli*), no 'modern' items, clothing, or adornments were permitted. Everyone was dressed in 'traditional' woven cloth, even foreign guests. The high-ranking women wore distinctive red and black striped tube-cloths (N: *krabi wa'i mee*), while the men wrapped men's cloth (N: *no'o ló*) around their waists over their shorts.⁵ Only 'traditional' tools and implements could be carried.

At a clearing where paths converged, the procession originating from the White House and Black House was joined by delegates from the Beli and Burmeta origin groups, reminding participants of the role that the Burmeta played in reconciling the elder and younger brothers of Beli and Daralari in the past (see Barnes 2017a). Entering the *lulik* or sacred burial site of the founder-ancestors involves crossing into another dimension of reality, necessitating the ceremonial 'opening of the door and gate'. At a site known as 'the door and gate' (N: *ita mata, kai hene*), the sacred keeper (N: *Makai Luluki*) from the Daralari sub-house of Burlalu, alongside the Source of the Land, took charge of opening and closing this gateway, respectively. This ritual involved cutting bark from a specific tree and tying it around the thighs of the Makai Luluki's representative, who then led the procession, escorted by

⁵ For the 2015 ceremony, a specially designed men's cloth was worn for the first time. Daralari elders told me that they wanted to be able to distinguish between the *rea netana* (source of the land) and other origin groups of the domain. Two designs were made: one for the source of the land houses and another for subsidiary houses and allied origin groups (see Barnes 2017a).

two acolytes from the Daralari sub-houses of Asurate Renu and Asurate Liurai. Following them were the Source of the Land, the Bu Dato (chief) of Beli, and the representatives of the Burmeta origin group, including the liurai (ruler) of Aha Bu'u and the headman of Kota Nisi.

During the 2015 ceremony, at this critical juncture, prior to entering the sacred and ancient burial ground of the ancestors, the spokesperson for the Source of the Land addressed the founder-ancestors by reciting the names of the origin groups that had come to pay homage:

<i>Ata Daralari, Beli</i>	Your servants, Daralari, Beli
<i>Wulana – Ta'ana natadeba</i>	The moon (the time) has come
<i>Mai</i>	Come hither
<i>Mai mhutu laa estasi Uarula</i>	Come together to this place Uarula
<i>Serbi, hanai niana</i>	Serve and pay homage
<i>Nua ata</i>	with your servants
<i>Kaburai, Asurati</i>	Kaburai, Asurati
<i>Kaburea Makailuluki</i>	The keeper of the sacra of Kaburea
<i>Gama'a lati</i>	All here present
<i>Oeleu Wemata</i>	Oeleu Wemata
<i>Ana Hebana, Ana Tadana</i>	Eldest and wisest son
<i>Gama'a Lati</i>	All here present
<i>Itana, Butana</i>	Black and White
<i>Asa wuu, Asa woke</i>	Asa wuu, Asa woke
<i>Baha'o, Baha Buga</i>	Baha'o, Baha Buga
<i>Bobosa Kaburai</i>	Bobosa kaburai
<i>Gamama'a la weleseti</i>	All in this place
<i>Gamama'a lebagati</i>	All in this place
<i>Mai serbi hanai</i>	Come serve and pay homage

Ceremonial order of precedence as recited by the eldest son of the Source of the Land, October 2015, as recorded by Josh Trindade.

Upon reaching the summit, a section of the forest was promptly cleared to make preparations for the overnight vigil and communal feast. Two altars were set up in honour of the *Ina Ama Beli Daralari* (Mother and Father Beli Daralari), regarded as the 'original' couple and progenitors of the seven brothers of Babulo (*Babulo Mane Hitu*).

Descendants of these ancestral figures, belonging to the Daralari and Beli origin groups, presented and then sacrificed a buffalo (from the Beli group), followed by a pig (from the Daralari Source of the Land) dedicated to the ancestors. Before the sacrifice, the *Makai Luluki* solemnly addressed each animal, invoking

the founder-ancestors and asking them to receive the gifts being offered by their descendants. With each invocation, he cast earth and stones towards the animals, a ritual meant to ensure the Makai Luluki's words are transmitted through the offering, with augury used to discern the ancestors' acceptance. The pig's spleen and the cow's spleen and liver were removed and taken to the elders. The Source of the Land, keepers of the White House and Black House and the *Makai Luluki* all examined the organs to determine whether or not the ceremony would be successful. Notably, markings on the cow's spleen were interpreted as references to the recent political unrest (the 2006-2007 crisis in Timor-Leste), acknowledging the trials of Indonesian rule and the call to 'return to custom'. The meat was then traditionally cooked in bamboo (N: *toki*) and arranged on the altars alongside cooked rice, betel nuts, and betel leaves, completing the ceremonial preparations.

According to custom, everyone present was obligated to remain awake and vigilant throughout the night, engaging in a solemn vigil to honour the ancestors and absent community members. Representatives from the Daralari Source of the Land sub-houses periodically patrolled among the gathered men and women, ensuring that no one succumbed to sleep or violated any of the set prohibitions. To ward off malevolent spirits, men from the Asurate Renu and Asurate Liurai houses occasionally struck the sides of the altar with bamboo sticks, reinforcing the protective barrier around the congregation.

At dawn, the offerings from the altar were distributed among those in attendance, following an order of precedence. The heart and tongue of the sacrificial meat were specifically allocated to the elders of Daralari, while the tail and flanks were shared with the other groups. The Daralari Source of the Land's spokesperson, together with the *Kaburai*, who is responsible for overseeing ceremony protocol, reminded everyone of their duties towards the ancestors and their earthly representatives, the Source of the Land. This proclamation included behavioural norms and practices regarding the social interaction between men and women as well as origin groups, and regulations governing access to certain lands, forests, and other natural resources. Additionally, it covered land use protocols, including the timing for agricultural activities like clearing, burning, planting, and harvesting. After reiterating these guidelines, known collectively as N: *luli* (*bandu* in Tetun), the participants prepared to depart from Baha Liurai in an orderly, silent procession, without looking back towards the summit. The final individual to leave was the Liurai Source of the Land, who symbolically 'closed' the *ita mata* (N: door) behind them, marking the end of their passage through this sacred space.

Back at the White House and the Black House, those not permitted to take part in the main ritual activities waited to receive ancestral blessings (N: *iluwai-malubu*) before returning to their homes and fields.



Figure 10: Returning from the summit to redistribute the sacrificial meat and dispense ancestral blessings at the White House and the Black House (N: *Uma Buta*, *Uma Ita*). Photo Credit: Josh Trindade.

The unfolding of the ceremony at Baha Liurai and materials used during the ritual carry meaning and serve to tell the history of the domain and changes in authority and power. Although invocation and oratory have a place, they are not the principal mediums through which meaning is communicated. In essence, the Babulo Mane Hitu ceremony is the re-enactment and representation of key events in the narratives of origin and precedence that underpin the social and spatial organisation of origin groups within the ritual domain of Babulo. During the course of the ceremony, key notions of ancestry, attachment to place, histories of migration, and changes in power and authority are all acknowledged within a single visual narrative.

While the ceremony clearly celebrates the ties that bind the various origin groups of the domain in co-operative action, it also articulates and emphasises the differences in rank and status that exist between them. By taking part in the ceremony and investing considerable resources in it, the various origin groups involved appear to accept their position of relative subordination in relation to the Daralari as direct descendants of the founder-ancestors or at least acknowledge that it is in their best interests to do so (see Rappaport 1999). Acceptance, however, is often circumscribed. Although the roles and duties of various groups typically

reflect narratives of origin, they are nonetheless open to negotiation, contestation, and multiple interpretations (Vischer 2009).

Beli and Daralari houses

During the Babulo Mane Hitu ceremony, specific references are made to key events in the narratives of origin of the domain. Evoking the history of the split between their sibling ancestors, representatives from the Beli and Daralari origin groups approach the ascent to their ancestral burial ground on Baha Liurai from the separate ritual centres.⁶ Consistent with the history of inversion of precedence and loss of ritual power described by Barnes elsewhere (2017a), representatives of the senior Beli house play a largely subordinate role in relation to the Daralari throughout the ceremony. Both Beli and Daralari provide animals to be sacrificed and two baskets each of rice and betel nuts; two altars are also erected on site to represent the two lineages. Nevertheless, it is the Daralari *Liurai* Source of the Land who leads the way to the ancestral burial ground. Daralari ritual specialists, who make the necessary invocations to the founder-ancestors of the domain and Daralari houses, perform key ritual tasks during the ceremony.

The ceremony also reaffirms the nature of relations among Daralari core and subsidiary houses. Daralari narratives of origin describe how, early on, the ancestors created two wooden canes (N: *kai ua*, T: *rota*) called the *kaiua kaburai* and the *kaiua asurate* (Amaral 2001). The house that was granted the *kaiua* or, as it is most commonly referred to, the *rota kaburai*, was given the task to monitor the use of land and natural resources (N. *lai bosa lai wai*: guard the fields and the paddies and the water). The headman of Uma Kaburai, who carries the title of Kaburai,⁷ is charged with the task of overseeing the application of seasonal prohibitions on the harvesting of various products, inform the origin groups of the domain of upcoming rituals and ceremonies, coordinate the collection of tributes for collective ceremonies conducted at the White House and the Black House at Baha Liurai, and exact fines for the infringement of prohibitions. During collective rituals held at the White House and the Black House or Baha Liurai, the *Kaburai* is responsible for ‘keeping order’ and ensuring that participants follow the necessary protocols.

The *rota asurate* was given to another house with the task of ‘assisting’ the King of Babulo (*Liurai Lulik Babulo*, Sacred Lord of Babulo, i.e., the Liurai Source of the Land). This house eventually split into two lineages. Both retain the name of the original cane but are distinguished as *Uma Asurate Liurai* (House of the

⁶ See Barnes (2017a) for an explanation of this rupture.

⁷ *Kaburai* is a term derived from both Portuguese *cabo* and Tetun *rai*.

assistants to the King) and *Uma Asurate Renu* (House of the assistants of the people). Representatives of the houses of Asurate Liurai and Asurate Renu assist the *Kaburai* in matters relating to land management. During collective rituals, representatives of these two houses also assist the *Kaburai* and perform specific tasks in relation to the preparation of food. The houses of *Kaburai*, Asurate Liurai, and Asurate Renu have been incorporated into the Daralari origin group and refer to the Daralari headman as *Ama Kaka* (literally 'Father-elder brother'), the title commonly used to address the head of an origin group. These links, however, are assumed or prescriptive rather than demonstrated.

An altogether more complex set of arrangements governs relations between the Daralari Source of the Land and two groups associated with ritual authority and secular power within the domain. The delegation of authority to these groups and the dualistic structures created in the process reflect common patterns observed throughout Austronesian societies (Fox and Sather 1996). What is significant is that in Daralari narratives of origin, in the process of granting symbols of office to these groups, the emphasis lies on the locations where these objects were placed to be 'watched over' by ritual specialists called *Makai Luluki* (keeper of sacra) rather than the specific groups to whom they were granted, reinforcing the emplaced nature of power and authority that is derived through relations with the land.

The sacred house of Burlalu

In one version of Daralari narratives of origin, the keeper of the *rota Kaburai* asked the ancestors of the Source of the Land, to grant his house something that those under his jurisdiction could 'fear' (N: *thaku*).⁸ As a result, some garments belonging to the Mane Hitu ancestors were placed in a sacred house located in Burlalu; and a *Makai Luluki* was appointed as keeper of the sacra and a ritual specialist to work with the *Kaburai* to 'watch over' the sacred objects and preside over rituals associated with the rice fields of Babulo (N: *Ia la Burlalu, lai hai bosa lai hai wai la Babulo*); [the clothes] were given to Burlalu and the task to monitor the paddy fields of Babulo.

Members of the sacred house at Burlalu (*uma luli Burlalu*) asserted that the *Makai Luluki* of their house was responsible for determining the end of the prohibition on harvesting certain crops like maize and rice. They stated that in the past, the *Makai Luluki* accompanied by the *Kaburai* and representatives from the houses of Asurate Liurai and Asurate Renu would walk the boundaries of the ritual domain announcing the end of the prohibition and collecting tribute to present to the Source of the Land.

⁸ The version of the Daralari origin narrative documented by Amaral does not go into the details of the relationship between the house of *Kaburai* and the *Makaerluli*.

In 2003, the *Makai Luluki* and senior members of his house (his eldest son in particular) played a central role in the Babulo Mane Hitu ceremony. Dressed in special ceremonial garments, the eldest son of the *Makai Luluki* led the ceremony to the place called the door and the gate (N: *ita mata kai hene*) and was instrumental in providing safe passage to the summit of Baha Liurai.⁹ The *Makai Luluki* himself was responsible for key invocations to the ancestors immediately prior to the ritual slaughter of the live animals presented by the Beli and Daralari origin groups. In 2015, the eldest son of the *Makai Luluki* reprised his ceremonial role, but the keeper of the white house (N: *Uma Buta*) performed the key invocations as the former *Makai Luluki* had passed away.

While the 'garments of the king' were placed in the house at Burlalu, the ancestors placed a 'hat' (N: *taka ulu* (*taka* = to close, *ulu* = head), or *sapeo* derived from the Portuguese *chapéu*) representing the symbol of office of those whose role it is 'to guard the people and the land of Babulo' (N: *lai renu lai rea*) in a house at a place called Borulaisoba. The principal sacred house at Borulaisoba is called the House of the Mighty Lord (N: *Uma Liurai Hebana*). The sacred house at Borulaisoba is associated with the descendants of the Burmeta¹⁰ a warrior (T: *asu wa'in*) in-migrant clan from the Matebian region.¹¹

Daralari elders recount that the Burmeta were on their way to offer vassalage to the domain of Luca, when they stopped and camped on Waimatamesa, land near Buntua, close to Baha Liurai.¹² Rather than let these warriors join forces with their strong neighbour, the Daralari ancestors offered the Burmeta some land on which to settle and in exchange asked them to protect the borders of their domain.

To the Burmeta

To the Burmeta, the Daralari ancestors gave the prescriptive title of 'eldest, wisest son/child' (N: *ana bo'ona, ana tadana*). This group was given the task of guarding the people, guarding the land (N: *lai renu, lai rea*), ruling over the people,

⁹ The garments worn by the son of the *Makaerluli* are reminiscent of those of a Catholic altar boy. It was not clear to me whether these garments were meant to represent the origin garments placed by the ancestors in the sacred house of Burlalu.

¹⁰ Burmeta or Beremeta is also the name of the highest tip of mount Matebian Mane (the male mount Matebian). It is derived from the Makasae word *buru* or *bere* meaning big, and *meta* meaning black, e.g., the big black-skinned warrior (Trindade pers comm).

¹¹ The Burmeta trace their origins to Mount Matebian and their founding fathers known as Matebian Mane Hitu (Seven brothers of Mount Matebian). The seven graves of the seven brothers of Mount Matebian still exist today in Mount Matebian and are known as Soru Ilu Wai (N. soru, to gather, ilu wai, spit). Soru ilu wai is a pile of stones, where every person who passes one of the seven graves (seven piles of stones) will have to spit on a stone and throw it to the grave.

¹² This land is where the origin settlement and sacred houses of Aha Bu'u are located.

and protecting the borders of the domain. The hat stored in the sacred house at Borulaisoba is their symbol of office. As with the garments stored in the sacred house at Burlalu, however, Daralari elders state that their ancestors appointed a ritual specialist to ensure that the Burmeta do not try to harness the power stored within them independently of the Source of the Land.

The Burmeta became known as the ‘gatekeepers’ (*ita mata, kai hene*, door and gate) between the autochthonous ‘inner’ community of origin groups and ‘outsiders’, in particular the colonial authorities. The Portuguese granted the title of Tenente Coronel to the head of the Burmeta clan and, historically, Chefes do Suco have been chosen from this origin group. Members of this group also possess a *rota*, a rattan staff that serves as a symbol of office to rule (T: *ukun*) over the people of Babulo. The origins of this *rota* are said to lie not in Babulo, but in Viqueque.

During the Babulo Mane Hitu ceremony, the descendants of the Burmeta are acknowledged in a number of ways. The headmen of the houses of Aha Bu’u and Kota Nisi approach Baha Liurai from the sacred house of Borulaisoba. They meet representatives from the Beli and Daralari origin groups and other origin groups of the domain at the place called ‘the door and gate,’ an act that acknowledges the role their ancestors played in reconciling the Beli and Daralari origin groups.¹³ From this location, they join the procession taking their place behind the Bu Dato (grand-father lord) of Beli and the Source of the Land to complete the pilgrimage to the ancestral burial ground on the summit of Baha Liurai. During the ceremony, their role as ‘oldest and wisest son’ is publicly acknowledged by the Source of the Land, and they sit with the Beli and Daralari elders and ritual specialists. They do not, however, perform any ritual tasks.

Descendants of the Burmeta often describe their role as rulers of Babulo in terms of local governance in relation to the State. In the past, this entailed specific duties and responsibilities regarding the settlement of local disputes, the collection of taxes (for the colonial authorities), and the recruitment of labour for colonial or state projects. In 2010, during the most recent village-level elections, a younger man from the hamlet of Liasidi was elected village chief. Although related by marriage, he was not a direct male descendant of the Burmeta, a development that has not been welcomed by some of the elders of Babulo, including the Daralari elders. The fact that the former village head, who held office during the late Portuguese colonial period and throughout the Indonesian occupation, fell ill and died in 2012 has been interpreted as a ‘sign’ of the displeasure of the ancestors who exclusively appointed the Burmeta to this role. In the following elections, the son of the former village head was elected.

¹³ In narratives of origin of Daralari, Beli and Aha Bu’u references are made to the role that the Burmeta had in reconciling the descendants of the brothers who fell out over the harvest celebrations.

The account of the incorporation of the Burmeta exemplifies the process of 'installing the outsider inside', a pattern typically found in many Austronesian societies (Fox 1995; Sahlins 2008). The Burmeta can be described as 'stranger-kings' who came from outside and entered into a compact with the Daralari Source of the Land. As warriors, the Burmeta were a potential threat to Daralari continuity. However, this potentially life-taking relationship was transformed into a life-giving one through gift exchange. Sahlins views the relationship between indigenous insiders and 'stranger-king' outsiders as conceptually akin to those between affines (Sahlins 2008: 196). If existence involves a dependence on external sources (encoded in the incest taboo), then stranger-kings share the same life-giving properties of fertility givers and consequently command a position of superiority in relation to indigenous insiders (Sahlins 2008). While the Burmeta are socially superior within the sphere of secular authority and draw their power from external sources, this power is kept in check by the ritual authority of the Daralari Source of the Land whose authority is based on proximity to 'origins' (see Trindade 2008).¹⁴

As with the sacred house of Burlalu, tensions exist between the Daralari Source of the Land and certain descendants of the Burmeta. Daralari Source of the Land claims to over-arching politico-religious authority over the land and people of the ritual domain of Babulo sit uncomfortably with the claims to exclusive political power by descendants of the Burmeta. Like the sacred house of Burlalu, the keepers of the house at Borulaisoba have attempted to seek sacred objects from alternative sources (Trindade pers. comm.), and stories circulate amongst the descendants of the Burmeta that call into question Daralari Source of the Land claims to exclusive knowledge of the land and emplaced authority.

At particular points in time, these tensions have come to the surface. During the early 1970s, for example, when the various political parties sought members among the local population, the then Source of the Land and his sons joined the pro-independence Fretilin party while the village chief and his brothers became prominent supporters of Apodeti. There were clear historical resonances behind the political choices of the local leadership. The village chief of Babulo was closely tied to key figures involved in the 1959 anti-colonial revolt, who were among the founders of the pro-integration party Apodeti, while the message of self-determination appealed to the Source of the Land who had experienced Portuguese colonialism as a loss of power and authority. However, it is also noted that, like in other parts of Timor-Leste at that time, aligning with different political factions was a strategy for families to safeguard their interests and ensure mutual protection. Despite the intensification of these tensions during the Indonesian occupation, contemporary narratives within the community focus on the complementary

¹⁴ See Trindade's description of ritual-political diarchy in Trindade 2012.

relationship between these groups, often highlighting the sacred oath (T: *hemuran*, P: *juramentu*) that unites them. This bond is credited with enabling the former village head to protect Daralari members from being deported to Atauro Island during Indonesian rule. Moreover, in the aftermath of the 1983 Kraras Massacre, when Falintil contemplated attacking the Indonesian military in Aliambata and targeting collaborators, the eldest son of the Daralari Source of the Land, involved in the clandestine resistance, proposed himself as a sacrifice to spare the village, demonstrating the profound commitments and complex interdependencies that characterise these relationships.

From the perspective of the Daralari Source of the Land, assigning responsibilities to subsidiary and immigrant groups, along with the conferment of symbols of office, land, and ceremonial duties, is seen as a strategic act of gift-giving designed to forge bonds of interdependence between the grantor and the recipients (cf. Godelier 1999). For those receiving titles and symbols of office, accepting these honours entails taking on roles in managing interpersonal and human-land relations, positioning them in a relationship of relative subordination to the Source of the Land within the ritual hierarchy. The representatives of the Uma Liurai Hebana at Borulaisoba and Uma Luli at Burlalu, often metaphorically referred to as the right and left hands of the Source of the Land, respectively, manifest aspects of legal and ritual authority within the Babulo ritual domain, Ina Ama Beli Daralari. Nevertheless, the Daralari elders emphasise that the influence of these groups remains contingent upon, and subordinate to, the supreme authority of the Liurai Source of the Land, underscoring a complex system of ritual governance and interdependence.

The incorporation of settlers

Two groups currently living within the domain of Ina Ama Beli Daralari are excluded from the central rituals of the Babulo Mane Hitu ceremony that takes place on Baha Liurai. They are the people who make up the new hamlet of Roma and in-migrants from Afaloicai. At the start of the ceremony in 2003, the spokesperson of the Source of the Land specified that those participating in the ceremony were not there to fulfil obligations relating to marriage exchange or kinship ties, but to pay homage to the sacred King of the holy mountain (T: *liurai lulik*, *foho lulik*), overlord of the ritual domain of Babulo Mane Hitu. As such, only those groups that received 'gifts' from the Beli/Daralari ancestors could participate.

While people from Roma hamlet and Afaloicai village are excluded from the rituals that take place on the ancestral burial ground at Baha Liurai, members of these groups do partake in the distribution of ancestral blessings that occurs the

following morning at the White House and the Black House. They also regularly participate in agricultural rituals, in particular the maize harvest (N: *masi eka rae*) and the rice harvest (N: *masi hare*) where they receive ancestral blessings in the form of holy water, betelnut spittle, and bua malus. They do so as people who ‘use the land for farming and gardening’. Their limited participation in the Babulo Mane Hitu ceremony is connected to histories of settlement within the domain.

The population of Roma hamlet are sometimes referred to by other groups in Babulo as ‘the aldeia without land’. The aldeia of Roma was established after independence. Unlike the majority Naueti speakers, the people of Roma hamlet are largely mother-tongue Makassae speakers. According to one history of the origins of this group, the Roma ancestors served a leader (*liurai*) of the Burmeta, who lived in exile near Quelicai. When this liurai was invited to return and rule over the people of Babulo, he agreed on condition that he could bring his own people who stuck to him like ‘the seeds of a long grass’.

The Roma were not granted specific areas of land on which to farm or settle by the Source of the Land but served the chiefly houses of Babulo. In the past, one of the main tasks of members of this group was to watch over the buffalo herds of Burmeta descendants. In time, the descendants of the Roma started farming land near the animal enclosures that they guarded or land where they regularly took the animals to pasture. Now members of this group claim these areas of land as their own, based on long-term occupancy rights.

Historically, the people of Roma hamlet have been strong supporters of Fretilin, and there can be no doubt that the aspirations of the people of Roma resonated with Fretilin’s rhetoric concerning putting an end ‘to all forms of domination of our people’ (Jolliffe 1978: 331). After formal independence was declared in 2002, the Fretilin government approved the creation of a new hamlet (aldeia) called Roma. For many in the village of Babulo, this was interpreted as a sign of recognition for the loyalty of the people of Roma to Fretilin during the occupation. Yet, despite this formal recognition, prejudice against the people of Roma continues. For example, one of the younger sons of the Source of the Land explained to Barnes that the Roma people who ‘served’ his uncle’s house were treated like family, yet he lamented that like members of some of the ‘commoner’ (N: *renu*) houses, they ‘no longer know their place’.

The people of Afaloicai

The largest group of in-migrants to Babulo are originally from the neighbouring village (T: *suku*) of Afaloicai. Located to the north of Babulo, the former domain of Afaloicai encompassed a large territory that stretched across the southern

slopes of the Matebian mountain range, from Baguia to Uato Carabau. Afaloicai, with its ritual centre in Buibela Lena, is also known as *uluku-watu* (N. mountain stone) in relation to Babulo *wai-tasi* (N. water and sea) reflecting upland/lowland distinctions.

People in Babulo recall three distinct movements of people from Afaloicai to Babulo.¹⁵ The first group, mainly from the hamlets of Buibela and Lena, arrived sometime in the 1930s in search of land with their leader, Liurai Gregorio. The second group came during the post-Second World War period, at first seasonally to work in the rice fields that were being ‘developed’ on the Uato Lari coastal plain, but later to settle more permanently in the area. The third group were forcibly displaced from their settlements of origin as a result of the Indonesian invasion and ‘relocated’ to Babulo following the ‘surrender’ of the civilian population from the resistance stronghold at Matebian in 1978.

The way in-migrants from Afaloicai gained access to land on which to farm and settle in Babulo depended on the circumstances of their arrival and the level of engagement with different origin groups and in the case of the ritual domain of Babulo, the Daralari Source of the Land. Within the ritual domain of Babulo, the people of Afaloicai were not incorporated into the local social order in the same way as previous immigrants. They were not ‘installed on the inside’ in the same way as the Burmeta by taking up a specific ritual or political role and function (Fox 1995b). They remained organised according to their own house-based origin groups, hierarchically ranked and ordered in accordance with their own histories of origin and precedence. Their settling on lands within the ritual domain of Babulo is viewed by the Source of the Land as temporary and in the context of communal rituals; whether held at Baha Liurai or Borulaisoba, the people of Afaloicai are often referred to as ‘the people who use the land for farming and gardening’ (see Barnes 2017a).

Daralari elders recount that a group from Afaloicai, led by Liurai Gregorio, migrated to their area in the 1930s. Through a key marriage alliance, Gregorio’s group gained conditional access to land under a fertility-giver/fertility-taker arrangement, which required ongoing contributions in exchange for use rights. Elders stress that this was a formal oath-based agreement, and that ultimate control of the land remained with the original custodians and the Source of the Land.

The capacity of the Daralari Source of the Land to negotiate or determine land allocation to immigrants was increasingly challenged after the Second World War. From the 1950s onwards, colonial policies aimed at ‘developing’ local agriculture led first to seasonal and later to more permanent migrations from the upland areas

¹⁵ There may well have been earlier migrations from the highlands to the coast. Narratives of the opening of the Uato Lari rice fields suggest that people from Afaloicai may have been involved prior to the 1930s.

around Matebian, including Afaloicai, to the lowlands. In the 1950s and 1960s, the *Chefe do Suco* and *Chefe da Povação* from the entire *concelho* (P. council/district) of Uatolari were ordered to organise work-groups and ‘open up’ the coastal plain for rice cultivation (Metzner 1977: 283-286). For those who arrived in Babulo during the post-war period, access to land was no longer necessarily mediated through marriage into local origin groups, but rather through their relationship with other family members from Afaloicai previously settled in Babulo and neighbouring Vessoru-Uaitame.

It was the Indonesian invasion and occupation that most severely restricted the possibility of negotiated access to land. Following the initial internment of the local population, those from isolated upland populations of Uatolari sub-district, most notably Afaloicai, were relocated to administrative centres or linear settlements in lowland areas of Babulo such as Naedala, Kampung Baru, and Uato Lari Leten. Although Daralari elders claim that the local leadership, hamlet, and village chiefs of Babulo played a significant role in the relocation of the population during the Indonesian occupation, they were nevertheless acting upon the instructions of the Indonesian military.

While Daralari elders acknowledge that their ancestors granted access to land to certain groups from Afaloicai, they also feel that land and natural resources (forest products and fuel in particular) available to their own people are becoming scarcer. Daralari elders expressed their concern regarding access to land and natural resources by suggesting that some ‘outsiders’ do not partake in communal thanksgiving rituals and continued to maintain strong links with their own ancestral settlements. One elder commented that many people from Afaloicai who had been displaced during the Indonesian occupation were now prospering and as a consequence taking over more land. He noted that more and more people from Afaloicai were building houses on Daralari land using concrete blocks and zinc roofs, which suggested that they planned to stay permanently. The same elder stated that the presence of people from Afaloicai on Daralari land was not the issue, but rather that little by little, the Daralari themselves were being ‘pushed out’ of their own land and in the future might have to look for land elsewhere. He also made a connection between the increase in numbers of people from Afaloicai and the perceived decline in the Daralari population, which was one of the main motivations for rebuilding sacred houses and revitalising ceremonial life through collective ceremony.

Although many people from Afaloicai recognise the emplaced authority of the Daralari Source of the Land, this recognition certainly does not extend to acknowledgment that the Daralari could evict Afaloicai migrants from their land, or prevent them from building permanent housing and transferring those houses to their children (Fitzpatrick et al. 2012: 142). Relations between Daralari landowners and Afaloicai settlers are in general cordial. Many individuals and families from these communities are bound by networks of reciprocal exchange and alliance through

marriage. They also remember the agreements (T: *juramento*) made between their forefathers regarding land allocation (see Barnes 2017a). Nevertheless, since independence, tensions over access to land and natural resources have increased. Whenever these tensions have surfaced, the Daralari local leaders and elders have tended to reassert their rights as Source of the Land (see Barnes 2017b).

Conclusion

The Babulo Mane Hitu ceremony exemplifies the dynamic and complex fabric of social, spiritual, and territorial ties that define the ritual domain of Ina Ama Beli Daralari Babulo Mane Hitu in post-independence Timor-Leste. Through the detailed examination of the ceremony and its participants, we observe the renewal and negotiation of relationships not only among the core origin groups but also between these groups and the wider community, including outside the traditional social hierarchy. This ritual serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring power of ancestral ties, the importance of land and natural resources, and the ongoing efforts to maintain communal harmony and identity in the face of historical upheavals and contemporary challenges. By articulating the contested matters and the collaboration within local orders of social organisation, the ceremony reveals the delicate balance between maintaining tradition and adapting to change. It underscores the ritual domain as a living, evolving entity, where the past informs the present, and the community collectively navigates its future. The dedication to rebuilding sacred houses and revitalising ceremonial life, especially in the post-conflict and post-occupation context, highlights a community's commitment to preserving its social and moral framework, a testament to the power of ritual in reaffirming social ties and hierarchies, and a vivid illustration of the community's ongoing dialogue with its land, ancestors, and each other. This ceremony, therefore, stands not just as a ritualistic event but as a pivotal moment of communal reflection, renewal, and affirmation of identity and belonging in Timor-Leste's evolving socio-cultural landscape.

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Houses of Koba Lima: Unity and Division

Andrew McWilliam, Lisa Palmer, and Balthazar Kehi

Abstract

Located in the far southwest of the country is the ancient politico-religious domain of *Koba Lima*, meaning the ‘five betel nut baskets.’ The cluster of constituent inter-married House groups identify their sacred centre as Fatumea, a fortified House complex situated in the central ranges near to the international border with Indonesia. Despite colonial and post-colonial challenges and population movements across this often-illusory border, the domain retains an abiding sense of unity reinforced through mythic narratives of origin, house-based rituals and ongoing economic exchanges. This capacity of Koba Lima communities to retain their sense of shared origins and cultural identity is to some extent threatened by the nation-state, based divisions and further challenges relating to the drift of their youth to towns and cities in search of more economically prosperous livelihoods. We examine the ways these House-based domains are negotiating and engaging with the challenges and opportunities offered by the current two state, border solution.

Keywords: Timor-Leste, Ritual house, custom, Tetum Terik, governance

Introduction

The final case study in this comparative exploration of the structures and organisation of House communities in Timor-Leste focuses on the far southwest of the country within the contemporary municipality known as Cova Lima that shares a border with Indonesian West Timor. The name itself derives from an ancient politico-religious domain referred to as ‘Koba Lima’, meaning the ‘five betel nut baskets’. The phrase alludes to the former cluster of senior House groups that constituted a self-governing domain or nation with its sacred centre (Fatumea) in the mountains of central Timor. It maintains an abiding sense of unity reinforced through mythic narratives of origin, ritual performance, and the historical emergence of marriage alliance and exchange.¹ Koba Lima is an ancient coalition

¹ Koba Lima is centred in the mountains (T: *foho*) and claims precedence of rule over a broader remembered alliance of House-centred domains known as the Nuli-ne’en (T. six pillows) (Luni Ne’en

of five highland patrifilial² *Tetun Terik*-speaking territories straddling what is now the international land border between the nation states of Timor-Leste and Indonesia, established following the successful struggle for Timor-Leste national independence. The politics of the border and its restrictive modalities, however, are simply the latest iteration of state-sanctioned border impositions with their origins in the centuries-long struggle between Dutch and Portuguese colonial interests for extractive control over Timorese territories with their natural resources and human populations. The original border was established in 1859 but went through a series of revisions and tumultuous adjustments in 1896 and again following the Manufahi war in 1912, resulting in broad movements of refugee communities (Damaledo 2018). State-imposed boundaries and borders, of one type or another, have thus been an ever-present reality for Koba Lima residents over many generations. In the contemporary context, the capacity of Koba Lima communities to retain their sense of shared origins and cultural identity is constantly under threat from the disintegrative forces of state incorporation and separation, population resettlement, and the continuing drift of young people to the towns and city in search of more prosperous futures.

Despite these threats, the ritual domains of Koba Lima retain a strong sense of an underlying unity and shared identity which are enacted in periodic ritual celebrations including the reconstruction of ancestral origin houses (*uma lulik*) that reinforce group and familial connections. Many of these *uma lulik* are now being rebuilt on Koba Lima territories but located on the Indonesian side of the border. These developments are a recognition of the large numbers of Koba Lima households and families who resettled in the west following more than a century of anti-colonial struggle and the tumultuous end of the armed struggle in Timor-Leste in 1999. In this chapter, we offer a series of perspectives on the divisive and integrative processes that have enabled the communities of Koba Lima to adapt and negotiate their shared connections with the old domain while engaging new opportunities offered by the current two-state border solution (see Kehi and Palmer (2012) for longer-term perspectives).

in Tetun Terik), which combined mountain counterparts (*foho*) as well as lowland (*fehan*) domains within a composite unity.

² In contrast to the strongly matrifilial Tetun Terik communities on the coast.

The Domains of Koba Lima

The culturally resonant phrase, *Koba Lima* (TT: five—*lima*, baskets—*koba*) refers specifically to the handwoven and decorated palm leaf containers crafted by women for social and ritual purposes. A *koba* is used to hold areca nuts and betel leaves, lime powder, and often, home grown tobacco for consumption (TT: *bua malus*). Smaller *koba* containers are regularly offered as betel gifts in everyday exchanges when people meet or welcome guests to their house. Larger-scale *koba* are also used in ritual offerings to the deity house ancestors (known as TT: *kukun sia*, the invisible and bodiless ancestors) as well as other invisible spirits, such as the spirit custodians of land (TT: *rai na'in*), water (TT: *we na'in*), and forests (TT: *alas na'in*). The ritualised offerings are typically prominent during religious ceremonies at sacred houses and used for ritual gatherings at sacred sites in the landscape, such as natural springs, clan lands, ritual trees, certain stones, and animals. The *koba* can also be used for offerings of silver and gold coins in respectful and amicable exchanges during marriage and other communal ceremonies.

In Koba Lima, *uma lulik* custodians maintain an ongoing dialogue with the ancestors of the House, and the doubly constituted deity, *Bei Feto* (TT. female) and *Bei Mane* (TT. male).³ The latter make up an original unity or whole before the mythical separation of the sky, earth, and underworld (as is said; TT: *leten ni'it aan sae*, *kraik tidin aan tun*: that above ascended, that below descended). This occurred before the original formation of the *uma lulik* (sacred house) and its *lotan* (T. wall of separation) and the *tos* (T. garden) and its *kladik* (T. boundary) came into existence.

According to oral histories, the first and most revered centre of the coalition is Fatumea which is referred to metaphorically as the origin place of the first human beings (three brothers and one sister). The recitation of the sacred origin story in its entirety takes many hours and is narrated in the form of poetic rhyming verse (recited in canonical pairs) that can only be told by those designated as custodians of the sacred stories. A special ceremony called the *loke odamatan* (T. opening of the door) is required before the incantation of the narrative to allow entry into the realm of the sacred. The narrative reaches its peak when the 'queen of stars' (T: *fitun nain sae*) appears in the sky in the early hours of the morning, usually around 3am, at a time when the world comes to its perfect stillness, solemn silence, and peace. This physical state is expressed as *rai nakmaus nakmatek* (Kehi and Palmer 2012). Following the recitation of these revered stories, the custodian enacts the closing of the revelations by ceremonially replacing the lid on a sacred betel-nut

³ Said to be the manifestation of the 'Single-One' in human form which is too sacred and auspicious to be named or defined with mere words (*kakan la to'o*, *temi la to'o*; *ami halo ibun la to'o ba*, *ami halo lian la to'o ba*...*Ami naran la kakan*, *ami naran la temi*).

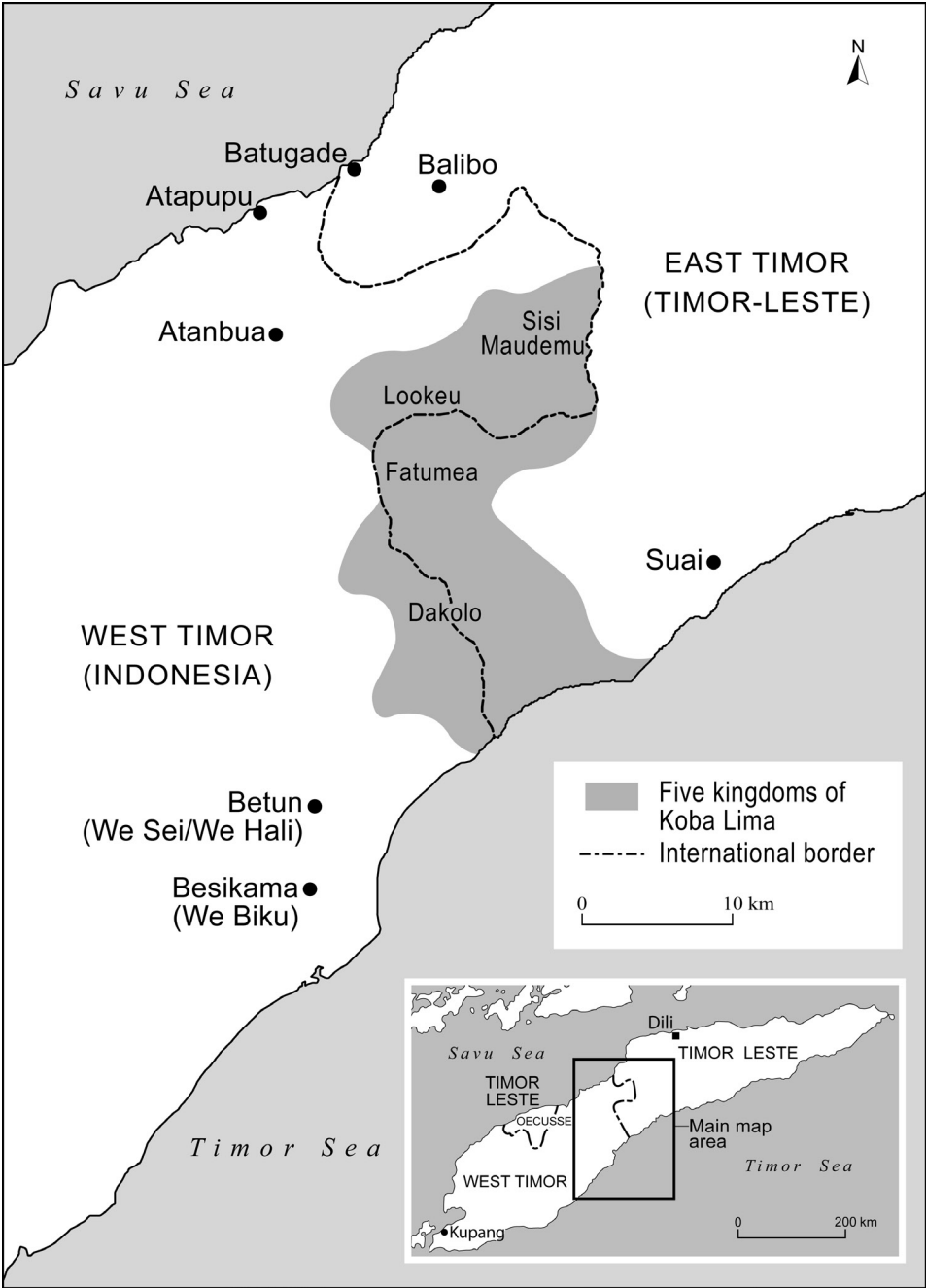


Figure 11: The Five Domains of Koba Lima. Credit: Chandra Jayasuriya

basket (*koba*). The ritual is completed by sealing the door to the sacred realm using formal speech.

<i>Didin hika, sara hika</i>	Replacing the wall, restoring the curtain,
<i>Nai Lulik Waik, Nain Manas Waik</i>	of the most Sacred Deity, the Deity of greatest heat
<i>Ne'e leten ba, ne'e aas ba</i>	high in the sky, there in the highest

The ritual centre of Fatumea, the mother domain of Koba Lima, is referred to in parallel ritual phrases as:

<i>Sadan We Sei, Molin We sei,</i>	The square of the Sei water, the courtyard of the Sei spring.
<i>Sadan We Hali, Molin We hali.</i>	The square of the banyan tree water, the courtyard of the fig tree water.
<i>Sadan Rai klaran, Molin Rai klaran</i>	The square of the world, the courtyard of the world.

In this parallel verse, *molin* is a *Tetun Terik* synonym for *sadan* meaning square or courtyard; a ritual space intimately linked to the sacred founding house of the realm. The word *Wehali*, literally means, 'banyan tree water' and is a *Tetun Terik* term usually paired in ritual speech with *We sei* (the Sei tree). But what is especially auspicious about this term is that it references the birth of the great domain of Wehali-Wewiku that was established on the southern coast of central Timor and came to be viewed by the colonial powers as the major political domain of the island (see Hägerdal 2012; Therik 2004). More significantly here, the renowned indigenous polity is believed to have originated from the ritual centre and life-giving spring waters of Fatumea mountain itself. According to this mythology, sacred water from Fatumea was carried in a green bamboo container along with one sapling of the sacred banyan tree (*hali lulik*) to the lowlands of Besikama on the southern coast (Belu, West Timor). Here, the youngest brother of the rulers of Fatumea, Nai Suri Lorok, founded a new settlement.

Reference to the origins of Wehali-Wewiku is also expressed in the following narrative verse in which the rulers of Fatumea assert precedence over the former historical domain;

<i>Ah bei sia, tuan no nura</i>	Oh ancestors, young and old
<i>Ah Fatumea ee Marlilu Haholek</i>	Oh Fatumea, Marlilu Haholek
<i>Uma metan sia ee uma lulik sia</i>	The black houses, the sacred Houses
<i>Bei sia iha kukun kalan</i>	Ancestors in the invisible realm
<i>Maromak ama Maromak</i>	Oh Enlightening Mother (female Deity)
	Enlightening Father (male deity)
	(see Therik 2004: 248)



Figure 12: Fatumea House and *Makoan*. Photo credit: Lisa Palmer

The ritual centre of Koba Lima is located close to the sacred house of Fatumea where the male and female rulers (T: *liurai mane ho feto*) of Koba Lima, and their *dato* (TT. second tier rulers) and other *liurai* gathered for public decision making. Historically, the elevated location of the site has been the prescribed location for the major ritual celebrations of the domain. They include (1) the celebrations of victory in war over enemy warriors usually accompanied with singing and dancing (the war dance) with the trophy heads of enemies, during which time the lyrics of war would be sung by several *makoan* (TT.) or *lia na'in* (T. custodians of the sacred words and ceremonies); (2) the sacrificial killing of a large buffalo bull accompanied by singing and dancing; and (3) the ceremonial serving and sharing of buffalo meat along with cooked rice, millet, or sorghum for commensal feasts.

The *sadan* (or *molin*) is laid out on the prominent hill, eponymously named red rock (TT: *fatumea*) which defines the vital ritual centre of the domain. The ritual space is guarded by the apical male and female sacred houses (*uma lulik*) of Fatumea, as well as two sets of large carved male and female statues (TT: *ai-tos*), several prominent megaliths, including flat and standing stones with marked and named features. The area signifies and reminds visitors of the mythical events that engendered Fatumea's creation by magical beings and powers, receding flood waters and the sea, and of great battles (T: *funu* or *hatuda*) against many different enemies, protected by the enduring power of its spirit guardians.

These epic adventures brought the great domain of Fatumea into being and subsequently the larger coalition of the three houses: the three betel baskets (*Uma Tolu* or *Kopa Tolu*), namely Fatumea, Lo'okeu, and Dakolo. The process culminated in the eventual confederation of Kopa Lima (Fatumea, Lo'okeu, Dakolo, Sisi, and Maudemu) when daughters of the senior houses (*Umane*) were married to the sons of the allied groups, Sisi and Mau Demu, whose names were Berek Mamea and Mauk Mamea. The latter became 'fertility receiving' groups (*fetosawa*) symbolically female and structurally subordinate to their alliance partners (see Figure 11). In this way, the fivefold structure of the Kopa Lima domain was established and has been maintained over generations of exchange and interaction to this day despite the existence of the colonial border and subsequent international boundary that has ruptured the geographical integrity of the larger domain.

On entering the *lulik* sphere of the *sadan*, visitors must first pass through an opening in the low stone wall leading to the grounds of the *Uma Lulik Fatumea*; a grand, timber, domed grass-thatched structure with its thatched roof nearly touching the ground. Two small doors through the overhanging roof provide access via male and female doorways to compartments of the inner house. These internal compartments are open to each other but separated by a raised central wooden floor beam that marks the boundary. Only authorised house members (male and unmarried female descendants or women whose marriage exchange obligations have been fulfilled) may enter the male space. A stone altar known as the *foho* stands guard by the outer doors.

Behind this living space is a path that winds further up the hill to the site of the *Sadan* proper. Here, there is a standing megalithic configuration (*boska*), also referred to as 'the parliament'. A central perpendicular stone juts out of a flat stone base encircled with four smaller stones fashioned in a semi-circle around it. The standing stone symbolises the power of the *Liurai* of Fatumea, while the four smaller stones in the semi-circle are the 'seats' of the remaining four kingdoms. Traditionally, the *dato* (lesser rulers) attend here to speak with the *Liurai*. Another smaller upright outlier stone to the north symbolises the domain of Kowa, while a large rock to the west, which is said to have transformed from a dog (TT: *asu rakat*), provides the continuing powerful security element for the 'parliament'.

Beyond this ritual configuration are a series of smaller upright stones symbolising other related domains and some distance away from them closer to a large banyan tree (*ai-hali*) is a smaller stone known as the *Rai-oan* (child of the earth). This rock is said to be connected to the power of the paired symbolically male *uma lulik* that sit beneath the banyan tree: the *Uma Metan*: *Uma Kukun Fatumea*. Here, *metan* (TT: 'black' and *kukun* (TT: 'dark' refer symbolically to the invisible, formless being or animating spirit of the domain. To the south of the *Uma Metan* are two



Figure 13: *Bei Feto*, *Bei Mane* and *Ai Tos*. Photo credit: Lisa Palmer

carved wooden statues (*ai-tos*) representing the male and female ‘grandparents’. The house structure itself is off limits to all but its custodians.

Further south of the Uma Metan is another large, symbolically female stone (with a smaller male rock resting on top). According to local lore, one night, the sound of a gong (*tala*) could be heard ringing out, and the next morning a gong appeared carved into the stone. The path from the female rock leads on up to a very large flat stone platform perched over a sheer 200-metre vertical cliff down into a river valley and south towards the sea. Near the edge of the cliff are two small stones, each with their own stone altar. The small round rock is referred to as *Bei Feto* (grandmother), while the upright stone nearby is the *Bei Mane* (grandfather). These two stones are visible manifestations in gendered form of the supreme deity (transcendental and formless).

A further two carved wooden posts (*ai-tos*), male and female grandparents, guard over them to the side. During important ceremonial events, especially new house inaugurations, the *Bei Feto* and *Bei Mane* are adorned in ritual jewellery and given food offerings. A buffalo is sacrificed and butchered nearby by the men while the women wait below by the female stone.

Descending along a path leading away from the *Bei Feto*, *Bei Mane* takes one to the ancestral cemetery with many graves marked by stones and adorned with Christian iconography. Beyond this is the main spring of *We Hali*, said to be the

original parent or source spring of the *We Hali* 'origin' centre in the plains of Besikama on the coast. Near the sacred *We Hali* is another spring called *We Nunak*, also known as *We Feto* (TT. Female Water) and another called *We Beko*, or *We Mane* (TT. Male Water). Every five or so years, major ceremonies are carried out at these springs to offer thanks to the spirit custodians (*bei lulik*) of the water. Separate ceremonies may be carried out at *We nunak* to call for rain in times of drought and at *We Beko* to ease excessive rain and slacken the wind. High above the *Sadan*, some 1.5 kilometres away, rises the imposing mountain peak of *Bei Ulu Molik* (TT. Bald Headed Ancestor) where, it is said, the first lands emerged from the great flood and where life on land began (see Kehi and Palmer 2012).

Parliament: stories of creation

According to Mau Suri, the now deceased *makoan* (TT. ruler) and *liurai mane* (male ruler) of the *Sadan* following the emergence of the land, the sea refused to give way. Two ancestral rats known as *Lin Berek* and *Mali Berek* prevented the sea from withdrawing from the mountain tops. To solve the problem, two birds called *Laku Nir* (TT. birds with civet cat faces)⁴ were summoned and directed to hunt down the recalcitrant *Lin Berek* and *Mali Berek* and sever their heads. Succeeding in their task, the two trophy heads were then taken to the central *Sadan*, *We hali*, *Molin We hali*, *Sadan We sei*, *Molin We sei* for a large celebration at the altar. It was following this original and apocryphal event that the first rulers of Fatumea turned themselves into the stones that surround the *sadan*'s altar (TT. *boska*). The main vertical stone has small circular indentations (or cupules) impressed across its sides with each indent representing the sacrificial heads of enemy warriors.

At this point, the domain of Fatumea came into being. The sea retreated from the mountain, and emissaries were sent out to the north and south and towards the coast. They carried with them bags filled with magical potions (TT: *ai-kakaluk*) belonging to the ruler of Fatumea. These powerful potions created river valleys, draining the waters into the lowlands and onto the coasts north and south. On the south coast (in the *rai fehan* lowlands of Suai Loro and Betun), the emissaries remained and guarded the sea with their canoes (*bero*) to ensure that the crocodiles of the sea would not return to Fatumea and threaten the people. On the north coast, the emissaries settled by the hill of *Fatu Kaden*⁵ (mispronounced and subsequently misspelled as *Batu Gade* in the domain of Kowa).

⁴ Civet cats are culturally associated with headhunting across Timor.

⁵ *Fatu* or *fatuk* = stone. In Indonesian or Malay, stone is called *batu*. *Kaden* = a high-pitched voice or sharp and piercing voice. *Fatu Kaden* is a flint stone with a sharp and piercing 'voice' which is used to generate fire.

The founding myth of Fatumea⁶

<i>Uluk we sae hotu</i>	In the past water covered the land
<i>Ema ida la sae</i>	No-one lived there
<i>We nakunu hotu</i>	water covered all
<i>Nai Nai halo funu ba ida</i>	The leaders made war against one another
<i>Halo ba funu ida</i>	waging war
<i>Too rahun</i>	total destruction
<i>Funu ida</i>	one war
<i>Tasi nee luan</i>	the sea is wide
<i>Funu to'o we hadau malu ne be</i>	Fighting until seizing
<i>Funu to'o We Hali</i>	Fighting as far as the We Hali (central spring)
<i>Mali Berek, Lin Berek (fo isin)</i>	Mali Berek, Lin Berek (gave their flesh)
<i>Tasi foun tun</i>	The sea began to recede
<i>Ta'a Mali Berek Lin Berek nia ulun</i>	the heads of Mali Berek and Lin Berek were severed
<i>Se'e lae tasi la fo fatin</i>	The sea was denied a place
<i>Lori fali dahur Fatumea</i>	recovering the ritual square of Fatumea
<i>Sadan We hali, Molin We hali</i>	Sadan We hali, Molin We hali
<i>Sadan We sei, Molin We sei</i>	Sadan We sei, Molin We sei
<i>Mali Berek Lin Berek tasi nain</i>	Mali Berek, Lin Berek the guardians of the sea
<i>Sira nain rua la fo fatin</i>	The two denied it a place
<i>Hodi ai kakaluk</i>	carrying the power
<i>Halo funu</i>	making war
<i>Ta'a sira nia ulun</i>	severing their heads
<i>Sira la fo isin, tasi la tun</i>	If they did not give their bodies, the sea would not retreat
<i>Iha nee sei tasi</i>	Here would still be sea
<i>Fatumea foun maran</i>	Fatumea dried out
<i>Nia sae la bele</i>	It could not move up
<i>Lori ai kakuluk</i>	carrying the magical ingredients
<i>Nai Bei ita nia, la os ema seluk</i>	It was our ancestor, no one else
<i>Itakan Bei, fo isin</i>	Our ancestor, gave permission

⁶ Following the Portuguese defeat of the Uma Tolu in 1896 and the creation of the Koba Lima alliance, a three-year war broke out between the border domain of Felaran Bauro and the Sisi Maudemu domain. This culminated in the defeat of Sisi Maudemu and forced the senior families to flee into Dutch Timor where they resettled (Alas, Ailali, and Litamali). Here, along with many former refugees from Dakolo, the settlers continued to assert their allegiance to the Koba Lima political alliance. This is why today, two of the sub-districts of Malaka District in West Timor are referred to as east and west Koba Lima sub-district (Koba Lima Timur and Koba Lima Barat). [Kehi pers. Comm].

<i>Rai foun luang</i>	the new land was wide
<i>Ida ba Kowa</i>	as far as Kowa
<i>Ida ba Suai Loro, Wehali</i>	as far as Suai Loro and Wehali
<i>Lori ai kakaluk,</i>	carrying the power
<i>we bele sai ba Suai, Wehali, Kowa</i>	creating the rivers at Suai, Wehali and Kowa
<i>Hamaus tasi nain</i>	quietening the sea.

This early period of creation is referred to as the *rai nakukun* (TT. land of darkness). It was a period of continual transformation, as divine and ancestral beings became, variously people, animals, plants, and stones. Bodily transformations taking multiple forms continued until the era of the *rai nakroma* (TT. the land of light). In this later period, epic journeys and adventures were still undertaken, but by then, the human protagonists were destined to remain in human form, and when they died, their bodies were buried in the land (T. *hakoi mate iha rai*).

<i>Fatumean inan ho aman</i>	The Fathers and Mothers of Fatumean
<i>Wehali Wewiku iha Fatumean inan</i>	are the mothers of Wehali Wewiku
<i>Rai fehan oan, Suri Ikun</i>	A child of the lowlands, Suri ikun
<i>Wehale la maran kokon</i>	Wehali did not dry up
<i>We foho tun ba tasi</i>	the mountain waters flowed to the sea
<i>Luca mos sai husi ne'e</i>	Luca also came from this.

The above account relays the journeys of the ancestor *Suri Ikun* as he travelled out across the land in the early creation period. His journeys took him southwest to the plains to establish what became the great domain of *Wehali Wewiku* and to the southeast to forge the future great domain of Luca (see Barnes et al. 2017). Two sacred (*lulik*) rock outcrops to the east of the *sadan* are known as *We Sei* and *Fahi Luca*. Above them on higher ground is the prominent rock outcrop of *Fati Kil lo Rai*, representing the masts of the 'mother ship' of Fatumea. It is from this point on the *Sadan*, that the *dato* (lesser leaders) are called up to be present in the parliament.

Political divisions

The various sacred houses of the allied domains of Koba Lima (except Fatumea) have periodically relocated to different sites within the territory due to wars and the dislocations caused by the colonial division of Timor between the Dutch and Portuguese. In 1895, for example, the Portuguese launched a series of attacks on the Uma Tolu rebel domains of Lo'o'keu, Fatumea, and Dakolo, eventually destroying

their resistance (see also Roque 2010). These events are remembered as the ‘fall of the three domains’ (T. *Rai Uma Tolu tohar*) and resulted in many refugees fleeing across the border and the sacred House (*uma lulik*) of Lo’okeu relocating to another part of the domain in what was then Dutch Timor. Since then, the ravages and disruptions of war and political struggle over the intervening years and most recently, the dramatic and violent end of Indonesian occupation in 1999, have scattered the people of Koba Lima to different places along the borderlands of Timor-Leste and West Timor.

As a result of these periods of turmoil, the sacred Houses (*uma lulik*) of both Lo’okeu and Dakolo have been forced to move and rebuild in new settlement sites within their respective realms and beyond. Today, the ritual communities of these domains now live dispersed across the international border in different jurisdictions of central Timor. Yet, despite these disruptions, they retain a strong sense of continuity and attachment to their origins. They participate regularly in ceremonies and obligatory ritual performances at their sacred houses, natural springs, and the graves of ancestors to pay respect, present offering, and celebrate their ties to one another. In these performative processes of integration, they reinforce group attachments to their sacred origins and receive spiritual blessings in return. Rituals of return are also vital practices to maintain connections with the sacred life-giving spring water of the domain, water that provides continuing generative and protective properties for house members seeking to establish new settlements elsewhere.

Currently, the mountainous domain of Lo’okeu (with portions of the estate lying in both east and west Timor) comprises nine constituent *datos* or senior sacred houses. All nine belong to and offer up their allegiance to the principal sacred house known as the *uma metan Lo’okeu*, founded in Foho Lor Lo’okeu (Timor-Leste) within the current domain of Lo’okeu where the senior elder of that house, Abuk Ama Kaitanu (*lia na’in*), maintains ritual authority and seniority over the sprawling domain. Lo’okeu’s antiquity is said to be 17 generations of descendants.

The nine constituent houses of Lo’okeu (3x3) are each headed by a *dato* (House community leader) and a kin-based network of house members. The nine Dato houses are named as:

Dato Mane Nen – Dato Mamulak – Dato Makerek Badaen –
 Dato Slak Wain Uma Kakaluk – Dato Slak Wain Uma Fuk –
 Dato Alin Nakelu – Dato Alin Lu Nain – Dato Tae Urak – Dato Lia Na’in

As elsewhere in the region, each of these sacred houses has its own specialised role in the operation and governance of the domain. For example, *uma mamulak* is the house of prayer, and specifically responsible for spiritual affairs of the domain. *Uma makerek badaen* is tasked with prosecuting legal decisions affecting the domain (*uma makerek ibun*, *makerek lia*). Dato Slak Wain Uma Kakaluk manages

the magical ancestral powers called *ai kakaluk* which are generally deployed during wars, whereas Dato Slak Wain Uma Fuk is empowered to organise the inner circle of the domain and convene broader discussions affecting the public affairs of the domain. Dato Alin Nakelu is tasked with the security of the ruler, while Dato Alin Lu Nain is responsible for poetic funerary rituals and material contributions (in the form of cattle, pigs, *tais*, and money) and welcoming guests to the domain. The Dato uma *li'an na'in*, takes the role of formal speaker for the domain and is the only sacred house that remains on the Timor-Leste side of the border within the domain of Fatumea.

In addition to the 3 x 3 main sacred houses of the *datos*, there is another important *uma lulik* that is also considered part of the inner circle of the realm. Uma *Naha Mauk Tuan Ai Dudun Tuan* is the house of the defenders and warriors known as the house of the *asu krakat* (TT. fierce dog), the *kroat nain*, *funu nain*, *hatuda nain* (TT. masters' of the sharp weapons, of war and securing the defence of the realm).

In the light of the turbulent changes following the fall of Uma Tolu in 1896 (see endnotes), eight of the nine Dato Uma Lulik have relocated to a 'new' settlement of Lo'okeu in Belu district (West Timor). The main Indonesian district township, Atambua, is visible from the mountains across the international border, especially when it is lit up at night. This Lo'okeu settlement of Belu (West Timor) was founded in 1910-1912 around the time of the disruptive Manufahi wars. The main Lo'okeu central house, *Uma Metan* (the black house) was built above the settlement at a place called *Au Ren*. While a remnant low rock wall is all that remains of the original structure, a replica house was built in 1992 in the middle of the new Lo'okeu settlement. In a similar style to the *uma lulik* in the Fatumea sacred *sadan*, this house has a *foho* (rock stone altar) and is guarded by two carved wooden *ai-tos*. The thatched roof hangs low to the ground with two small openings that access ladders leading up to the elevated inner compartment of the house, which is divided into male and female spaces. Within the Uma Metan is a fireplace by the main female pole and a gong hanging on the wall by the main male pillar. The gong, which was brought from the domain of Kowa (the site of Fatu Kaden/Batu Gade), is sounded to call people to ceremonies. There is also a side space for waiting visitors and a bed inside where the male keeper of the house sleeps.

In preparing the new *uma lulik*, the main pillars of the house were fashioned from suitable timber cut and shaped within present-day Timor-Leste and then dressed in male and female *tais* to be ceremonially carried to the new destination in West Timor. During the journey, care had to be taken to avoid the timber beams touching the ground at any point. During this ceremonial journey, house members accompanied the crowd carrying water from the sacred spring to quench the thirst of participants and transfer its life-giving properties to the new site. During the elaborate rituals of construction and inauguration, food basket offerings are

presented at seven key features of the new structure to ensure their integrity and protective qualities. They include the central male and female pillars, the male and female doors, the great dividing beam, the *foho* (rock altar) and the carved wooden *ai-tos*.

Returning to the source: The consecration of Uma lulik

There are many religious and ritual procedures that guide the construction of sacred houses (*uma lulik*) and can take many months, even years to complete. Critical stages of construction include felling and trimming timber, cutting grass thatch for roofing, collecting and fashioning fibres for ropes, digging and securing the foundation supports, and completing the roof. All these activities necessarily involve the whole community, and each stage requires a series of animal sacrifices and communal offerings following ritual observances to the *Uma Metan* 'the black house' or *Uma Kukun* 'the dark house'. The use of nails, metal, or other foreign materials is also expressly prohibited in the construction.

In the allied domains of Fatumea and Lo'okeu, as in the other coalition allies of Koba Lima, the main house rebuilding ceremonies take place around once every twenty-five years as the structures weather and slowly deteriorate, even with regular maintenance. These renewal ceremonies are referred to as *dahur uma lulik* (TT.), which references a form of celebratory circle dance, in which the dancers stamp the ground in front of the sacred house moving backwards and forwards in unison.

As noted above, the most recent community celebration of the sacred house of Lo'okeu took place in 1992 at the new settlement in Atambua, West Timor. It was preceded by largescale offerings and celebrations at the most sacred spring of Lo'okeu, *We Lulik* or *We Uas* (the original spring), on the mountain, Foho Lor Lo'okeu (East Timor). The renewal of the Fatumea sacred House (*dahur uma lulik*) took place in 2010 and involved the slaughter of 40 head of cattle and buffalo, more than 100 pigs, and dozens of chickens, which were subsequently butchered for sacrificial offerings and communal feasting. The celebrations were preceded by offerings at the most sacred spring as well as a series of other significant locations in the domain including further springs, sacred lands, forests, stones, hills as well as trees and ancestral graves. It is only during this celebration that the revered *sacra* of the ancestors (TT: *bei siakan lulik*), ordinarily kept inside the sacred house, are brought out and displayed to the wider community. They belong to the collective sacred house community, comprising the living and the dead as well as its lands, water, and mountains (see Vroklage 1953: 415, 478).

During the offerings and celebrations made at the sacred springs, holy water is drawn and carried in two green bamboo cylinders (TT: *au bonun*) covered with a

special hand-woven textile (*tais*). The offerings and celebration at Lo'okeu's sacred spring in 1992 took place one week prior to the sacred house celebration and two weeks prior to the community blessing with holy water to mark the end of the sacred house celebration and feasting. In the 'cyclical movement between human and spiritual modes of existence' (Hicks 1996: 614), water is seen by the people of Koba Lima as the nurturing mother, the critical life enabler and most important element. It ensures the favourable condition of *matak malirin* (T. *matak*—newly green or sprouting, *malirin*—coolness and wellbeing). The latter refers to good health and productive life energy or life force of human beings, plants, and animals (see, for a more detailed discussion, Palmer and Kehi 2012). Water is the symbolic mother—the *matak inan malirin inan* (T. the mother of the greenness, the mother of coolness), that is, the source of good health and productive life force or life energy (Vroklage 1953: 88, 97).

One week before the opening (inauguration) of the sacred house celebrations in Lo'okeu, West Timor, at least two hundred people, men and women, young and old, of the Lo'okeu domain in both East and West Timor gathered together at Lo'okeu's most sacred spring—*We Uas* in Foho Lor Lo'okeu, Timor-Leste, to present offerings and ritual prayers at the sacred water. They stayed there for two nights and two days. Thirty pigs and more than one hundred chickens were killed as offerings and celebrations around the spring, the origin site of the first sacred house of Lo'okeu, and the first ancestral graves. Activities prior to and after the offerings were made including cleaning up the area around the sacred spring, storytelling, prayers, singing and dancing, and preparation of meat and other food for the offerings. After midnight at around 3am when the 'queen of the stars' (*fitun nain*) appeared, the cooked food along with betel-nut offerings were placed on baskets called, *hane matan* (TT.) and offered to the invisible owners of the sacred spring as well as the invisible owners of the sacred land and the ancestors, by the *lia nain* ('custodian of the words') coupled with prayers.

Following these ritual offerings of food and meat, the participants were sprinkled with 'holy water' (TT: *we lulik*) as a characteristic gesture of protective cooling of the participants. The ritual speaker (*lia na'in*) then offered a ritual prayer to the spring water, repeatedly requesting the bestowal of *matak malirin* (green coolness) on the participants. Then, water was scooped up by the *lia nain* from the surface of the sacred spring and poured into the two bamboo cylinders (*au bonun*), covered with a woven cloth (*tais*), and placed on the stone altar at the head of the spring. This rite is known as 'taking the top of sacred water' (TT: *kuru we fohon*).

The following day, the blessed water in the two bamboo cylinders was cradled by two young men dressed in sacred heirloom ornaments who were then placed into a trance (*kiki*) and carried by the participants in turn to a counterpart spring called *We onu* (TT: *we* = water, *onu* = type of small bamboo) near the site of the new

sacred house of Lo'okeu in West Timor. Here, the bamboo cylinders were filled with sacred water and then placed on the small altar made of stone at the head of the spring, beside two wooden statues of male and female deities (*ai tos*). Several people stayed at the spring to guard the precious water until the final night of the sacred house celebration.

A week later, the celebration at the new sacred house of Lo'okeu was initiated. Everyone from the domain of Lo'okeu who lived within or outside the territory made their way to the new sacred house (*Uma lulik*), bringing with them offerings of pigs, buffalo, cattle, rice, betel nuts, textiles, drums, and other exchange gifts for the celebration that would continue for three weeks. In the afternoon of the final day of the celebration of the sacred house, some four hundred people walked from the sacred house of Lo'okeu to *We onu* (one kilometre away)—the site where the bamboo cylinders filled with holy water remained under guard. Again, two strong young men walked in the procession with the crowd led by women beating drums and men striking the gongs and all singing and shouting. On arrival at the *We onu* spring, people danced and sang to the percussion accompaniment of drums and gongs around the spring. A special prayer was intoned, and the two young men were roused from their trance. Once again, they carried the holy water in the bamboo cylinders and were followed by a large crowd of people in procession.

Arriving at the sacred house, more people were waiting for the arrival of the procession and greeted them singing poems and dancing to the beat of drums and gongs. At this point, the two bamboo cylinders were then taken inside the sacred house and placed in front of the main pillar, the sacred pillar (TT: *kakuluk lulik*). A large red boar and five other pigs were then killed, and the blood sacrifice was sprinkled onto the sacred flat stone near the central pillar next to the holy water. Several special *koba* (baskets) with betel leaves and freshly sliced areca nuts were also placed as offerings next to the holy water while outside, people continued their celebratory dancing and singing.

At around eight o'clock that night, the sacred prayers and history of creation (*lia lulik*) of the group were recited by the *makoan* (custodian of the sacred stories) culminating at three o'clock in the morning when the 'queen of the stars' appeared to the waiting faithful and ending shortly thereafter (see Palmer and Kehi 2012). This was then followed by a prayer for *matak malirin* (green coolness) and the sprinkling of the holy water over the people, the sacred house, the seeds, and the *hai matan* (literally 'eye of the fire') referring to hearth and also symbolically to families (*uma kain*) and clans (*uma fukun*) within Lo'okeu domain and within Koba Lima as well as the sacred houses of Lo'okeu and Koba Lima and of other related kingdoms.

The use of *matak malirin* as holy water is not created by the elders of Lo'okeu but by the older affines of the wife-giving houses of Lo'okeu (these elders are

considered 'life givers' and referred to here as *malun*) (see Kehi and Palmer 2012). In the morning after sunrise a spectacular event of the so-called *ta karau* (TT: the sword sacrifice of large male buffalo) took place, and the gifted meat was subsequently carved up and offered to the deities and ancestors who received the prized portions of cooked meat and rice in special baskets (TT: *hane matan*). Offerings were then placed in front of the sacred pillar, and people ate their final commensal meal together at the *sadan*—the gathering space in front of the sacred house. Cooked rice and meat along with drinks (mainly locally produced distilled palm liquor – TT: *tua sabu*) were placed on top of large newly made woven mats (TT: *biti*), and everyone ate together. After that final commensal event, people returned to their homes in groups to different parts of East and West Timor. They carried with them the *matak malirin* (blessed betel nut) for prosperity and protective wellbeing, as well as the joy of the community feast and of sharing once again the sacred story of creation, of the communions with their ancestors and deities, and of their renewed and strengthened community ties to one another.

In 2012, a group decision was made to celebrate and inaugurate one of the subsidiary Dato origin houses, *Uma Naha Mauk*, in West Timor near the international border. Some two hundred people from Lo'okeu in West Timor went first to the old centre of the *Uma Lulik Lo'okeu* in Foho Lor Lo'okeu, where the principal sacred water sources are located, namely *We Liurai* and *We Uas*. Together with members of the Lo'okeu community resident in East Timor, prayers were carried out and a water drawing ceremony (TT: *hanai ho kuru we fohon*) performed. Staying for a week undertaking the required rituals, they then hand-carried the precious sacred water from the springs in two green bamboo containers (*au bonun*), walking into West Timor for the final inauguration celebration of *Uma Naha Mauk*. The journey of the sacred water follows the traditional pattern where the responsibility for transporting the life-giving waters is entrusted to two young men who are placed into a trance at the sacred spring and carried in turn by the accompanying crowd, in this case a five-hour walk down the mountain and across the Indonesian border into West Timor.

In October 2013, some two hundred people currently living in the Lo'okeu borderlands of West Timor, crossed the international boundary to attend ceremonies at the origin centre of the domain of Lo'okeu in Fatumean. They were joined by others from Lo'okeu and Koba Lima in East Timor, coming together in the forest for a week of closely attended rituals at the ancestral source and its sacred springs. This activity was followed in November 2013 with the celebration of the reconstruction of the related house, *uma lulik* Makerek Badaen, where many people participated from Lo'okeu and Koba Lima, including residents of both East and West Timor.

One further example illustrates both the challenge and commitment to a continuity of relations that has been created by the international border in central

Timor. As a result of historical border violence in November 1959 and the subsequent resettlement of households into West Timor, two House communities with strong affinal connections (marriage: *umane-fetosawa*) had not undertaken the expected ceremonial gatherings with attendant material and spiritual exchanges to strengthen their ties to one another, for over four generations. Recently, the second and third generations of both parties (Lo'okeu house, Nai Kaitanus Kutu as *uma mane*, and Rai Oan Fatumea sacred house as *fetosawa*) recommenced negotiations in consultation with the 'bodiless souls or spirits of the dead' (TT: *kukun sia*) in 'the invisible realm' (TT: '*iha kukun kalan ba*') to convene a full ceremonial gathering and celebration to take place in 2023.

In February and March 2023, the elders from Lo'okeu in West Timor twice made their way to gatherings in Fatumea, Timor-Leste. Joined by the Lo'okeu elders in Fatumea, they met in person and conducted propitiatory rituals in the Uma Rai Oan Fatumea. These preliminary actions were undertaken in a measured and formal way to ensure the physical, psychological, and spiritual wellbeing of the members of the sacred houses concerned, including the respective, ever-watchful house ancestors.

After lengthy negotiations, agreement was reached, and the *uma-mane* (brother's house) committed to providing 40 cattle and other assorted gifts that would be escorted across the border into Fatumea, while the *fetosawa* (sister's house) agreed to a commensurate series of gifts and hosting the gathering. Following a reconciliation ceremony in the Rai Oan and Uma Kukun Bau Halek sacred houses of Fatumea, attended by many people in early July 2023, the cattle were walked across the border in late July 2023, and the formal exchange took place. A further ceremony is planned to take place in two years' time, involving many more people from subsidiary houses of Lo'okeu, Rai Oan and Uma Kukun Bau Halek, and Lookeu. The occasion needs to be undertaken with feelings of mutual deep respect and honesty; otherwise, the cooling blessings (*matak malarin*) from the ancestors may not eventuate, and retribution in the form of sickness, death, or other misfortune could result.

In these processes of exchange and acknowledgment, the people of Koba Lima celebrate their shared connections and economic ties of mutual obligation (Silva et al. 2023), and for a time at least reconfirm the significance and legitimacy of the ancient ancestral domain. In bringing together the agnatic House community and their affinal networks, their strength and continuing vitality of the community is made visible and celebrated. In the process, they reaffirm the continuing importance of the ritual domain as a source of social identity and locally emplaced attachments to the land and its ancestral resources.

Order and division in the borderlands

The impact of the borderlands in central Timor also highlights a range of practical and logistical challenges for families and their networks of relatives who find themselves living on either side of the divide. As is evident in the foregoing discussion, despite the existence of the 'hard border' that divides the old coalition of Koba Lima, there are multiple opportunities for participating in collective rituals of exchange and renewal, and for sustaining ties of membership to the traditional polity. There are also many every day and more mundane opportunities to undertake regular, informal border crossings, particularly into the Indonesian sector where bustling markets and the busy town life provide services and a range of products unavailable in Timor-Leste and at much more competitive prices.

From the elevated vantage point of the main unsealed road leading into Fatumea, the international border lies to the west, curving north to encompass portions of Lo'okeu land and the ancestral territories of Sisi Maudemu, now within West Timor and the Indonesian territory of predominantly Bunak-speaking Lamaknen. As night falls in the hills, the bright lights of the Indonesian boom town of Atambua glow in the distance, highlighting both the economic disparities between Indonesia and Timor-Leste but also the alluring opportunities for consumption and trade. Many people take advantage of these economic possibilities enabled by a porous border negotiated informally via a five-hour walk on foot down the valley but often assisted by relatives on the other side who can take advantage of the new sealed highway that runs along the border, nicknamed 'Jalan Jokowi', affording vehicle access along the West Timor side of the border.⁷

Atambua (Belu District) offers a ready market for selling agricultural produce, including vegetables and particularly foraged foods from the forests, wild tubers, and fruits, as well as hunted animals, pigs, possums, and birds. There is also a lively and largely unregulated cattle trade from Timor-Leste into Indonesia (reportedly up to 5,000 head per annum, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) Staff pers. comm.) where demand and prices are strong.

In return, Timor-Leste residents can take advantage of more cheaply priced food and domestic goods available in the Indonesian markets and shopping precincts. One interesting example in this field of opportunity created by the international border is the widespread and growing popularity of the plant herbicide, marketed as 'roundup' (glyphosate) which can be purchased cheaply in the markets of Indonesia. Roundup (pronounced as *rundup*) is highly effective in clearing fields of weeds followed by rapid inactivation and degradation allowing new food

⁷ Referring to the name of the Indonesian President, the newly improved bitumen highway runs broadly parallel to the border.

crops to be planted with little or no cultivation. The widespread use of roundup in the seasonal food gardens of rural households in the Timor-Leste borderlands has been the direct consequence and effective response to the continuing drift of young people away from agriculture, attracted by further education and the prospect of higher-paid employment in the towns and cities. For ageing farmer households and communities remaining on their ancestral lands, the use of herbicides provides a welcome and economical solution to the absence of young labourers willing to clear the fields and prepare for planting.

Another feature of the borderlands of Fatumea, which has a long and disruptive history tied to colonialism and nation state rivalries, is the mutual practice of cattle rustling resulting in significant economic losses to affected households and communities. The establishment of the international border has if anything only exacerbated the problem given the difficulties of negotiating effective policing and prosecution of offenders between the two governments (see also the Bunak-language map in Schapper 2011). Indeed, the everyday threat of cross-border raids on cattle herds was given greater immediacy during a visit by the researchers to the region in early October 2022. One morning, news of the brazen overnight raid by a group of men from the Indonesian side of the border spread quickly around the community. The thieves had targeted a local herd and butchered two animals at the site, before leading upwards of 30 cattle across the border and into the comparative safety of Indonesia. Herders from Lo'okeu had witnessed the events but were outnumbered and fearful of attempting to intervene. They kept their distance and returned to report the incursion. While there was not much uncertainty around the identity of the perpetrators, with the suspects thought to come from the Bunak-speaking Indonesian territory of Lamaknen, adjacent to the allied domains of Sisi Maudemu, the challenge was how to reclaim the animals and square the account across the international border. The response, when it occurs, is likely to be informal and retributive given the difficulty of negotiating formal channels of investigation.

The contemporary example highlights the sometimes highly contentious relations that persist between borderland communities and the reality of smuggling and trade in contraband which has been a long-term cultural legacy of borderland relations. Farram, for example, in his discussion of post-second-world-war relations between the Dutch and Portuguese in Timor, highlighted the contentious nature of the then border in a report from Schiller (June 1948) who noted that 'one had only to look at the old reports of any border district's official to find mention of the 'irreducible love' of the Timorese on both sides of the border for livestock theft' (2017: 30). Old feuds, he commented, 'were often the cause of such thefts and were not considered by the Timorese to be a crime, but something meritorious.' In

January 1949, it was reported that cross-border livestock theft remained common (2017: 31).

In an ironic twist to the recent elaborate cross-border negotiations between the house communities of Lo'okeu and Fatumea, just 3 months after the cattle had arrived in Fatumea, the grazing cows were hijacked in a cross-border night-time raid. The thieves walked them out over 15km under the cover of darkness and entered West Timor and the traditional Lo'okeu borderlands of Debuloku. But the thieves' audacious plan to load the cattle onto waiting trucks was thwarted by mobile phone messaging alerting people to the heist and requesting local Lo'okeu families to be vigilant. Their plans thwarted, the thieves withdrew and abandoned the cattle in Debuloku. Eventually, a search party located them grazing contentedly in the same area and promptly walked them back across the border to Fatumea.

These examples illustrate the complex and turbulent history of imposed borders and restrictions that have had long-term and corrosive impacts on the original Koba Lima domain alliances. The key impact is the fracturing and undermining of the spatial unity and integrity of the old Koba Lima clan alliances as local households and house members have been caught up in the prevailing struggles for political supremacy and the search for state-sanctioned security and protection. At the same time, and despite the imposition of new regulatory borders and shifting political alignments, the foundational importance of Koba Lima as a source of life and social identity, an enduring nation as it were, remains strong. Its status as a centre of politico-ritual power has, through commemorative words and confirmatory actions, survived the material and political changes of centuries past as well as more recent nation-state realignments (see Barnes et al. 2017: 352). As we have sought to demonstrate in this discussion, this enduring value and reality is reinforced in the periodic ritual gatherings of constituent House members who participate in extended, community-based economies of exchange and mutual recognition while celebrating their shared origins and the life-giving qualities of the land and water that nourish and protect them all.

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Tara Bandu and Customary Governance in Post-independence Timor-Leste

Lisa Palmer and Andrew McWilliam

Abstract

In developing the concept of intergenerational wellbeing from its base in an ever-transforming customary realm, we also need to ask how these ideas and practices might be integrated successfully within secular state policies and government service delivery. To date these issues of long held customary practices and orientations have been largely ignored or quietly sidelined. Exemplifying this challenge in Timor-Leste is the customary practice of periodic prohibitions on harvesting or cultural burning deployed under the restrictive customary process of *tara bandu* (to hang the ban). In this next chapter we examine these multiple, locally enacted customary practices of ritualized prohibitions designed to regulate diverse place-based social and environmental relationships. Now officially valued and promoted by the state as a local mechanism to conserve and promote the preservation and sustainable use of natural resources, we argue that what is usually missing in this collaboration is an engaged respect by those in power for the context-specific, spiritually sanctioned, dynamic traditions and moral expectations that underpin local *tara bandu* institutions. Further we find that these transformations and the implied renegotiation of power and ritual-political structures, are being impacted by state-sanctioned intentions to harness or subvert their potential. In this protracted struggle for recognition, we locate a continued purpose and strength in the Timorese commitments to honouring their spirit ecologies. Chapter 7 presents an extended discussion of these customary practices in post-Independence Timor-Leste with case material drawn from the Fataluku and Waima'a ethnography.

Keywords: Timor-Leste, Ritual house, custom, environment, governance, ritual, post-conflict

Introduction

The continuing significance of spirit ecologies across Timor-Leste is exemplified in the preceding focus on a range of Timorese House communities and their vital role in sustaining and reproducing customary governance in a context of expanding formal government programmes and regulatory policies. One such field of engagement is the widespread tradition of *tara bandu* (T. to hang the prohibition) which is used in many communities as a form of sanctioned proscriptions against harvest

theft or environmental damage. In recent years, these traditions of *tara bandu* have been valued and promoted by the state as local mechanisms to conserve and promote the preservation and sustainable use of natural resources. In this chapter, we argue that, while well intentioned, what is often lacking in this collaboration is an engaged respect by those in power for the context-specific, spiritually sanctioned, dynamic traditions and moral expectations that underpin local *tara bandu* institutions. Further, we find that these transformations and the implied renegotiation of power and ritual–political structures, are being impacted by state-sanctioned intentions to harness or subvert their potential.

In this chapter, we offer more specific ethnographic insights into the practical enactment of spirit ecologies and practices of *tara bandu* in the context of customary forms of governance. The concept of customary governance here may be defined as an assemblage of cultural practices that is grounded in notions of spiritual blessing as well as sanction and constituted as diverse forms of moral obligations enacted through gift exchange and appropriate behaviour. These concerns are fundamental elements that underpin and inform moral and behavioural practices within defined landscapes and traditional jurisdictions.

Fataluku spirit ecologies: foundational properties

Fataluku spirit ecologies are complex cultural terrains with multiple interpretive dimensions. For most Fataluku, the experience of the ‘spirit’ domain is part of the lived reality of social life. People refer to this ever-present though largely invisible realm by the generic term, *tei*—a concept that combines moral authority and protective familiarity with elements of dangerous uncertainty and retribution (akin to the Tetun notion of *lulik*). That which is *tei* is treated with caution, respect, and ritual restraint. The concept of *tei* extends to a wide range of polysemous forms, from spiritually charged locations across the landscape, to certain forms of behaviour, the consumption of sacrificial meat, avoidance relationships, sanctioned names of origin ancestors, and group-specific knowledge of healing spells, sorcery, and ritual prayer. We agree with Pannell and O’Connor (2005: 2) when they argue that, ‘the notion of *tei* is positioned in the centre of a discourse that explores the often perilous limits of sociality’; the idea of the sacred here expresses the inherent ambiguity of power in the indeterminate spaces between blessings and threats, malevolence and benevolence.

Within a broadly Catholic framework, Fataluku posit a continuum of classes of spirit agency extending from clearly human to more-than-human forms. However, in practice, the distinction is often blurred as transformational processes are frequently a defining quality. This continuum also informs the idea of what has

been referred to elsewhere as Fataluku 'inspired landscapes' (McWilliam 2011) a notion that speaks to ways of engaging pre-existing and emplaced 'spirit' forms with active processes of inspiring as a means of legitimating residential presence and resource claims. This can include processes of clearing and cultivating the soil, hunting and resource capture, and being born and dying in the land, all of which contribute to the conversion of the country over generations from the strange to the familiar, from 'other lands' to 'our' lands (see McWilliam 2011: 69).

Fataluku cultural repertoires include wild spirit agents that can influence human actions in beneficial but also deleterious ways. These agencies comprise a very diverse range of powerful spirit owners of the land and waters known as *mua ocawa* (guardians of the land) often intimately linked to the origins of ancestral settlements. Other spirit entities include forms of land, forest and water dwelling spirits (*ca-catu*), as well as the bloodied and vengeful souls of those who have died a bad death (*ula papan:: ula ucan*)¹ and the elusive shape-shifting witches (*acare*) who entice and consume the unwary.

It is said the wild *tei* of the land may be calmed or 'tamed' (*tei ma'a varin pai*) through the actions of human intervention. Sacrificial offerings of blood, offal, boiled rice, and palm liquor with appropriate invocations are designed to address ruptures in relations and/or render them amenable to the service of the living land-owners, while securing the protection of those residing on the land. But the nature of invisible autochthonous spirits is capricious and demanding as they can turn on their living custodians if relations are neglected or they are addressed incorrectly. As ever, there is a high degree of indeterminacy and uncertainty surrounding ritual communication with *tei* forms.

The counterpart to these unpredictable spirit strangers is the immanent ancestral domain, and for Fataluku, ancestors matter in fundamental ways. All Fataluku are members of agnatic kin groups and trace their collective identity, mythic origins, resource attachments, and clan-specific knowledge through the memorialised settlement trajectories and actions of paternal ancestors. Collectively referred to as *Calu ho Papu* (lit: grandfather and great grandfather), the invisible presence and agency of ancestor spirits (*i huma'ara*) are conceived of maintaining a kind of vigilant oversight of the social affairs of their living and visible progeny. Through prayer and sacrificial feeding (*fané*), ancestors are urged to provide blessings and protection for their descendants, to ward off illness and heal the sick, to bring abundant harvests and healthy babies, to restore reputations, and alleviate suffering. For these reasons, life transitions and commemorations for

¹ Untimely death (e.g., suicide, falling from trees, accidental or intentional death) is inauspicious and results in the soul of the deceased (*huma'ara*) being abandoned and left to wander as a tortured and unconstrained spirit.

newly deceased kin are accorded great importance and attention by agnates and their affinal relatives alike.

For most Fataluku, ritual engagement with their house and clan ancestors is actively mediated through life-cycle events of the household such as baptisms, marriage negotiations and weddings, funerals and the consecration of graves, house inaugurations, opening new food gardens, and so on, all of which reaffirm the solidarity of shared origins and the expanded ancestral networks. At the household level, the locus for ancestral communication is the sacred hearth (*lafuru tei* or *aca-kaka*). To celebrate life cycle events, kin gather to present sacrificial offerings to male ancestors, especially meat, comprising the thorax and internal organs of sacrificial animals (*leura tei :: ipilu tei*). Ancestors are invited to assemble at the (sacred) hearth (*aca-kaka na cuare*) within the house and participate in commensality with their living male progeny. Engaging ancestors in this way evokes a symbolic conjoining of past and present and the celebration of origins as a source of continuing life and wellbeing.

Ultimately, the Lautem landscape is a deeply enculturated one, littered with the signs and traces of group specific sites of renown and generative ancestral power. Most people locate their origins in the long-range exploits of forebears who arrived along the coast of Lautem in their sea-going *perahu* (F. *Loiasu*). Here, they left mythologised inscriptions of their settlements in the landscape that are variously memorialised. They include carved sacrificial altars (*ia mari tulia*) that signpost places where ancestors made landfall; ancestral 'stone boats' (*loiasu mataru*) that lodged in the landscape and became 'fossilised' remnants of the original settlement; and naturalistic figurines and carved posts (*ete-uruha'a* or *sikua*) located on hilltops, near springs and forested groves, as well as multiple stone-walled hilltop settlements (*lata paru, pa'a makolo*) often overgrown with dense vegetation and enclosing massive stone graves of ancestors and *tei* altars. Collectively, these sites identify the historical and material imprint of the ancestral presence in the land (McWilliam 2019). Each provides a focal point for ritual veneration by descendants in the hope that blood sacrifice and prayer will resolve impediments to relations leading to the misfortune of afflicted members and/or bestow blessings of protection and abundance. These early and old places of ancestral presence are reputed to be the most powerful in terms of their restorative or influential affects. Their seniority, it is said, gives them the authority to assemble a wider group of more-than-human kin. But powerful ancestral sites are also fraught with risk, where errors in ritual performance and narrative address carry heavy sanctions including illness and even death for practitioners. For those reasons, Fataluku generally rely on the knowledge and ritual skills of their leaders (*laficaru, luku-lukun ocava*) in this spiritual work.

The central point of this excursion into Fataluku spiritual ecologies of place is for the purpose of highlighting the powerful, thoroughgoing but often indeterminate

nature of the properties attributed to place and its implications for customary governance. Ritual invocation and commensality in these spirit ecologies has been an important part of the post-conflict rebuilding process for Fataluku communities. They reveal a 'meshwork' of shared concern around giving thanks to ancestors for their protective role during the years of struggle. They also address points of resistance, breaks, or blockages in relations and apologies for inadvertent neglect of their needs; and they work to cleanse the collective group of the lingering effects of wrongdoing, while seeking guidance, blessing, and support for a better future.

Customary Governance: Divination and Ancestral injunctions

In the crowded landscapes of Fataluku spirit ecologies, it is evident that individuals, householders, and extended family groups are by no means passive recipients, beneficiaries, or simply victims of ancestral and other spirit actions. Rather, the spiritual domain is a highly interactive field—one amenable to manipulation and processes of discovery, interpretation, and resolution for many everyday afflictions and suffering that affect households and the networks of more-than-human kinship and alliance in which all are enmeshed. Key to this complexity is the widespread use of diagnostic techniques of divination performed by ritual practitioners (*i navarana*) skilled in specific mantras and interpretive knowledge. A range of techniques are employed, often accompanied by the sacrifice of domestic animals (esp. chickens and pigs) and the close inspection of the pancreas (*ari moko haca*) and liver (*ari haca*) for blemishes, shadows, and signs that portend unresolved concerns and threats (see McWilliam 2008). One common divinatory technique, known as *mu'u-fuka totole*, involves the use of a soft inner-banana stem, a small knife, and the practice of asking a sequence of questions of the ancestral domain, slicing small segments of the stem for each enquiry and watching how they land. The result determines whether the question is answered in the positive or negative. These interrogative procedures often take some time before the specific source of affliction or ill-fortune is identified. Typically, they are located in behavioural acts of commission or omission on the part of the patient/supplicant which are affecting their relations with the more-than-human ancestors or nature spirits. Subsequently a variety of performative actions and ritual remediation is usually prescribed. The practice of *mu'u-fuka totole* is a widely used tool in Fataluku society for divining cause and effect, as well as confirming the efficacy of actions through subsequent sacrificial offerings. In Figure 14, the practitioner is using this technique to assist a small group of male siblings (*noko :: kaka*) to resolve the cause and problems associated with a miscarriage suffered by the wife of one of the participating brothers. Unless ritually contained and its effects neutralised, the spirit



Figure 14: Fataluku divination ritual. Photo credit: Andrew McWilliam

agent (*moco-i-can*: lit: the fallen child) can be a cause of expanding misfortune and accidental death (characteristically, from falling). The ritual also brings together the symbolic elements of the spirit child (blood, bones, and burial cloth) that will be later bundled and buried in the ancestral settlement of the father, thus containing and integrating the dangerous spirit into the ancestral collective.

Divinatory techniques like *mu'u-fuka totole* accompanying sacrificial offerings and the various prescriptive actions that supplicants are obliged to follow, are important cultural mechanisms for addressing illness, disruptions, and uncertainties in social life. In other words, the affects revealed in physical bodies are often related to transgressions against the body social, and the complex web of mutual indebtedness, obligation, and exchange that shapes and informs the broader governance of social life (McWilliam 2008).

Aside from investigating the cause and effect of human actions via ancestral direction, Fataluku also draw upon specialised cultural knowledge to protect and

conserve household or group possessions and resources through the application of potentised prohibitions and sanctioned measures. The generic Fataluku term for these protective invocations is *lupure*, a local variant on the wider Timorese (Tetun language) concept of *tara bandu*. The Fataluku practice involves the placement or fixing of a sign or marker, often botanical in form, together with appropriate words to charge or activate the protective device. Each ancestral origin group has its own forms of *lupure* and ritual invocations. The intent of *lupure* is to draw upon the powerful possibilities of the ancestral/spirit realm and enable release of its punitive actions against transgressors. The use of these restrictions is often applied to food crops and plantation commodities such as coconut, areca, and other tree crops (*vata lupure*). Here, the prohibition is signalled with a material marker made from palm leaf affixed to a wooden post (*lupure pacun*). But *lupure pacun* can also extend to restricting access to ripening crops such as maize (*cele*) or wet rice fields (*ale ira*). Prohibitions may be applied individually or extended as general restrictions on harvesting, and sanctions for transgressing these prohibitions are generally non-specific, but there is a widespread view that a key consequence of theft from items placed under *lupure* prohibition is the affliction of genital shrinking or genital retraction in the perpetrator leading to death if untreated. Fataluku allude to this effect with the term *molu molunu*, meaning to ‘disappear’.² In due course, the harvest prohibition will be lifted or rescinded (*mamihe*) by its owners and with it any existential threat to personal or material injury.

The scope and limits of customary governance

The different ways of proactively engaging the agency of Fataluku spirit ecologies, highlighted above, illustrate forms of customary governance at different levels of social inclusion, moral injunction, and behavioural effect. They are distinctly local in flavour and highly instructive in offering specific cultural expressions of what are widely shared practices enacted across the ethno-linguistic landscape of Timor-Leste where thirty or so distinct language communities share a common Austronesian heritage. People find continuing solidarity, comfort and efficacy in the authority of ancestrally constituted social and environmental governance practices tied to behavioural expectation.

² The notion of genital shrinking is widespread across southeast and East Asia. In the literature, it is often associated with the Makassar or Bugis term *koro* (meaning wrinkled or shrunk). Edwards defines this as a psychogenic syndrome of the subjective experience of penile shrinkage accompanied by extreme anxiety, and postulates that, ‘that genital insecurity may be a basic feature of Indonesian-Malay psychic and cultural life’ (1970: 168). See also Mitchell (2003).

In developing the concept of intergenerational wellbeing from its base in an ever-transforming customary realm, we would compare this with other more traditional and positivist notions of wellbeing expressed in governmental health, security, and environment sectors. As such, we also need to ask how these ideas and practices might be integrated successfully within secular state policies and government programmes of service delivery that, to date, have largely ignored customary practices and orientations. We are cognisant that moving beyond an acknowledgement of pluralist approaches towards pathways for active engagement requires careful research and more innovative analytical frameworks that can overcome the possibility of formalised governance interactions being little more than a means of demarcating and controlling the customary economy (cf. Zerner 1993: 1107, 2003).

Exemplifying this challenge in Timor-Leste are the multiple, locally enacted customary practices of ritualised prohibitions, widely glossed as *tara bandu* in the official language of Tetun. *Tara bandu* practices are often referred to as ‘seasonal or periodic resource harvesting restrictions’ (Meitzner Yoder 2005: 249), but as noted above, they can also be more broadly interpreted as a practice that regulates diverse place-based social and environmental relationships. They are, in other words, forms of sanctioned behaviour directed towards environmental or social organisational ends (cf. Belun and the Asia Foundation 2013). Like the Fataluku notion of *lupuré pacun*, these ritual prohibitions are generally invoked to proscribe behaviours considered damaging to social cohesion and/or the integrity of the local environment. Elevated as a tool for forest protection by the Portuguese at the turn of the twentieth century, over several decades, the practice of *tara bandu* became the favoured ‘indigenist ideology’ supported by the state (McWilliam et al. 2014). This officially favoured status that afforded it recognition as an ‘indigenous environmental protection practice’ has been reinvigorated in the independence era with similar intent. Alongside a significant amount of community and non-governmental organisation-level embrace of the process (McWilliam et al. 2014), *tara bandu* has developed as a ‘traditional’ mechanism that has garnered significant attention and traction in the development of formal resource management laws, many of which are being drafted by ‘expert’ foreign advisors and well-intentioned policymakers (Jackson and Palmer 2012). Furthermore, since 2013, the Secretariat of State for the Environment has also supported these ritual injunctions through small allocations of funding, and in some cases, the attendance of senior government members. *Tara bandu*, it seems, is now valued by the state as a local mechanism ‘to conserve and promote the environment and the preservation and sustainable use of natural resources’ (Article 10 (2) of the Draft Water Resources Law, Timor-Leste Ministry of Infrastructure 2012).

But what is understood today as the *bandu* process is usually conducted at the sub-village, village, or inter-village level at locally specified intervals (ranging from

months to years). While the ceremony may be announced and co-ordinated by the local political leader (usually the village head), the law-making power emanates from the ancestral and ritual authority of the ancestral house or houses of one or more of the area's senior origin groups. Ceremonies typically involve invitations to people from beyond the village to witness the ceremony. Invited guests can include political and ritual leaders from neighbouring communities, members of the clergy, and representatives of local government, police, and civil society. The ceremony itself may be a multi-day event. The months of preparation include special ritual speeches, celebratory ritual dancing, drumming and singing, betel nut exchange, animal sacrifice (the type of animals, their colour, and required number depend on the traditions, local capacity, and the subject of the *bandu* itself), divinatory techniques including an augury based on these animals' internal organs, and communal feasting. Prior to the public feasting, the main ritual elders must also come together in the commensality of specially prepared sacrificial foods which are shared with the ancestral spirits of relevant 'houses', lands, and waters (spirits which may also be consubstantiated in animal form (Palmer 2015)). In most areas following the ceremony, large ritual 'mother' posts and smaller 'child' posts will be placed around the extent of the prohibition area and hung (*tara*) with relevant symbols of the prohibitions (*bandu*). They commonly include skulls of the sacrificed animals, forest foliage, and crop items and depending on the locality of the pole, receptacles of water and handwoven symbols of wild animals.

Another purpose of the *tara bandu* is to honour the ancestral sites that connect the lands of different houses, sub-villages, and villages to a particular ritual domain. In these areas, the 'child or subsidiary posts' are erected and accompanied by ancestral prayers. The practice reinscribes the traditional order of ancestral relationships that speak to the origins and political configuration of the local community. It is also associated with a suite of practices in the ritual domain that seek to assure and generate agricultural prosperity as well as intergenerational wellbeing through carefully attuned and calibrated communication with founding ancestors and the autochthonous and newcomer groups who now inhabit the area.

Yet, in what may be read as both a strategic intervention and a reminder of the significance of custom, the placement of these posts has been known to feed simmering independence-era disputes over land and village administrative boundaries, particularly in Timor's urban and peri-urban areas. These tensions emerge via particular instances of *tara bandu*, but the disputes are, at their sources, legacies of colonial and Indonesian-era administrative processes that have to varying extents embraced, subverted, or ignored local 'custom' (Fitzpatrick et al. 2012; Shepherd and Palmer 2015). They are also a consequence of the emerging 'development' value attached to these lands. In many areas of Timor-Leste, development planning and initiatives have fuelled mistrust and suspicion between sub-villages and villages,

especially when ‘newcomers’ renege on their commitments to recognise and reaffirm the founding rights of local land custodians to ritually oversee the use of land and resources (Palmer and McWilliam 2018). In these contested circumstances, independence-era attempts to secure resource regulation and village boundaries through either customary or formal state-based agreements can work to undermine solidarity and foster socio-political fragility and conflict.

Nonetheless, in contrast to the prospects for effective customary governance in much of neighbouring Indonesia, across rural Timor-Leste, a high proportion of environmental and social disputes, including serious divisions, are still ‘conducted between parties who are inclined to obey the same local rules of conduct and the same traditional authorities’ (Henley and Davidson 2008: 848). To what extent this might change in the future is a moot point (Palmer and McWilliam 2018).

Promoting *tara bandu*

These days, new land, resource, and development policies and supporting laws are being rolled out across Timor, which are also engaging with and being co-constituted by the renewed desire among local populations to re-institute a range of house and community governance rituals. These rituals mark out connections across space and time and define the limits of authority in particular jurisdictions. They are therefore significant as the self-conscious expansion of the meshwork of local political and ritual spheres into the national body politic.

In such scaled-up and often state-sanctioned *tara bandu*-like events, distinctions between ritual/spiritual and political power are relationally defined vis-a-vis others in the community and vis-a-vis the state. In these recursive political and ritual spheres of governance, those most closely associated with ritual/spiritual power are realised only in context and in diarchic or complementary terms. Across the country, house-based communities draw on these dual categories to represent a range of collaborations between such complementary powers, all of which are recursively replicated at multiple levels (see Palmer and McWilliam 2018). In diverse and often new ways, *tara bandu* combine these diarchic political and ritual/spiritual governance functions, mobilising ancestral powers to punish both socio-ecological and ritual transgressions.

In these circumstances, we argue that local communities are seeking an active role in the designation and management of their lands and waters as well as space for performing resource management capacities through practices such as *tara bandu* (Palmer and Carvalho 2008). To this extent, these performances are also important political interventions into land resource governance. But they do not always work. For reasons outlined below, some *tara bandu* events are discussed

and even planned by communities but are never implemented, while others happen but have little desired effect.

From a local standpoint, *tara bandu* is not simply about conserving and promoting, as the Timorese state characterises it as ‘the environment and the preservation and sustainable use of natural resources’. Rather, it is more broadly interpreted as regulating a range of social relationships, and land and resource rights as well as moral action. In this sense, there is no separation between a community’s natural, cultural, and economic resources. Based on experiences elsewhere in the world, and as is evident historically in Timor, activating these kinds of rituals as ‘counter maps’ for social and environmental governance risks political co-option or even repressive legal sanction. Yet, this is a risk that local peoples have so far been willing to assume, realising perhaps better than most, that negotiating the ‘friction’ (Tsing 2005) of these meshworks of material imagination and practice is always messy, incomplete, dynamic, and opportunistic.

For its part, the recent responses of the Timor-Leste Government have been to support the enactment of public *tara bandu*. This positioning in part reflects their own lack of capacity to ensure effective environmental monitoring and protection. As noted above, government support in this regard has included the provision of state funds to promote the ritual enactment and observation of the prohibitions. From a government perspective, the funding is intended to ensure effective support for state regulatory proscriptions against undesirable practices such as logging and clearing forests, burning grasslands, hunting game, and livestock theft. In these collaborations, customary authorities are in a sense, very much co-opted by way of government support funding to implement restrictive forms of behaviour on pain of sanctions, usually including fines and spiritually based (*lulik*) punishments, in the form of illness or misfortune, of perpetrators. In other words, the state demonstrates a willingness to draw on the spirit ecologies of local Timorese cultural constructions of ritual and behavioural transgression to facilitate its own environmental agendas. To be sure, in some areas and at certain times, the process of collaboration between state and customary authorities over natural resource management has been viewed as working to the benefit of both local peoples and the nation-state (see Meitzner Yoder 2005). Elsewhere, however, particularly around the nation’s capital, concerns have been raised about the selective use of the process by government authorities (cf. Meitzner Yoder 2005: 252). In these cases, the government has become involved with *tara bandu* ceremonies and provided money and animals for the rituals but has generally not followed through with the process beyond the theatrical staging of a ceremony. Consequently, local people have tended not to take the process too seriously, and prohibitions have been breached or set aside shortly after their ritual enactment (pers comm. D. Carvalho 2008). In other cases, collaborations have focused selectively on particular

environmental elements of the *tara bandu* process, but the failure to engage with the full spectrum of the usual social and environmental prohibitions has weakened the *bandu* implementation and no doubt the regard in which the customary institution is held.

Our forestry colleague, Snr Fernando Santana, has observed in this respect that too often these days, the institution of *tara bandu* has become ineffective, operating as gestural politics and symbolic performances designed to appease government expectations and the funding that accompanies such ritual performances, but without the weight of sanction—spiritual or material—that encourages compliance. ‘More *tara* than *bandu*’ is how Fernando expressed it, where people break the established rules with apparent impunity. Partly, he thinks that this is due to the unwillingness of local authorities to enforce sanctions, but he also considered that customary leaders were often reluctant to ‘activate’ the spiritual (*lulik*) power of the prohibition out of a concern for the wellbeing of their neighbours, who may actually be harmed or die as a result of wilful transgression of the ban. This is especially the case when the ban relates to matters of more interest to the state than local communities (for example, a blanket ban on hunting wild animals or land clearing). The issue highlights the inherent risks of applying traditional practices constituted in local domains as a vehicle to further the environmental policies of the state, often to local people’s detriment, and where government funding may well undermine or disenchant the moral injunctions attached to ritual invocation itself. It also highlights a community strategy to ameliorate this risk, namely watering down, refraining from, or holding apart the process from particularly powerful ritual invocations.

As noted above, in most cases, there is a surface-level pluralist accommodation between Timorese Catholic and ancestral traditions, but in some areas, open hostility toward ‘traditional’ practices by representatives of the local Catholic Church works to undermine the operation and implementation of community-based rituals such as *tara bandu*. Among more puritanical Catholic and newer Protestant traditions, apparently on the rise in the nation’s capital (the seat of the government and the bureaucracy), people often express outright objection to engagement with customary practices (Wiyono 2001). In the process, they reprise the historical disdain of the modernising urban centres (*cidade*) towards the perceived fetishised and backward people of the hinterland and hills (*foho*), seeking instead a break from ancestral religion and associated practices. On the surface, this break entails both a rejection of responsibilities towards enmeshed customary social relations and beliefs in ancestral sanction, in favour of a radical reshaping and codification of an increasingly individualised habitus (cf. Strathern and Stewart 2002; Schram 2007; Keane 2007). Yet, at the same time, these more institutionalised approaches are fashioned as a radical change from ancestral traditions of ‘stone worship and animal sacrifice’; they are ironically underpinned by a firm belief in the need

to continually exorcise the fearsome and ecologically diverse spirit beings from unwell human bodies (Palmer et al. 2017). Hence, despite the potential blockages, resistances, and friction in the meshwork of customary practices created by newer forms of Christianity, the continuing efficacy of affective Timorese spirit ecologies persists as an existential reality.

The lessons that we draw from this experience of pulling together or distancing customary and other sets of practices are that sanctioned custom designed to prohibit or deny certain behaviours retains its efficacy and conforming authority only when the consequences for human wellbeing of transgression are realised and serious (even when these are framed as customary or Christian spirit ecologies). This is not to say that state-supported symbolic action cannot be effective in changing behaviours, but its secular authority to motivate compliance is necessarily of a different order. Below, we argue that the urge to ‘scale up’ customary governance in an undifferentiated way and to secularise such processes alongside more formal administrative structures is, in fact, part of the problem.

In the municipality of Baucau, locally enacted customary practices of ritualised prohibitions are known in Makasae as *lubhu badu*³ and similarly in Waima’a as *lubhu badu* (literally ‘the prohibition post’). These *tara bandu*-like events, once at the heart of the relationship between local ritual communities, are said to be derived from more localised traditions of *lubhu sari* (Makasae) and *lubhu gege* (Waima’a), the same concept in Tetum as *horok* or in Fataluku as *lupure*. These latter processes refer to localised hamlet-level rituals where spiritually infused objects (T: *ai-moruk* = medicine or ‘bitter wood’) are hung in public view to activate *lulik* prohibitions of the highest order. By contrast, when ‘scaled up’ to the village or sub-municipality level, modern-day performances of *tara bandu* events (such as *lubhu badu*) do not usually involve the placement of spiritually infused objects on the *bandu* post. While sanctions in these village-level *tara bandu* events are still activated by ancestral prayer and offerings, the even more dangerous properties of *ai-moruk* used in the *lubhu sari* or *lubhu gege* are usually omitted. Nonetheless, in these cases where the aim of the scaled-up rituals is also to invoke, re-inscribe, and honour ancestral place-making practices [and the boundaries of their authority], the use of revered ancestral prayers and the sacrifice of particular animals may have similarly potent and behavioural controlling effects as the use of spiritually infused *ai-moruk*. In such cases, there is as much at stake in the contents of the *tara* (that is hung), as there is in the *bandu* (that which is prohibited/regulated) itself. Yet, as noted above, in cases where these ancestral place-making acts are now overlaid with colonial-era administrative structures, the invocations may struggle to achieve complete authority and, in some cases, cause resentment and dispute.

³ Also known as *lubhu etena* (see da Costa et al. 2006: 94).

Sometimes, such issues need to be referred to a higher-level administrative authority for resolution, usually the sub-municipality. It is also worth noting here that the administrative role of the sub-municipality (*posto*) lies outside the conventional purview of 'traditional' governance structures. When this level of administration is called upon to arbitrate everyday affairs, the dispute is effectively seen as lying beyond the (ordinary) authority or capacity of the customary realm. In most cases, rural people prefer to avoid such an outcome.

Thus, while customary resource management practices have undergone a local resurgence in post-independence Timor-Leste, a host of post-conflict and post-colonial issues constrain full recovery. These issues include 1) the challenge of collaboration among diverse stakeholders while pointing to the legacy of colonial and post-colonial abuses and disruptive administrative changes and 2) the failure of mainstream resource managers to integrate resource management into the realm of social and political relationships, preferring instead to limit its scope to regulatory and environmental relationships. Selective engagement with ritual activities is also likely to be unsuccessful. From the perspective of local communities, there may be a lessening of belief or faith in spiritual sanctions and conversely a heightened concern about the dangers involved in enacting forms of sanction that are unlikely to be upheld.

A further related issue affecting some areas in Timor-Leste is the loss of knowledgeable ritual leaders to carry out traditional resource management practices. Some of these people may have died during the Indonesian occupation, while others may have been sympathisers with the Indonesians and fled across the border into West Timor in the turmoil following the referendum (see Damaledo 2018). Due in no small part to the societal disruptions of the Indonesian occupation, the death or departure of these customary leaders creates a politico-ritual vacuum at the local level. In Indonesian times when such rituals were authorised and their practice permitted, Indonesian-appointed authorities (such as the village head) are said to have often chosen inappropriate people to lead the rituals. This resulted in both a de-sacralisation of the process and the implementation of ineffective, if not potentially dangerous, ritual practices. Today, community members are usually reluctant to carry out rituals where the necessary expertise is felt to be lacking.

Dangers and possibilities in the formal recognition of *tara bandu*

In Timor-Leste, a number of researchers have been critical of locally idealised representations of *tara bandu* and the tendency to encourage 'invented practices of tradition' (Meitzner Yoder 2005: 252; Shepherd 2013). Yet, by adapting Ingold's concept of the meshwork (2011, 2012: 431), and extending it to include processes of resistance and the need to address blockages or ruptures in the flow of life, we argue

that it is more useful to think of these changing conditions and their advocates as being engaged in an ambiguously shifting array of ‘representational economies’ and ‘different modes of objectification’ (Keane 2007: 269). They speak and respond to the demands of a meshwork comprising spirit ecologies, intergenerational well-being and the associated indigenous practices, intra- and inter-community politics, regional, national, and international conservations, and development agendas. Such conversations and collaborations through the meshwork are simultaneously situated, dynamic, and opportunistic, even as the outcomes in many ways are either unsuccessful, unknown, or uncertain.

We have thus far argued that the power of *tara bandu* is established through its links to a moral economy based on ancestral clan or house-level relationships rather than more abstracted, ‘scaled-up’ articulations. In the fractious post-conflict environment of Timor-Leste, it was widely believed that the attributes of a community-based, ritually sanctioned prohibition would result in higher levels of compliance with the prohibitions, higher than would be expected with the simple imposition of governmental laws and regulations. These days, over two decades on since independence and with the revival of *tara bandu* practices across Timor-Leste, the state is now indicating that it may move toward the formal legislative recognition of *tara bandu* as a customary resource management practice. But given the dangers of co-option, the continuing absence of legislative recognition may well be considered by some to provide a more desirable and indeterminate state of affairs—one that enables local expressions of *tara bandu* to flourish and expand without unnecessary, regulatory oversight. The issue divides opinion, especially among local people themselves who are keen to see state recognition of their customary laws (cf. Carvalho et al. 2008). Many community leaders across Timor-Leste also express a desire for the government to authorise and support practices such as *tara bandu*, with some advocating that these legislative forms give effective constitutional recognition of traditional laws and customs.

Already, there are civil society groups who are actively supporting the documentation of community-specific, *tara bandu* processes in the hope of pushing forward with governmental recognition. In other cases, similar initiatives have stemmed from within the community itself, encouraged by the presence of educated individuals familiar with the formal recognition and codification of customary law in other jurisdictions (pers comm. D.A. Carvalho 2008). But how this recognition might be activated and whether or not such laws should be formally codified need careful consideration.

In the early years of independence in the enclave of Oecussi, for example, active collaboration between customary and government forestry officials was underpinned in each instance by the creation of formal ‘letters’ documenting a combination of traditional practices and state forestry laws constituting that

specific *tara bandu* (Meitzner Yoder 2005, 2007a, 2007b). But to date, it remains unclear from the *tara bandu* documents that are emerging through this process whether these regulations are intended to be guidelines for practice by the relevant community or imposed regulations to be applied and adhered to indefinitely regardless of constantly changing contexts and circumstances.⁴

On the one hand, communities 'hosting' government-endorsed, and increasingly standardised *tara bandu* events, have begun to question the source and necessity of such restrictive or 'non-negotiable' actions. Critics suggest that this accommodation is rapidly becoming a new form of imposition on existing local customary practices. Still, others, who acknowledge these tensions, make hopeful comparisons between formal institutions of social and environmental governance and the protocols of *tara bandu*, referring to the coming together of soft state governance approaches and the absence of *lulik* sanctions, which nonetheless may have some beneficial effects of lessening otherwise indiscriminate post-conflict resource harvesting. Similarly, this anticipated coming together of benefits, is also sometimes extended to state aspirations for localised economic development. For example, in a number of *tara bandu* processes associated with coffee growing districts in the mountainous west of the country, often added to the list of 'environmental' bans are restrictions on the number of animals that can be exchanged and sacrificed between houses during life cycle events (Palmer 2007; Silva 2016). While such *tara bandu* processes were initially embraced by communities to tackle perceived excesses in localised land clearing and ritual exchange, it has been argued that over the years, many of these processes have morphed into a more insipid type of state-sanctioned 'environmentality' (Cullen 2016). People now question the propriety of bans enabled under the guise of customary governance. As one young man in the Municipality of Ainaro remarked in relation to regulations on life cycle exchanges, 'It makes us sad, ashamed, and angry. We have to increasingly hide out in the coffee forests to carry out ritual sacrifices that exceed those allowed under the *tara bandu* law. If we get caught, we risk being locked up and fined' (pers. comm. Ainaro September 2018).

On the other hand, as described in the brief case study below, for other participating communities, post-independence *tara bandu* events and governance arrangements have been and remain a source of great community pride. There they are viewed as a tangible expression of a community's commitment and attentiveness

⁴ Meitzner Yoder (2007b: 48) writes that the formal documents known as 'letters' which are produced as an outcome of the customary-state collaborations in Oecusse have, over time, become increasingly detailed and elaborate in terms of identifying the objects of prohibition and the fines associated with itemised breaches. She notes, however, that in most cases, following a breach, protracted community negotiations were still the norm to settle a specific fine, 'indicating that the quantities outlined in [stipulated] fines often serve [simply] a symbolic function' (2007b: 49).

to intergenerational wellbeing and are valued as an explicit demonstration of the faith and efficacy of customary modes of governance. From this perspective, whether or not these *tara bandu* rituals and associated ‘modernist’ paraphernalia (written documentation, formal signing ceremonies, stipulated fines) are initiated from within the community or beyond is not relevant to the greater project of the pursuit of intergenerational wellbeing. Of more relevance is that the protective agency of the ancestors, animals, lands, and waters is being enabled and even brought into dialogue with the state, even as the latter are interested primarily in the deployment of prefigured environmental or ‘economic pedagogies’ (Silva 2016).

In the example below, we reflect on a post-independence *tara bandu* in the Baucau municipality in the east of Timor-Leste. In the rural inland Waima’a-speaking community of Bercoli, comprising one ancestral domain but two administrative villages, the most recent *tara bandu* came into force in 2016.⁵ This event followed the participation of senior elders in a workshop of customary leaders from across the country. The workshop was convened by an international NGO to discuss ways that they could best enable and support localised *tara bandu* initiatives. Returning from this workshop, the men worked with the Bercoli community on a nine-month socialisation process to negotiate the terms of the *tara bandu*.⁶

With financial and material assistance of the NGO, a formal 28-page document was produced outlining the specific laws that would be put in place. A community-wide *tara bandu* ceremony to ‘open’ (activate) the prohibitions was conducted in October 2016. In the written document, the community negotiated and set prohibitions that comprised: (i) specific activities relating to non-serious criminal violence against persons and property as well as theft; (ii) disputes over land, land use, and property (e.g., related to the cultivation of fields, water sharing, crop destruction by livestock, and unauthorised harvesting of forest products); (iii) destruction of public property; and (iv) matters of divorce, adultery, and family disputes. Basic principles were also outlined regarding the conduct of any mediation processes, the financial costs of each negotiation stage, and the relevant fines.

A village committee was established to oversee and implement the *tara bandu* that would stand for the next seven years. The committee comprised the senior customary ritual leader or *lia-na’in* (custodian of the words) who had attended the initial national-level *tara bandu* workshop and other senior ritual and political leaders at the village and sub-village levels, as well as representatives of youth and women’s groups and the local Catholic Church. It was also declared in the document stipulating that those who did not comply with the processes set out for the mediation of disputes would have their cases referred on to the police and formal justice system.

⁵ Renegotiations commenced in 2024.

⁶ Their first post-independence *tara bandu* was carried out in 2008.



Figure 15: *Tara Bandu* mother pole, Bercoli. Photo credit: Lisa Palmer

At the time of Palmer's first fieldwork in the community in January 2017, the *tara bandu* was anecdotally hailed by many local people as a successful initiative that had strengthened the communities' cohesion and commitment to customary regulatory and dispute resolution processes. Those tasked with mediating disputes were regularly being called upon to do so at the sub-village level, leading to many customary interventions to resolve disputes over access to land (especially fields) and inter-family relations (especially divorce). This was an important intervention as the period of conflict and civil disruption under Indonesian occupation had displaced many households and disrupted much collective customary governance.

Soon after the *tara bandu* was initiated, it was reported that the process had already begun to address these issues of social cohesion. At the inter-village level, two corrosive disputes were mediated successfully, including one arising from a violent incident at a 'friendly' inter-village, football match. The skulls of a buffalo and goat signalling the animals sacrificed to resolve the dispute were displayed prominently outside the administrative office of one of the villages. The ability to address entrenched and periodic social conflicts was continually referred to as a major outcome of the renewed *tara bandu* process.

In mid-2018, Palmer returned to the community, staying in the same household as the senior *lia-na'in*, who is also the president of the *tara bandu* committee. Every few days, she observed and/or participated in conversations between those

involved in various conflicts (and/or their emissaries) and the senior *lia-na'in*. By the time that his counsel was required, the dispute had become a seemingly intractable problem, one eluding resolution at either the kin group or sub-village level. The possibility of the issue escalating further and involving state institutions was by then also a matter of consideration and concern. Yet, in all the instances observed during this period (most of which involved disputes over land), the looming threat of outside involvement worked to bring the parties together to find a solution. People were keenly aware that state courts created winners and losers and most people preferred to find ways of living together harmoniously.

Other frequent callers to the house during this period were those involved in the reconstruction of origin houses (*uma lulik*). While this was not a part of the *tara bandu* process *per se*, it is intimately connected to the functions of localised customary governance. House reconstructions involve negotiating past, present, and future relationships among members of the village community as well as inter-married (affinal) and more-than-human kin of house communities from elsewhere. While these negotiations focused on matters of alliance and ensuring intergenerational wellbeing, like a *tara bandu* process, they also involved honouring ancestors, local histories, and the need for painstaking negotiations of dynamic house inter-personal relationships. Indeed, the commitment to honour relations between origin houses is arguably the true basis for a functioning *tara bandu* with its documented 'account' of the range of issues and conflicts that had arisen during the last two years. The *Lia nain* had previously mentioned that such a 'book' [report] was in the making and that the '*malae*' (outsiders) who had helped instigate the *tara bandu* would be coming back soon to collect it. Yet, by the time Palmer had taken her leave, the *malae* had still not arrived.

When asking a second time about the possibilities of obtaining such documentation, the *lia-na'in* replied to her in frustration that, 'You already have the book. All the details are there. That's all you need' (referring to the 28-page *tara bandu* document). Clearly for him, this 'founding' document, which he himself could not easily read, was enough to make the process legible, even though, as his comment suggested, the process of mediation was not at all readily evident. Along with the fact that many of the village's customary leaders are also illiterate, it is debatable what actually might constitute a successful or completed *tara bandu* negotiation. When is such an issue resolved or even distinguishable from other related and likely ongoing negotiations? The fact is that local commitments to *tara bandu* in this sense refer not to a clearly defined set of processes but to a whole lifeworld (or meshwork) of inter-relationships that remain for the most part opaque to outsiders. But clearly and for a variety of reasons, village authorities aspire to make their worlds legible and 'accountable' to the people and organisations whose help and resources that they need (see the challenges that this entails in Zerner 2003).

Customary communities in Timor-Leste are thus well aware that they are engaged in an experiment ‘across worlds’, one that strives to shape ‘how things could be’ by drawing together and at times holding apart the often divergent and conflicting logics that shape and cultivate new possibilities for the future (Salmond 2014: 304; Palmer and Carvalho 2008). While communities have, on the whole, enthusiastically engaged with the state and others to implement new *tara bandu* processes, we have seen above that the diverse contexts in which these processes have been enacted has required a constant assessment by these communities of the effects on more-than-human intergenerational wellbeing. This reflexivity and the associated need to continually re-negotiate ritual–political structures and processes in new governance contexts are neither surprising nor novel for Timor’s diverse customary communities (Palmer 2015: 174). Nonetheless, rapidly changing post-independence circumstances, aspirations for land and economic development, new resource laws and policies, and demands for transparent outcomes will no doubt increasingly challenge the possibilities of such collaborations. At present and beyond irregular one-off support for approved *tara bandu* events, there is little direct funding or material assistance provided by the government or NGOs for local people to manage their ancestral commons. As a result, *tara bandu* processes which engage government and non-government agencies remain a (less than ideal) option that local people may choose to ‘opt into’ and continually negotiate.

Conclusion

The aspiration for ‘scaled-up’ customary mechanisms designed to manage local and regional resources across Timor-Leste struggle to gain traction in the post-independence environment. While there is a broad spectrum of potential relationships, expected behaviours, and obligations operating within local spirit ecologies, only some are being mobilised to express what is glossed as customary practices of *tara bandu*. Issues of local governance are critical to *tara bandu* implementation and impact, but so too is the extent and style of engagement by other environmental governance actors across Timor-Leste. The remarkably widespread level of community support for *tara bandu* and its associated diverse practices currently lacks what is required for any regulated and successfully expanded implementation whether at the village or sub-municipality national levels. What is usually missing is an engaged respect by those in power for the context-specific, spiritually sanctioned, dynamic traditions and behavioural expectations that underpin local *tara bandu* institutions. As our examples illustrate in this paper, the need for these kinds of *sui generis* governance rituals to emanate from and remain under the full control of recognised local ritual and political specialists is

a primary, but much overlooked, principle of customary authority (and efficacy) across the country.

A further matter for consideration is that while communities will generally agree that *tara bandu* in its diverse cultural expressions, is a key mechanism for halting the indiscriminate felling of timber, burning of grasslands, and the excessive hunting of animals, the State by contrast seeks to impose a generalised ban on these activities. Thus, while both assert the need for *tara bandu*-like events to ensure community compliance, competing objectives undermine the very possibility of collaboration or of achieving environmental conservation via an actively engaged local population. This issue arises because of the inherent contradictions of purpose. For customary communities, the priority is to maintain respectful relations and exchange relationships with one another and the local spirit ecologies that inform and enliven social life. Under state conservation approaches, affording central importance to more-than-human, kin networks is considered irrational and rendered illegitimate (cf. Gombay 2014; Blaser 2016). The government, for its part, with good intentions, seeks to protect natural heritage values by a blanket ban on certain activities while customary community approaches towards conservation focus instead on reinstating and recalibrating relationships of exchange with a more-than-human nature (even appropriating state mechanisms to do so).

Customary communities in Timor-Leste have a long history of colonial (and now post-colonial) relations that continue to shape understandings of and approaches to their more-than-human relations. In the indigenous commitment to the recognition of these diverse relationships, 'the resonances as well as contradictions between different ontological styles are being recognized and new forms of order explored' (Salmond 2014: 303). It remains unclear to what extent customary pathways for governance will substantively influence, modify, or even transform existing models of state governance. What is clear is that combining formal state and customary approaches to improved governance outcomes depends on the ability of all actors to embrace a meshwork of practice that, in its continuous becoming, forms the negotiated outcome of multiple, diverse contingent flows and constraining elements. As we have seen above, when *tara bandu* processes are controlled less by communities and more by the state apparatus, they risk losing their generative qualities and constraining elements (presences, absences, blockages, bans, restrictions) becoming fixed orders rather than continually negotiated outcomes. Yet, despite this, what anchors these expanding *tara bandu* practices over time and in place is their continued salience for a majority of Timor-Leste's diverse indigenous populations. Across the rural spectrum (and to a lesser degree in urban areas), localised relations with spirit ecologies and their associated ritual practices are understood to be essential to the pursuit of group and house-based intergenerational wellbeing. We recognise that customary relations are always of

necessity, embedded in a flux of emergent processes across multiple bodies and times. It follows that the transformation and the renegotiation of power and ritual-political structures in Timor-Leste are driven as much by Timorese commitments to honour their spirit ecologies, as they are by the state-sanctioned intentions to harness or subvert their potential.

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Ambivalent ‘Indigeneities’ in Timor-Leste: Between the Customary and National Governance of Resources

Lisa Palmer and Andrew McWilliam

Abstract

In this final chapter we explore the broader aspirations and tensions between House-based orders and the bureaucratic impulse of successive Timorese governments to contain and co-opt these processes. Here we consider the distinction between two key *Tetun* language terms that carry powerful emotional resonances. These terms include the concept of *rai na'in* referring to the traditional custodians of the land and that of the *rai Timor* which speaks to the wider nation of Timor-Leste. The tumultuous achievement of nationhood required the active involvement and sacrifice of multiple traditional Timorese communities – *rai na'in* – to bring the new nation – the *rai Timor* – into existence. But while acknowledging the significance of what Ben Anderson (2003) has described as the triumph of ‘aggregated nativeness’, Timor-Leste’s nation-making agenda remains mired in the search for inclusive futures for its citizens. Too often governments overlook or subsume the sub-regional collective claims of customary communities to political and cultural rights, within the wider frame of the national interest. In this penultimate chapter we examine both the shifting ‘indigenous’ ontologies of local communities and the varied governmental recognition of ‘indigeneity’ thus illuminating the socio-political challenges of carving out spaces for plural identities and meaningfully diverse economic futures in Timor-Leste.

Keywords: Timor-Leste, custom, environment, development, governance, Indigeneity

Introduction

Since 1999, when the UN-sponsored referendum triggered the pathway to effective independence from Indonesia, successive governments of Timor-Leste have been engaged in the task of confirming the state as a legible ‘geo-body’ (Winichakul 1994 in Anderson 2003: 165), namely the discursive creation of territory, practices and values (Seegal 2015). Successfully achieving nationhood under the banner of what Anderson (2003) terms ‘aggregated nativeness’, Timor-Leste is Southeast Asia’s newest nation. Yet, as Anderson observes, ‘for the culture of nationalism ...

survival cannot be enough' (2003: 184) and as with all other nationalisms, Timor-Leste's nation-making agenda is now fully engaged in the search for inclusive futures for its citizens.

In this chapter, we examine the extent to which Timor's independence trajectory has included the active involvement of self-identifying indigenous Timorese traditions, practices, and priorities in the scope of governance across the new nation. By theorising the shifting nature of Timorese 'indigenous' ontologies, we argue that indigeneity is an inherently ambivalent concept here, both as a founding identity principle and a lived reality which is so often sidelined in the pursuit of more cosmopolitan and technocratic futures. By examining the conditions of post-independence environmental governance and industrial development, we highlight the socio-political challenges of carving out spaces for plural identities and meaningfully diverse futures in Timor-Leste.

The extent to which these struggles invite the politics of indigeneity into public arenas of discourse and governance possibilities remains an open question, as do other forms of sub-national or cultural framing of identity politics among the diverse ethno-linguistic communities of Timor-Leste with its 32 distinctive languages and multiple dialect chains. We argue that the term 'indigenous' can be used interchangeably with the term 'customary'¹ in Timor-Leste but it is not (yet) a term, mobilised as a vehicle for the politics of recognition at either national or local levels of civil society.

In Timor-Leste, the equivalent term, *indigenas*, has been associated historically with Portuguese colonisation and long held up as the primitivised antithesis of the colonial power's 'civilising mission' (Roque 2010; Bettencourt and Pearce 2012). Conceptually re-deployed and embraced by the emerging Timorese political classes in the 1970s, especially by the adoption of a formerly derogatory term, *maubere* (T. dirt farmer, hillbilly)² as a rallying cry, it was a reference that subsequently gave form to an aspirational Timorese nationhood vis-a-vis the Indonesian occupiers (Jolliffe 1978). Anderson's (2003) description of this coalescence of sentiment and resistance identities as 'aggregated nativeness' speaks to just that concept of indigenous nationalism.³ Yet, in the early years of independence, this embrace of a heroic

¹ As Barnes has noted (2010:14), 'Across Timor-Leste "customary" relations and institutions have played a critical role in providing communities with a sense of stability and continuity in the post-independence environment. This has been particularly the case in rural areas..., where the presence of national level "state" institutions has been weak, and where the legitimacy of local level "state" actors is embedded in local or "customary" institutions'.

² The female version of the term and mobilised in the same way was *buibere*.

³ Ironically fostered in part at least by the undifferentiated classification of the Timorese population as 'natives' (indigenous) by the Portuguese which served as an ideal frame for common citizenship upon independence (Merlan 2007).

indigenous rural identity, the 'warriors of maubere' (T. *maubere asuwain*), which had widespread currency across the rich ethno-linguistic diversity of Timor-Leste, has been challenged anew by a lingering sense of the backwardness and ignorance (T. *beik*) still clinging to the old term, *indigenas* (cf. Keating 2013).

Today, the rapidly emergent middle classes, prospering from the benefits of the nation's offshore oil and gas revenues (Scheiner 2015) and now building fine homes in the capital of Dili, are the modern equivalent of the colonial-era Timorese elites. Formerly, these so-called (P.) *assimilados* and *civilizados* defined their urban modernity (T: *ema cidade*) by their distance from the impoverished people in the hills (T: *ema foho*). Ironically, with independence from colonial rule the trope of backwardness, which remains both tangible (in terms of poor services, infrastructure, and economic opportunity) and powerfully re-imagined (Silva 2011, 2013), the State seeks to redress these material disparities by rolling out ambitious plans for regional development and economic transformation of the country (Meitzner Yoder 2015; Bovensiepen 2016). But despite all the strategic blueprints and infrastructure planning, the reality for most Timorese in the hills and hinterland of the island nation is that it is their own *lisan* (T. cultural traditions) of diverse, customary protocols and ancestral traditions that continue to guide the conduct of everyday life (e.g., Hicks 2007; Brown 2009; Barnes 2017). This choice need not signal a rejection of the possibility of effective state governance regimes and services. On the contrary, it is arguably the limited presence and active engagement of formal government in everyday life that has fostered this reinvigoration of customary governance.⁴ This was especially the case in the early years following liberation when the newly independent national government struggled to develop effective administration and programme delivery across the countryside (Brown 2012). These days, it is also too often the case that the glittering promises of centrally managed development (P: *desenvolvimento*) remain expensive unfulfilled technocratic visions with little tangible purchase or participation among the prospective rural beneficiaries (Kammen 2018).

Mobilising Indigeneity in Timor-Leste

In this chapter, we explore the implications of the ambivalent concept of indigeneity in Timor-Leste. If East Timorese have successfully mobilised this powerful sense of 'aggregated nativeness', if not exactly indigeneity, in their claims vis-a-vis the Indonesian state, we want to ask how these identities are being deployed two

⁴ As Susana Barnes has reported on the declaration of one of her informants, 'This is why we fought for our right to *ukun a'an* (self-determination). To manage our affairs according to our local customs and beliefs' (2010: 14).

decades on from independence. In contrast to other indigenous peoples elsewhere who have for the most part sought recognition of their cultural, legal, and political rights, even conditional forms of sovereignty without secession, the East Timorese sought out and eventually succeeded in achieving secession and independence. Hence, while a sense of ‘aggregated nativeness’ was of great conceptual utility for the nation, it was cultivated for specific nationalist and secessionist purposes. When we look beyond the aggregate, we can ask what has happened to this crafted sense of collective purpose.

Emily Yeh has suggested that in contrast to the terminology of, indigeneity, ‘[n]ativeness, at least in current usage, references a scale that is smaller than collective claims-making about political or cultural rights’. She argues that when Tibetans (who also seek a secessionist state) ‘make claims to political and cultural rights they do so based on their identity as “Tibetan”, rather than through their familial or ancestral connections to the land *per se*. In this sense,’ she writes, ‘they do not currently participate in what Niezen (2003) calls indigenism—the social movement of those indigenous groups who deliberately build trans-local and transnational alliances with other indigenous groups to achieve their own goals’ (Yeh 2007: 70–71). The same observation, we would argue, can be made about Timor-Leste, certainly in the past and for perhaps more complicated reasons, into the present day.

So how should the concept of ‘nativeness’ or even ‘indigeneity’ be understood in an independent Timor-Leste? Does the diversity of customary communities prioritise the seeking out of separate cultural recognition of their rights and interests or are their aspirations and sights more firmly fixed (for the time being at least) on achieving economic equity on the national stage? Should we understand these customary communities as ‘indigenous’ or ‘first nations peoples’ which, as Li (2000: 151) argues, conjures up images of the ‘tribal slot’ and their deployment in the context of specific fields of power, or do we understand them through the lens of peasant studies, as the literature from elsewhere in the world might suggest (Tsing 2007)?

As in neighbouring Indonesia, as Tsing has observed, ‘[i]ndigeneity is not a self-evident category... (a)lmost everyone is “indigenous” in the sense of deriving from original stocks’ (2007: 34), and for decades, the Indonesian government rejected the use of this term to privilege forms of difference from an authorised version of mainstream citizenship (I: *warga negara*). In the late 1990s, post-Suharto Indonesia, however, an alliance of groups of *masyarakat adat* (I: customary communities),⁵ came together under the Indonesian umbrella alliance, AMAN (*Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara*: Indigenous Peoples Alliance of the Archipelago), to assert claims for recognition, particularly in relation to land resources and

⁵ An Indonesian phrase devised to approximate the term ‘indigenous’.

traditional rights. In the context of AMAN, the notion of 'indigenous peoples' is a concept mobilised to network with customary or *adat* (I. customary) communities across the archipelago. But this is not an alliance that is replicated among the thousands of house-based 'cultural communities' in Timor-Leste. There is no comparative politics of identity promoted among disaffected segments of rural Timor-Leste. Yet, in the origin narratives and ritual practices within and negotiated between these Timorese 'houses', this appeal to and identity of the autochthonous custodians of the soil (Tetun: *rai na'in*) is the critical mobilising principle of local social and political organisation across the territory. It is also this notion of indigeneity, we would contend, that was effectively co-opted in the earlier political reappropriation of *maubere* (dirt farmer, hillbilly) and its deployment in the interests of nationalist struggle.

It is therefore not surprising, as many researchers have demonstrated ethnographically, that Timorese claims to localised political and cultural rights are mobilised through the Tetun lingua-franca prism of *rai na'in* ('owners' or custodians of the land/soil) (McWilliam 2011). The phrase approximates many meanings including living custodians or owners of the land, land spirits, and spirit custodians of place, all deriving from a shared understanding of derivation from the subterranean or 'other' world. While we argued elsewhere that these spirits are most often ontologically ancestral and autochthonous in form (Palmer 2015), Hicks (2004: 33) also refers to them as free nature spirits and agents of mother earth—often appearing in other-than-human form with an unpredictable and sometimes malevolent agency. In Timor-Leste, the conventional understanding of the category, *rai na'in*, finds tangible expression in a distinctive consubstantiated form. There is a human and visible expression embodied in the living senior representatives of the clan community of owners, and a second, mostly invisible realm that comprises emplaced 'spirit' entities of the land itself, including the collective ancestral shades of the living owners. In this foundational cultural construct, the living community of landowners (*rai na'in*) maintain a continuing relationship of sacrificial commensality with their spirit domain (*rai na'in*). In exchange for placating and feeding the emplaced 'spirit owners' of the land, the affiliated living community ensures access to its abundant blessings and protection as well as political primacy over its jurisdictional resources.

Among the diverse settlements of Timor-Leste, the population is composed of extended families and lineages organised around *rai na'in* (T.), origin groups, and thereby linked to particular customary house-based communities (T. *uma lisan*) and their associated local spirit ecologies and landed estates (Fitzpatrick et al. 2012). These exchange-based affiliations embed families in intimate, intergenerational, socio-political, and economic relationships of extended kin and affines with other houses. At a deeper politico-ritual level, the link between members of a particular

‘sacred’ house complex (*uma lulik*) and their associated spiritual ecologies of place, determines their social status including their obligations and entitlements within local fields of social relations. The issue is whether these people are socially acknowledged as *rai na’in* (original people of the land/soil), or relative newcomers to the area with subsidiary claims to the lands and political authority that devolves from the *rai na’in* group. When the latter are allied with *rai na’in* houses through marriage or political alliance, links between these marrying houses and their claims to resources in the surrounding environment are embedded in a continuing meshwork (Ingold 2011) and lifeworld of obligation and reciprocity.⁶

In Timor-Leste, customary relations of alliance and exchange are built upon and reproduced around symbolic discourses of socio-cosmic dualism or what Fox has described as ‘metaphors for living encoded in a pervasive binary form’ (Fox 1980: 330). These category markers of precedence are deployed in the framing of harmonious (and often contested) relations between groups that ensure the ‘flow of life’ for their houses over time. They reflect and reproduce the heritage of a broader Austronesian cultural tradition that all East Timorese cultural communities share. Expressed in Tetun, these distinctions include *umane // fetosan* (fertility giver/fertility taker), *maun // alin* (older sibling/younger sibling/), founder settler/ later arrivals, political authority/ritual authority (*liurai // lia na’in*), as well as a suite of linked botanical metaphors, trunk/tip, root/branch, and the replicating rhizomatic qualities of sugar cane and banana stems. It is in and through these cultural conventions around life-giving relationships that customary communities are sustained and renewed.

Timor-Leste writer and scholar, Josh Trindade, has sought to represent the foundational qualities of this customary worldview diagrammatically, by drawing on the Tetun concept of *lulik* (sacred/ritual power) that has local language equivalents across Timor-Leste. He describes the *lulik* as a philosophical, religious, and moral order that represents the core of Timorese values (Trindade, 2012). For that reason, it remains an important guide to East Timorese intentions and actions across all areas of social life. In Figure 16, Trindade represents the *lulik* circle in politico-ritual terms as a recursive diarchic model in which the concept of the indigenous (*rai na’in*), those most closely associated with ritual power, is always contextual and in many cases only realised in diarchic or complementary terms.

The recursive and relational qualities of indigeneity (Merlan 2007) mean that the concept is always understood as one aspect of a complementary relation of precedence, so the *rai na’in* always needs an, ‘other’ or a counterpart to confirm its status and identity. In Trindade’s conception, an inner spiritual and ritual power

⁶ For specific ethnographic examples of these kin-based ‘house’ societies in Timor-Leste, see Fox (ed.) 1980.

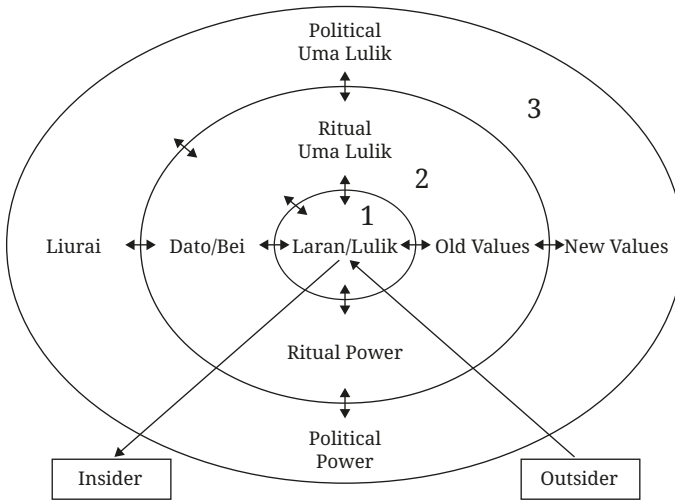


Figure 16: Traditional *lulik* circle. Source: Trindade 2008

(*lulik*) stands in a relation of precedence to an external political power, as in colonial times when the state (*Estado*) was viewed as the returning 'younger brother' in relation to the elder, prior, and more senior authority over the *lulik* (see Traube 2011). At the village level, local political leaders (*Xefe de Suku*) will often be counterposed to the local ritual authority of *rai na'in*. On a larger scale in certain contexts, the entire 'customary community' may be considered to represent *rai na'in* interests in relation to the state (*Estado*). The situation transforms again in contexts where the state represents the people of Timor-Leste as a whole and may be accorded the symbolic status of 'indigenous' representative of the nation. In this latter case, the power of the state is understood at some level to be underscored by the ancestral powers (*lulik*) which coalesced to bring the nation into being (a power which, in some popular accounts, is consubstantiated in human form by certain national political leaders, in particular the founding 'father' of the nation, Xanana Gusmao). Both populist and elitist political discourses continue to characterise the nation of Timor as *Rai Lulik* or *Rai Lulik Timor* (the ancestrally potent land of Timor).

As noted above, this dialogical and contextual relationship is also influenced by a colonial history of subjugation and disdain for the primitive. Portuguese, Indonesian, and to some extent the current Timorese state internalise a rejection of local traditions while notionally acknowledging their force in matters relating to land access. Culture is embraced for its tourism potential (the Department of Culture was until recently part of the Ministry of Tourism), but not for its potential in the implementation of social and environmental governance. Trindade (2008) argues that a new national identity (and state culture) needs to be built by

taking careful account and lead from these local Timorese paradigms of the sacred centre (*lulik*) and the recursive relations between insider and outsider powers. His observations and associations highlight the relational qualities of customary modalities for asserting landed authority including the discourse of origins (*rai na'in*) as a dynamic arena for expressing and contesting claims to place and status. But, as discussed below, it is also apparent that the impact of Indonesian military occupation and the long struggle for independence did promote new forms of imaginative connections to land and landscape, especially around the idea of the 'homeland' or *Rai Timor*. The idea of *Rai Timor* is one therefore that speaks to a broader sense of belonging and shared suffering in the struggle for independence than the differentiation politics of local allegiances and identities. Furthermore, the *Rai Timor* is not only a more encompassing homeland than the jurisdictions of local communities; it is also imagined in a different way, as a territory shaped from below, collectively, by the ordeals of 'the people', who become the active originators of the nation. If the constitutive act of a subject in the traditional ideology of rule is to make sacrifices in the pursuit of life-giving exchanges and to recognise and defer to authority vested in ritual and political leaders, the constitutive act of belonging to the nation is similarly to suffer and sacrifice for it (McWilliam and Traube 2011: 17; see also McWilliam 2019). The continuing popular loyalty to, and power of, certain senior resistance-era leaders is testimony to this fact.

Negotiating Place: The Case of the Caisidu Cement mine

To demonstrate how these diarchic relations play out ethnographically in practice, we draw on two case studies of the politics of development in the context of state infrastructure projects in Timor-Leste. The first example is adapted from the Baucau Municipality and a case study drawn from the region of Caisidu. It is followed by a comparative example from the Nino Konis Santana National Park in neighbouring Lautem Municipality.

In mid-2014, the 'barren' lands of Caisidu and nearby areas in Baucau were embroiled in simmering tensions over the proposed development of a limestone mine and cement factory. While the local village heads were reported to have given their support for the development, the two origin clans (*rai na'in* groups) with acknowledged traditional authority over the Caisidu region had not been engaged nor consulted. The relations of these clans with others in the community who supported the development deteriorated rapidly amidst acrimony and threats of violence.

Other people from outside Caisidu, while welcoming the arrival of regional economic development, were also concerned about the evident risks of the venture. It

was said that the ritual leaders from all the villages needed to be brought together to discuss the matter. Yet while they could 'speak' (T: *koalia*—ask for ancestral permission), there was no guarantee that they could ameliorate the consequences of digging up the underlying karst rock formation. It was said that local negotiations between the 'world of light' and progress and 'the dark' and powerful world of *lulik* (the centre/sacred/forbidden realm) and the ancestral beings who continue their fluid movements through the landscape, were needed before excavation could proceed.

The proposal developed in late 2013 included plans to mine the local karst for the next 100 years. Brokered by national-level politicians and bureaucrats, the mining venture promised hundreds of local jobs and economic development. While the local village heads were said to have given their support for the development, the initial proposal was only for an exploration phase. Yet, even before the required socio-cultural and environmental assessments of the proposal had been undertaken, consultations at the local level were not proceeding well, and apprehension spread throughout the community. Some voiced concerns that the removal of rock from coastal areas around Caisidu would result in the sea rising up to swallow all the agricultural land. Others were worried about movement of the *talibere* (python), a spirit being critical to the proper flow of the region's hydro-social cycle (Palmer 2015). Still others from inland areas feared that the quarrying would cause the underground karstic waters connected to the *talibere* (in this case the eels known as *marui masara*) to simply dry up. Still, there was an openness to inquire into the possibilities of mining, an openness framed by the possibilities that such an action might receive blessings from the world of *lulik*, the ongoing source of all life.

Much of the debate around the implications and risks posed by the planned developments at Caisidu was rooted in the particular historical context of the customary community at the centre of the controversy. Around five generations ago, population movements of people from the mountains increased in and around the coastal town of Baucau, and under pressure from the Makasae-speaking settlers, many of the original Waima'a speaking peoples of the area were compelled to move out. Waima'a houses subsequently relocated west and settled on the barren rocky plateau of Caisidu where they were welcomed by the resident origin clans of Wai Hau and Wai Luo (the 'mother-father' clans of the area; *woi-ba'a* in Waima'a). As the ritual custodians of the land and resources, these 'mother-father' clans carried out rituals and initiated the newcomers into the traditions of the area. When Palmer undertook research in the area in 2012, the people of Caisidu asserted that they deferred to Wai Hau and Wai Luo (as *rai na'in*) in all rituals or dispute mediation that concerned the land, water, or other natural resources in the area.

It was in this context in 2014 that a local community group called Kapeliwa was established, ‘to protect and preserve the Waima’a communities’ rights to their culture, development and traditional land rights’.⁷ Yet, despite their demands, the NGO campaign for greater consultation and information about the cement mine proposal, publicised through a ‘global voices’ network, did not progress. The group’s website was not updated beyond this initial enthusiastic post. Rather, the issue of who had the right to authorise the development continued to be played out through more nuanced localised processes. It is worth noting that many people in the wider Baucau area welcomed the heralded economic boom that the development promised. The slogan, ‘Your Dream, We Build It’, was splashed across the banner of the Timor-Leste Cement Company website. Others continued to voice private concerns that the ‘indigenous’ owners of the land (Wai Luo and Wai Hau) were yet to grant their permission for the development (*Rai na’in la fo’ lisensa*). Such statements, when communicated, are usually whispered pronouncements, a caution reflecting the dangerous qualities of the *lulik* (the sacred centre, that which is set apart and forbidden), and cannot be spoken about openly. The silence surrounding *lulik* is integral to its latent power and mystery. People were waiting to see how the ancestral realm responds.

In January 2017, an event occurred that rattled many in the Baucau community. On New Year’s Day, at the coastal site demarcated for the cement factory’s construction (an area now opened up to visitors by a new road made in preparation for the mine), a visitor went missing while swimming in the sea. For several days, there was no trace of the swimmer, and rumours circulated that the *Avo* (lit: grandparent, but in this case, a circumlocution for the estuarine crocodile) had taken him. Although the authorities instigated a search, it was not until a representative of the *rai na’in* group came down to the seashore to carry out a ritual invocation (T: *hamulak*) to the ancestors of the sea that the body was revealed or recovered—depending on one’s interpretation.

The *rai-na’in* had requested that the body of the unfortunate swimmer be returned to the shore, and within a day, the dismembered corpse washed up on the beach. The events shocked the community who shared gruesome images of the deceased on their phones, and much discussion ensued about the increasing incidents of crocodile attacks. In the past, these attacks were, everyone said, very rare. Now, they wondered, without publicly saying it, why were the *Avo* apparently turning against their people? For others the answers to these questions were only too (worryingly) clear, namely, that these *Avo*, the powerful beings of the sea and local cosmology, were angry with the development plans for the cement mine,

⁷ https://globalvoices.org/2014/04/21/east-timor-land-rights-australia-cement-plant-deal/?gv_hidebutton_used=header-banner&gv_hidebutton_expiration=30 [Accessed 28 Feb 2016].

and this was their warning. Unchecked by customary processes, the fear of ritual leaders was that an angered *lulik* would wreak devastation on all.⁸

Reclaiming Place in Nino Konis Santana National Park

Our second case study draws on developments in one part of Nino Konis Santana National Park located in the far eastern municipality of Lautem. During 2017, in the seaside village of Com located near the northwestern boundary of the park, a growing number of households from the constituent hamlets of Mua Pusu and Lohomatu took the decision to relocate their residences further inside the national park, being a distance of little more than two kilometers. Led by their customary leadership, many more were openly canvassing the possibility of moving *en masse* and in doing so, making definitive statements of claim or more precisely, 'reclamation' of their ancestral lands despite the absence of any official approval to do so and the real risk that they faced future eviction for ignoring government procedures. The developments raised sensitive issues around the enduring strength of customary claims in the face of the wider public interest and conservation objectives of the national government. For their part, the residents of Mua Pusu and Lohomatu were seeking to repair the dislocation in their lives following forcible resettlement to Com by the occupying Indonesian military in the late 1970s.

The immediate precursor of the decision to move was a development initiative taken by the national government itself, namely, to fund the construction of an unsealed access road some 4km into the park to a beachside area known as Salara. The new roadworks would be built on the foundations of a former Portuguese colonial road built in the early twentieth century, but which had long since fallen into disuse. At the end of the newly graded road, a luxury guesthouse was being constructed. Reportedly as part of a 'tourism initiative', it featured high-quality decorative, stone masonry sourced from Iliomar on the south coast of Lautem, electrical connections to the national power grid, and a series of bedrooms and well-appointed and plumbed bathrooms. The whole edifice is nestled in a dense thicket of forest overlooking a tranquil beach and protected, sea turtle nesting ground. Local people took to referring to the mini-Poussada as 'Xanana's place' based on various, unsubstantiated rumours concerning the involvement of a charismatic former resistance hero and key figure in national government, Xanana Gusmão.⁹

⁸ As of 2024, the cement mining project at Caisidu seems to be officially abandoned.

⁹ It is understood that the initiative was being developed as a tourist-related luxury retreat for special guests of the state and not specifically linked to any privileges extended to Xanana.



Figure 17: 'Xanana's Place', Nino Konis Santana National Park. Photo credit: Simon Connor.

The decision to establish the guesthouse within the park boundary also needs to be seen in the light of the rationale behind the establishment of the park itself in 2007. Created as an IUCN Category 5, mixed use, conservation zone, the government sought to balance environmental protection with continuing livelihood development objectives.¹⁰ Unfortunately, due to extended delays and a lack of funding, the critical process of zoning the park to reflect the intended mix of environmental protection and development areas has never been implemented (see McWilliam 2013). The result has been an ongoing uncertainty over both government development intentions and the extent of local Fataluku entitlements to ancestral lands within the boundaries of the park.

The development of the guesthouse therefore, along with its associated infrastructure, sent a clear message that, in this area of the park at least, strategic developments were permitted, and the area was not intended to be a protected zone with minimal disturbance. The former residents from Mua Pusu and Lohomatu took this as a sign that they could resume their former garden lands with attendant ancestral rights over their historical claims to this natural resource domain. This view was reinforced by the role of senior ritual practitioners from Mua Pusu who

¹⁰ The park covers an area of 1,236sqkm and includes both terrestrial and marine components within its boundaries.

were invited to perform a ritual release of land for the guesthouse with a ceremony known as (E.) *mua masule*, to ensure success and protection of the endeavour. At the same time, another element in this string of events that has guided decision making is the push factor from Com itself. As in many other areas of Timor-Leste where displaced groups were involuntarily resettled by the Indonesian government, long term entitlements to land in the resettlement areas have rarely been accepted by host communities, who typically had little choice in the matter of their placement and would generally be happy to see them return to their former lands (cf. Myat Thu 2012). This is probably a majoritarian view among long-standing groups in Com who regard the decision by their neighbours from Mua Pusu and Lohomatu to relocate their settlements in the park as well overdue.

In the years since the development of the guesthouse and the period of disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Mua Pusu and Lohomatu residents continued to quietly reopen and fence swidden gardens on their ancestral lands. In the absence of a clear and prompt regulatory response by the government, the piecemeal reoccupation has continued unopposed and new house construction, livestock pens, and the associated structures are once again shaping the ancestral landscape, reinforcing through practical action the abiding customary basis upon which territorial claims are made and consolidated in the area.

In a recent visit to the guesthouse (2024), the edifice had long been completed but remained unused and visibly abandoned to the elements. Meanwhile, the local owners of Kati guesthouse have built their own large new tourism establishment right on the lodge's boundary and now fully fenced. Thus, ironically, in order to access the 'tourist lodge', any visitors must now drive through locked gates of the Kati guesthouse, with fences and gates erected to keep the cattle out of the property (Palmer pers. comm.). The salient point here is that the case study reveals the inherent tension between customary claims to resource domains over and against the broader public interest as defined by the state in the establishment of the national park. In a way and similar to Emily Yeh's concept of 'nativeness' (2007) or Kaplan's (1999) notion of a 'sub-state nationalism' operating at a regional scale, the events in this corner of the national park confirmed the idea of a mythically constituted ancestral sovereignty, founded on both an assertion of traditional rights in land and a religiously based association of sacrificial connection to ancestral country.

The Politics of Indigeneity

What do these examples mean for the wider politics of indigeneity in Timor-Leste? As elsewhere, elements of an indigenous identity can be read as being deeply and variably implicated in the long history of ethnic and political diversity of the

region (Keating 2013: 12) and reinforced through mythic narratives of origin and place. Yet in contrast to the mobilisation of indigenous identity politics elsewhere, Timorese customary communities and their attendant practices remain, for now at least, ambivalently entangled within a hard-won national identity. While there are some low-level protests erupting against the prioritisation of national interest policies at the expense of all others, national unity and shared citizenship remain persuasive rhetorical principles promulgated by political and government leaders. They are also generally accepted or at least accommodated by the wider Timor-Leste population (Bovensiepen 2016, 2018). In other words, people are still prepared to buy into the aspirations of, and/or underwrite, the nationalist agenda and the continuing strong sense of ‘aggregated nativeness’ that infuses Timorese identities with a sense of unity (see also Cullen 2016). The politics of hope in the slogan of the Fretilin political party (T: *hamutuk ita bele*—together we can) remains an alluring prospect, perhaps especially among those who are yet to experience the tangible benefits of development and the long anticipated, drawdown of the proceeds of Timor Sea oil and gas revenues (T: *fundo petroleu*).

But there is also a discernible politics of fear which frequently silences opposition. One fear is that of being seen as anti-nationalist or anti-government. People know only too well the implications of these kinds of accusations from their experience of Indonesian times and the repercussions that could follow (Bovensiepen 2016). Another worry, as argued above, is the transgenerational and embodied concerns around the traditions of *lulik* and ancestral powers, including fears that certain ‘nationally authorised’ activities may translate into local forms of ancestral retribution. These are fears that cannot be easily voiced but remain compelling because of their immediate and potentially far-reaching impact. These ostensibly ‘passive’ silences and concerns are underwritten by a deep, active and continuing attention given to the way in which *lulik* powers might respond to matters that lie beyond the control of its authorised human custodians. Hence, in addition to human agents who may fear to speak, there are also, in many cases, a fear of the actions of silent, more-than-human-agents that ‘speak’ through the prosperity they bring or the devastation that they wreak. The rhetoric of the Indonesian era was one of liberating the population of the tiny half island from the shackles of Portuguese colonialism and the lingering ‘feudalism’ of inherited clan privilege. Fretilin, the leading Timorese political party of the resistance era, also railed against this same feudalism while embracing in a ‘trans-communal manner’ (Leach 2017: 230) a collectivist and communitarian vision of the Timorese. Fretilin’s co-option of the trope of *Maubere*, the resilient, rural peasant, was a concept arguably closer to the figure of the rural proletariat than indigeneity. Twenty years on from independence, the changing makeup of successive governments has embraced the free market, and while these approaches are generally described as ‘social markets’ by Fretilin

(Meitzner Yoder 2015), it remains unclear how these processes invite inclusion or negotiated outcomes for Timor-Leste's customary communities.

Early indications suggest that the massive infrastructure projects on the south coast of Timor (Tasi Mane) and the enclave district of Oecusse (ZEESM)¹¹ both underwritten by Timor Sea oil revenues, have provided windfall contracts for well-connected business interests. But much less apparent is the extent to which the massive expenditure has provided a commensurate long-term economic payoff for local residents or the communities who have been exhorted to embrace these developments. Most researchers are sceptical (Scheiner 2015; Rose 2017). On the prospects for the ZEESM mega project in Oecusse, Meitzner Yoder questions the priorities of investing in a few large projects designed to attract external investment opportunities when there is a critical need for improvements in local transportation, education, and health services (2015: 316). She observes that '(t)here appears to be little flexibility or responsiveness built into the plan to mobilize public monies to also serve the central needs identified and publicly expressed by the largely agrarian, rural local population' (2015: 316). In this context, neo-liberal economic planning and action appear to drive the infrastructure and economic decision making of contemporary Timor-Leste government policy in Oecusse. But there is a real risk that most of the impoverished rural population will not enjoy the promise of economic benefits and prosperity held out to them in the vision of Timor-Leste's future (see Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030).

A similar critique might be directed at the ambitious and hugely costly 'strategic' investment in the much-lauded *Tasi Mane* project—a planned industrial complex for oil and gas processing and supply-based industry developments in Suai on the southern coast of Timor-Leste. Designed to benefit from the extraction of oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea, the project was formally initiated in 2011 and undertook a series of infrastructure initiatives and appropriation of agricultural land for which landowners were compensated with payments of USD 3:00 per square metre and additional payments for the loss of trees and plants (Bovensiepen 2021). But despite much government rhetoric and the promise of prosperity, the *Tasi Mane* project stalled in 2018 with a change of government, and the supply base has remained undeveloped.

In 2024, there is little to show for the political hype apart from 25 odd kilometres of crumbling dual freeway, tendered and built to international standards, but now largely unusable and slowly succumbing to land slips and decay. Near the coast is the gleaming edifice of the Kay Rala Gusmão international airport, fully equipped and commissioned, but now locked and slowly rusting in the sun—a testament to

¹¹ Zonas Especiais de Economia Social de Mercado de Timor-Leste [Special Zone of Social Market Economy of Timor-Leste].

hubris and the careless waste of precious national resources. While the future of the *Tasi Mane* modernist dream remains uncertain, it has left a legacy of corrosive local politics and enmity as competing customary groups jostled for influence and favour from government policymakers (Bovensiepen 2021).

In these scenarios, the emergence of a more assertive and resistant customary ‘politics of the local’ could yet emerge—one that defines itself and its objectives in terms of defending ancestral legacies and the entitlements that demand due recompense (see Traube 2007). However, familiar terms such as *uma lisan* (customary house-based communities) and *rai na’in* (owners of the land/soil) may approximate the concept of indigeneity, but they do not index a movement or the emergence of a disruptive identity politics. They are rather a social fact, a way of being in the world and an approach to life that underpins the practices and dispositions of rural communities that have long provided the foundations of local governance across Timor-Leste. Timor’s national political classes and elites are all aware of these facts, but for many of them, the persistence of custom (*lisan*) and ritual exchanges that mark traditional forms of sociality are also ‘backward looking’ practices mired in ignorance and superstition, ill-suited to the challenges and opportunities of the modern nation. This claim, however, is a self-serving one to the extent that such dismissive views deny the basis of authority upon which local groups assert their traditional claims to natural resources. Moreover, customary practices consistently reveal themselves to be both highly inventive and thoroughly contemporary. They endure because they engage and adapt effectively to the changing requirements of contingent events (see Li 1999: 2), and thus it might be argued that the recursive complexity (and dynamism) of customarily configured insider/outsider relations is a key factor in the state’s reluctance to engage with customary processes *and* its desire to simplify state structures and practices.

Others have noted the current attempts by Timorese law makers to reconfigure local-level administrations (elected village councils/heads of administration) from their role as representatives of the state to society (as this relation has long been locally understood) to an understanding of village councils as the representatives of society to the state (Simiao 2017; Silva 2017). In Timor-Leste, the imperative to sustain a unity of national purpose requires a greater willingness on the part of policymakers and politicians to actively acknowledge and support the role of customary governance from which the resilience of the nation derives.

An accommodation such as this need not invite or exacerbate expressions of a political ecology of resistance against a perceived coercive state (e.g., Banerjee et al. 2023) nor the rise of more assertive politics around self-determination, indeed, it may act to avert the latter. But it does need to acknowledge the significance of older forms of authority and attachment to vital ancestral homelands as a dynamic platform for inclusion and cooperation within the broader national homeland of

Rai Timor. Time will tell what becomes of the ambivalent concept of indigeneity in Timor-Leste and, whether or not the existing 'pluri-cultural formations' (Keating 2013) are able and enabled to work from 'within' to reform statist orthodoxies.

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Afterword: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity

Andrew McWilliam

Abstract

The closing commentary offers some insights into the development of transnational work beyond Timor-Leste and the financial rewards flowing back in support of familial and home-based spirit ecologies of practice. The transnational chain migration flowing out of Timor-Leste in recent decades to destinations such as the United Kingdom, Portugal, South Korea and Australia, has been transformative for participants and highly beneficial to increasing numbers of Timor-based households receiving cash remittance flows. In the process, new avenues for the expression and maintenance of reciprocal exchanges are being created and elaborated. The capacity to accumulate sufficient means to successfully negotiate new marriages and attendant costs in obligatory and reciprocal marriage exchange payments (T: *barlake*) is one such novel outcome of this process (Wu and McWilliam 2022). Elaborate burials and reburials of fallen family members and heroes of the resistance struggle is another, as is the renewed commitment to rebuilding *uma lulik* ancestral houses. In these and other ways contemporary Timorese society has become open to the new possibilities and opportunities of the wider world. Many now increasingly look to distant lands as both a highly desirable pathway to prosperity and one that offers the possibility of building sustainable livelihoods in Timor-Leste and supporting home communities in the process.

Keywords: Timor-Leste, Ritual house, custom, remittances, economy, post-independence

In the chaotic aftermath of 24 years of occupation, rural communities across Timor-Leste have embarked on the long and arduous process of social and economic recovery. For a majority of rural communities, this recovery has generally meant focusing on the rebuilding of household infrastructure and re-establishing food gardens and livestock as part of a phased return to the rhythms of seasonal agriculture. In the early years of freedom with highly constrained government services and support, the revival of customary gift exchange practices through kinship and affinal networks of support has provided a sustained basis for restoring local communities and reinvigorating customary forms of local governance (McWilliam and Traube 2011; Silva 2013). These practices reflect the importance accorded the ‘return to custom’, that has been observed across the country with

its many accompanying values including, group solidarity, reverence for ancestral agency, the reconstruction of ancestral origin houses (*uma lulik*) as well as support for ritual leadership in the management of local affairs (Hicks 2007; Barnes 2017).

Two decades on from independence, our series of detailed case studies, drawn from different regions of the country, demonstrate that the renewal and revitalisation of complex social and cultural exchanges remain a lively and engaging process of the co-production of custom and governance across scale. These ‘spirit ecologies’ of practice, as we interpret them, extend from the micro-social dynamics of households and strengthened domestic economies to broader issues of social alliance, resource entitlements, landed authority, and collective endeavour. In each of the case studies, we argue that these themes continue to inform and shape the organisation of social and political life in communities across the country. They highlight the counter-intuitive idea that the inventive practices of custom are really, thoroughly modern and endure because they engage and adapt to the changing requirements of contemporary events (McWilliam 2012: 73). These observations are widely evident across Timor-Leste and have been the subject of sustained research and critical analysis by multiple authors in recent years (examples include Silva (ed) et al. (2023), Bovensiepen (2018, 2018b), Rose (2020), and Kent (2024). As a collected archive of ethnographic analysis, these works illustrate the rich diversity of experience across Timor-Leste as communities and households strive to secure an economic prosperity built around the enduring ethics of customary governance. Moreover, in the changing patterns of work opportunities across Timor-Leste, these challenges are no more clearly seen than in the flow of remittances and savings generated by the burgeoning trend in Timorese temporary transnational labour migration to countries in the region and beyond.

Spirit Ecologies and Labour migration

Ritual exchange and cycles of gift giving among networks of familial relatives are particularly prominent in rural areas where gift exchange and debt obligations have traditionally provided sources of enduring social protection for households. The orientation to what we call ‘spirit ecologies’ persists despite substantial improvements in the provision of government services including education and financial transfers to many households (pensions and veterans’ payments), along with a widespread commitment to Catholicism and aspirations for a better life. These modernist influences are especially salient among families looking to improve their household wealth and status, and who might be resistant or even antagonistic to the demands of village-based spirit ecologies, even as complaining about cultural obligations is often part of the performative dynamics of participation.

Another prominent trend in post-independence Timor-Leste is the movement among young people away from the family farm in the villages to the towns and bright lights of the cities seeking new experiences and wider horizons. Dili has long been a favoured destination for aspiring youth with some eastern municipalities of Timor-Leste losing between 16 and 20% of their population over recent decades, mostly young people in search of employment (National Directorate of Statistics: 40).¹ With another 20-30,000 new graduates entering the job market every year, the competition for permanent jobs is fierce, and many struggle to secure regular or continuing work (Oxfam 2022).

In the face of these challenges, the growing shift to transnational labour migration in the form of temporary and circular periods of work overseas is offering new opportunities for aspiring young Timorese workers. Like their counterparts elsewhere in contemporary Southeast Asia and wider patterns of globalised labour, common push factors in Timor-Leste reflect the persistent economic insecurity in the countryside with low wages, and unemployment as prospective migrants seek pathways out of poverty and alternative means to support their families (e.g., Rigg and Vandergeest 2012; Inder 2023). Somewhat ironically, however, their success in these endeavours, and their strong sense of obligation to support their families provide a growing and important source of income and financial support for village-based cultural and customary practices. The following closing commentary offers some insights into the development of transnational work out of Timor-Leste and the financial rewards flowing back in support of familial and home-based spirit ecologies of practice.

Post-independence Pathways to Recovery

Informal Labour Migration

Post-independence Timor-Leste has seen two major developments of transnational labour migration. An initial and quite informal process of migration to Portugal and especially the United Kingdom, had its unlikely origins during the independence struggle in the mid-1990s. At this time, post-Santa Cruz, many young

¹ Inder (2023) has noted that even as agriculture remains the largest non-oil economic sector in Timor-Leste employing the largest number of people (228,000 working-age adults), the proportion of the working-age population participating in agriculture (either as workers or subsistence farmers) fell by 23.3% between 2013 and 2021. The greatest decline was among young men in agriculture with a consistent pattern of high levels of migration from rural to urban areas (mainly Dili) and growing levels of international out-migration.

Timorese student activists came under intense pressure from Indonesian security forces and fled into Indonesia seeking refuge and protection under the Indonesian student-based activist network, RENETIL (*Resistência Nacional dos Estudantes de Timor-Leste*). Many other young Timorese studying in Indonesia on Indonesian government scholarships were also recruited to join RENETIL's political activities. Between 1993 and 1996, hundreds of these young *clandestinos* were able to secure political asylum and safe passage to countries in Western Europe by occupying a series of Embassy compounds in Jakarta. Although most of these transplanted asylum seekers (*suaka politiku*) began their expatriate lives in Lisbon, Portugal, over time, a few made their way to centres such as London, Liverpool, and Oxford in Great Britain where they secured local support for their cause along with intermittent work to sustain their campaigns for independence (see Pinto and Jardine 1997). It is from the efforts of these unlikely pioneering settlers, who maintained their familial and political ties to Timor-Leste, that the labour migration of young East Timorese took root and expanded (McWilliam 2020). The pathways to Portugal and the United Kingdom in particular, then gradually expanded following independence and especially after 2010 when increasing numbers of young Timorese pursued the UK travel option, emboldened by the success of pioneering friends and acquaintances (Wigglesworth and Boxer 2019; McWilliam 2022).

The growth of Timorese labour migration to the United Kingdom has been entirely informal and spontaneous, relying for the most part on word of mouth and familial connections. But its success and sustained growth have depended on a series of vital enabling factors, including, in brief: (1) the decision by Portugal to recognise all Timor-Leste people born before 2002 (national independence) as Portuguese citizens and hence able to acquire passports that provided open access and work opportunities across the European Union. (2) The good fortune to find a sponsor in Lisbon who could facilitate the process of securing a Portuguese passport for Timorese applicants. These services were often undertaken by expatriate Timorese relatives familiar with the Portuguese bureaucracy and willing to offer their services. Initially at least, this very much favoured Fataluku Timorese who had strong connections in this regard. (3) At the time, the UK was experiencing an economic boom offering significant and comparatively well-paid work opportunities for low-skilled migrants with marginal English proficiency. (4) The deregulation of global airlines by 2010 dramatically reduced flight costs, offering labour migrants cut-price return airfares between Dili and Heathrow. (5) Finally, the dramatic rise and expansion of global telecommunications, the internet, and social media platforms extending into Timor-Leste created the possibility of fast, cheap communication between migrants and their erstwhile families back home. The internet fostered new economic imaginaries for many aspiring young Timorese facing bleak employment prospects at home and with little likelihood of improved conditions (McWilliam 2022 for further analysis).

For more than 20 years, this practice of travel and circular labour migration has flourished and expanded as increasing numbers of young Timorese took up comparatively well-paid, low-skilled employment in factories, restaurants, supermarkets, and hotels across England (*Inglatera*) and Northern Ireland (*Irlandia*) (McWilliam 2020). Living for the most part in group houses and sharing the costs of food and entertainment, money judiciously saved from low-wage shift work has formed the basis of a thriving cash remittance economy (McWilliam and Monteiro 2019). Just how many aspiring Timorese workers have participated in this migration is open to debate. The 2015 Timor-Leste National Census reported a total of 5,350 Timor-Leste citizens 'living in European countries other than Portugal' which, in fact referred to the United Kingdom (National Directorate of Statistics 2016). But this figure excluded large numbers of migrants who, at the time of recording, were visiting Timor-Leste for holidays, family commitments, or taking longer breaks between further periods of employment overseas. The popularity of working in the UK continued to grow until the onset of the global COVID epidemic when international travel was dramatically shut down. Subsequently, delayed regulations governing the dramatic Brexit result in Britain (2016) were eventually put into effect which drastically reduced access to work opportunities for European passport holders in the post-COVID world. The constraints apply, especially, to new and aspiring Timorese labour migrants seeking to access work opportunities in Britain.

Formal Labour Migration

A second and more formally constituted wave of labour migration grew out of Timor-Leste government bilateral agreements for labour exchange with South Korea and Australia. Managed under the auspices of the Secretary of State for Vocational Training and Employment (SEFOPE), the programmes were designed to provide Timorese youth with work opportunities for skill-based learning and take on the pressure of unemployment at home. The temporary workers' programme to send Timorese to Korea was piloted from 2006 and formally initiated in October 2009 (Wigglesworth and Fonseca 2016). Under the Korean permit system, male and female recruits to the programme worked in agriculture, industry, and especially the fisheries sector for 3–5 years. The programme included a compulsory savings component which required participants to grow their savings during their absence. By 2023, some 5,500 young Timorese workers had participated in the programme (Tatoli 2023).

The Seasonal Workers Programme (SWP) from 2011 to 2012 was an Australian Government initiative promoted to meet seasonal labour shortages by recruiting workers from Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste (Thu and da Silva 2013). The programme targeted a range of approved industries including agriculture,

aquaculture, cotton, and sugar cane industries. From the inception of the SWP, the SEFOPE has facilitated a growing number of young male and female applicants to work in Australia, and the numbers have grown significantly since then given the proximity of Australia as a work destination and the capacity to return for subsequent periods of work with approved employers. As of 2022, Timor-Leste had enabled over 5,290 young Timorese to participate in the programme (Sousa 2022).

In 2022, a revised and expanded programme known as the *Pacific Australia Labour Migration Scheme* (PALM) was introduced providing employment opportunities of between 9 months and 4 years for low-skilled and semi-skilled workers. This has given greater impetus to increase the numbers of participating Timorese workers with a record 4,852 participants travelling to Australia in 2023, 30% of whom were young Timorese women, working in a wide range of accredited Australian businesses. The PALM scheme incorporates a range of policy objectives and compliance measures designed to strengthen business practices and support skills development for staff (see <https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/faq>) (see also Rose 2022b). Timorese workers are now engaged in many diverse businesses across Australia. Examples include seasonal fruit and berry production in Tasmania, Queensland, and NSW; egg production, forestry, and hospitality services in Western Australia; fisheries and aquaculture in the Northern Territory and South Australia, as well as seasonal agriculture and abattoir work in Victoria.

More recently in 2024, the East Timor Development Agency (ETDA) has initiated a new formal programme with Portuguese Fruit and Vegetable companies that holds out the real prospect of many young Timorese travelling to rural Portugal for work opportunities. Under the programme, the workers live and travel together and are provided with training by the companies involved. They are then offered employment contracts on a range of farms and production centres in the country earning substantial euro-based incomes.

These new and expanding overseas labour opportunities are proving a boon to many young, underemployed Timorese workers who are now earning and saving far more money than is possible in the contemporary Timor-Leste economy. Their efforts, however, come at the cost of separation from friends and family over long periods of time, and they often find themselves living in isolated geographic locations pursuing contract work and often with limited or no access to healthcare and other services. While the immediacy and benefits of the internet and social media help to offset these sentiments to some extent, for many there is a shared sense that overseas work is a form of personal sacrifice for the wellbeing and future of their families.

Growing Remittances

As the scope and scale of both informal and formal transnational labour migration has grown, so too has the weight of savings and remittances directed back to Timorese-based households by dutiful sons and daughters, husbands, and wives. Early remittance practices using Western Union money transfers have also improved and expanded as bank-based services into Timor-Leste have grown. A recent survey published by Griffith University (Conceicao, Costa Guterres and Su 2022) examining electronic transfers of remittances into Timor-Leste, provides insights into the remarkable scale of this monetary flow. The research tracked remittances into Timor-Leste over a five-year period from 2017 which highlighted both the growing size of the remittance flows and a breakdown of the source of funds.

The key points highlighted by the authors are that in 2021, the total remittance from overseas countries increased by 39% to a staggering US\$171 million (2022: 7). This was up from US\$123 million in 2020. The cash inflows have been rising by about US\$10 million per year since 2017 which, it is argued, reflects both an increase in the total numbers of labour performed by migrant participants and growing demands for support from Timor-based households. The figures reinforce the analysis that overseas remittances are now the second-largest source of income in Timor-Leste after oil revenues. The authors also note that Timorese coffee exports pale in comparison to these sums. At US\$25 million in 2021, this amounted to just 15% of remittance flows (2022: 7).

In terms of where the remittances are sourced, the researchers note that the greatest cash remitters were based in the United Kingdom and contributed 67% of the total funds. In 2021, the total inward remittances were US\$114 million from the UK, US\$34 million from South Korea, US\$15 million from Australia, and from Ireland just US\$2 million. Since then, however, due to the impact of Brexit work restrictions on European passport holders (McWilliam 2022) and the recent significant expansion of the Australian PALM programme, it is likely that the scale and source of remittance funds into Timor-Leste is now shifting with a gradual decline from the UK and an expansion from within Australia.

These survey results reinforce the attraction of overseas labour opportunities and their tangible financial rewards, but the data only confirms what young Timorese participants have recognised for years. In one of the pioneering surveys of the impact of informal labour migration to the United Kingdom, researcher, Schuaib, concluded that '(h)ouseholds' with members working overseas (were) better off financially by many multiples than households pursuing local employment' (2007: 5). This observation has been reiterated and confirmed over the years since then and undoubtedly provides the underlying motivation for so many

young Timorese to pursue transnational work experience. The fact that so many participants in the UK labour market, and now Australia, pursue a pattern of circular migration with periodic return for home and community visits ‘on holiday’ (McWilliam 2022) reinforces the point but also highlights the continuing paucity of viable alternative economic opportunities in Timor-Leste.

Remittance flows and benefits

The rising tide of cash remittances flowing into Timor-Leste is directed, unsurprisingly in the great majority of cases, to familial households and close family members. This pattern reflects the strong bonds and continuing sense of obligation that migrant workers manifest via their families through these ‘monetised expressions of care’ (McKay 2007).

To provide a sense of the ways that growing remittances are distributed, I draw selectively on the results of several surveys undertaken in different areas of Timor-Leste in recent years. One survey undertaken in Lautem with 70 returnee Fataluku migrants revealed the high priority placed on supporting the short-term consumption needs of their families in Timor-Leste—expressed as *attende necessidade familia* (McWilliam 2022). However, a significant number (30%) mentioned contributions to cultural obligations. These cash gifts are designed to provide vital support for significant household life transitions such as marriages and funerals.

They also extend to obligatory gifts as part of wider familial networks of exchange (T: *umane-fetosawa*) [F: *Ara ho pata::tupurmoko*] (McWilliam 2011). The immediacy of internet connections between Timor-Leste and the world ensures that news of important family events can be conveyed quickly to migrant family members along with expectations that cash contributions would be forthcoming.

Another poignant sense of obligation conferred upon survivors of the struggle for independence has been the practice among Timorese households for investing time, effort, and resources into commemorating those who died in the process (Kent and Feijo 2020). Over time as resources come to hand, graves in honour of the dead have become larger and more elaborate with epitaphs that speak to their sacrifice as ‘heroes of the nation’ (*Herois da Patria*) and Martyrs (*Martires*) for the cause (Kent 2024). These projects of honouring the ancestral dead have also attracted remittance support which enhances the reputation of the family’s commitment and their evident capacity to fulfil these commitments.

In a more recent and larger-scale survey of 417 returned migrant worker households (Saikia et al. 2022) exploring the experiences among returned labour migrants engaging in work programmes in South Korea and Australia, a range of consistent and largely positive findings were also received. The respondents in this

case were selected from across the Timor municipalities highlighting in part the broader catchment for government-sponsored labour migration than participants in the earlier informal UK experience, even as Dili remained the overall favoured residence among the participants.

When asked about the key benefits gained from labour migration, the majority response by workers and their households was to acknowledge the financial benefits gained (78%), highlighting, in particular, income support and the boost to their standard of living. Examples include responses to questions around purchases of household items using remitted funds where 80% acknowledged these expenses; 54% made kitchen improvements, 27% bought a vehicle or motorbike; 23% made improvements to their existing house, and 18% purchased a new TV, mobile phone, or laptop. The responses reveal some of the desirable contemporary, domestic benefits that the added migration income permits.

Another set of questions addressed issues around the direction of savings and remittances to the wider community for cultural ceremonies or events. Over half (58.7%) answered 'often and very often'. The most common occasions in this regard were contributions to engagements (*prenda*) or weddings (*kazamentu*) (40.5%), and funerals (*lia mate*) (39.4%) with more minor gifts for new births (10.4%), and end of mourning (*kore metan*) ceremonies (5.2%).

All these practices highlight the continuing significance of family networks of obligation and gift exchange in which people are embedded across Timorese society and which extend outwards through relational ties. The capacity to contribute to these group expenses enhances the status and standing of households across their familial networks. Even so, for many, the expectations to contribute hard-earned savings are high and often experienced as a burden among younger people. As one young female labour migrant returnee commented, 'when I got back (from working in Australia) my mother died so all my money was spent on the cultural obligations for my mother's funeral.' Another observed that, 'there is always someone with their hand out. If you don't have it [to give] then they say the ancestral spirits will come after you, or a curse will be put upon you' (Saikia et al. 2024). The spirit ecologies of Timorese communities, it would seem, are demanding fields where obligation and benefit are closely intertwined.

For those who remain in the villages, overseas labour brings economic benefits but also significantly heightened care and labour responsibilities. When a young man migrates overseas for work, he very often leaves behind a wife and young child. Over time, he may return for visits, and more children are born. He may then organise for his wife to join him working overseas, leaving grandparents and great grandparents as the primary carers for their children's formative years. The associated impact of these labour related shortages on rural Timorese agricultural livelihoods is not well studied.

Rural, origin house communities draw sustenance and strength from their annual harvest rituals of crops such as wet rice and corn (T: *saur hare, saur batar*). During these rituals, family members from across the country return home to participate and receive the ancestral blessings of health and wellbeing. With a diminishing agricultural base, the significance of these collective annual events may, over time, weaken the collective commitment to the spirit ecologies of the ancestral house.

Conclusions

The transnational chain migration flowing out of Timor-Leste in recent decades to destinations such as the United Kingdom, Portugal, South Korea, and Australia, has been transformative for participants and highly beneficial to increasing numbers of Timor-based households receiving cash remittance flows (see Rose 2022). It is true that long-distance separations from the interactive sociality of community life are strongly felt and often disruptive of home communities. Similarly, the extended physical absence of sons and daughters, husbands, and wives creates an emotional burden as well as constraints on household agricultural labour needs and the physical demands of ritual exchange and commensality. But arguably, these mixed feelings are to a significant degree offset by the generalised commitment to fulfilling social obligations founded and expressed through local custom, along with the communicative immediacy of social media and a thriving flow of remittance payments funding public expressions of group commitment. In the process, new avenues for the expression and maintenance of reciprocal exchanges are being created and elaborated.

The capacity to accumulate sufficient means to successfully negotiate new marriages and attendant costs in obligatory and reciprocal bridewealth payments (T: *barlake*) is one such novel outcome of this process (Wu and McWilliam 2022). Elaborate burials and reburials of fallen family members and heroes of the resistance struggle is another, as is the renewed commitment to rebuilding *uma lulik* ancestral houses. In these and other ways, contemporary Timorese society has become open to the new possibilities and opportunities of the wider world. Many now increasingly look to distant lands as both a highly desirable pathway to prosperity and one that offers the possibility of building sustainable livelihoods in Timor-Leste and supporting home communities in the process.

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Index

- aggregated nativeness, 159, 161
Ainaro, 14, 21, 71-72, 87
Anderson, B., 23, 159-160, 162
Arnhem, K. and G. Springer, 16
Austronesian heritage of ideas, 16, 164
- Babulo, 91; and ritual domain (*rea luli*), agnatic kin, lineage, source of the land, founding ancestors, 92-93, 95-96; invocation and communication with, 96, 99-100; ancestral blessings, protections and sanctions, 95, 100-101; and stranger kings, 103-107; customary authority and political-ritual ordering, 93, 106; overlap with state administration, 93, 105; sacred houses (*um luli*), house communities and ritual centres, 92, 95-96, 108; generative and reproductive labour, 96-97
Barnes, S., 11, 13, 18, 62, 92, 102, 108, 109, 111, 123, 130, 160, 161, 180
Barnes, S. et al., 133
Bovensiepen, J., 13, 16, 161, 173-174, 180
- Caisidu case study, 166-168
Catholic Church, 18, 32, 81, 146, 151
Cinatti, R. et al., 19
commensality, 36, 46, 95, 99-101, 138, 139, 143, 163, 188
- Davidson, K., 68, 144
divination, 139; and sacrificial offerings 139 – 140
- ema cidade* and *ema foho* as colonial class distinctions, 161
- Fataluku agnatic ancestors (*calu ho papu*), 29; and house communities, 30-31; sacred hearth (*acakaka*) 31, 138; sacred house (*le teino*), 32; social structures, 33-34; innovation and revival, 35-39; house construction challenges and post conflict recovery, 42-44; sacrificial meat, 44, 138; *nololo (nere ca'a)* death recounting, 46-47; and spirit ecologies, 136; power of *tei* (T *lulik*); spirit agency 136; spirits of the dead – (*ihuma'ara*) 137; *lupure* – protective sanctions, tensions over 143-144
fetosan no umane, 13, 50, 76
Fitzpatrick, D. et al., 13, 143, 163
Fox, J., 12, 16, 31, 72, 94, 106, 109, 164
- Hägerdal, H., 62, 117
Hicks, D., 11, 12, 60, 127, 161, 180
- Ingold, T., 16-18, 148
Indigeneity, 23; *Rai na'in* (land custodian) and *Rai Timor* (nation), 22-23, 159, 163; used interchangeably with customary; linked historically to the term *indigenas* in the context of Portuguese colonization, 160; as an ambivalent concept, 161; and the co-option of *Maubere* (dirt) farmer) as a rallying cry in the nationalist struggle, 163; the politics of indigeneity, 172
intergenerational well-being, 22, 142, 151, 155
- Jackson, S. and L. Palmer, 15, 142
- Kehi, B. and L. Palmer, 114, 115, 121
Kent, L., 180, 186
Keane, W., 146, 149
Koba Lima, 21, 113; the five domains of Koba lima, 115; and origins of Wehali-Wewiku, 117; the ritual centre of Fatumea, 118-121; the founding myth of Fatumea, 122-123; colonial history and political divisions, 123-124; returning to the source, rebuilding *uma lulik* on the borderlands, 126-130; accessing markets in West Timor, 131; histories of cross-border cattle rustling, 132-133

- labour migration origins, 81-182; labour migration to the UK, Korea and Australia 182-184
- Lansing, S., 16, 17
- Le ia valu (Fataluku)* Stilt house, 20
- Li, T., 18, 162, 174
- Li'an nain* – custodian of the words, 151-153
- Lulik*, 164 as a philosophical, religious and moral order; the *rai lulik* Timor (the ancestrally potent land of Timor-Leste, 165; and the idea of *Rai Timor*, 166
- Map of Timor-Leste, 14
- Mambai, 21; sacred houses – *fad lulin*, 71-72; *Maubisi-Mauloko*, 72; *Tartehi-Teliltuku*, 72; mythic origins, 74; constituting the domain, 75-76; *Kukusaen* – ritual leader; rituals of agriculture, 76-78; rebuilding sacred Mambai houses, 80-82; rituals of celebration and belonging, 82-86; rituals of renewal and growth, 88
- McWilliam, A., 11, 13, 15, 20, 34, 137, 139, 180
- McWilliam, A. and E. Traube, 23, 166
- Meshwork, 16-18; 149
- Metzner-Yoder, L., 17, 142, 148, 150, 161, 173
- Nino Conis Santana National Park, 169-171
- Palmer, L., 15, 16, 17, 25, 56, 68, 215, 143, 150
- precedence, 33, 44, 98, 99-102, 109, 113, 117, 164
- remittances and cash flows, 186-188
- Rigg, J. and P. Vandergeest, 181
- ritual communities, 19, 127, 147
- ritual exchange, 12
- Renetil, 182
- Roque, R., 63, 124, 160
- Rose, M., 173, 180
- sacrifice, 39-40; sacrificial offerings 137
- Sahlins, M., 12, 34, 106
- Salmond, A., 18, 154-155
- Schapper, A., 19, 132
- Scheiner, C., 161, 173
- Silva, K., 18, 130, 150-151, 161, 174, 179, 180
- Silva, K. et al., 180
- Simiao, D. and K. Silva, 18, 174
- Sousa, L., 13, 184
- spirit ecologies of practice, 14-15, 18, 135, 139, 180
- tara bandu*, 18, 22, 135-136, 142; purpose of, 143; government engaging with, 144-145; complexity and resistance to, 146; in Baucau, 147; as *Lubhu sari* (Makassae) and *Lebhu gege*, 147; protective agency brought into dialogue with the state, 150-151, 155
- Traube, E., 12, 23, 32, 75, 76, 82, 84, 88, 165, 166, 174
- Trindade, J., 17, 164-165
- Tsing, A., 145, 162
- uma lulik, 12-14, 19, 29-32, 76, 179
- Uato Lari, 109-110
- Viegas, S., 20, 27, 36, 46
- Waima'a, 20, 22-23, 49-51; house origin stories, 50-52; *lela ho'on* (fertility givers), 50, 51, 63-64, 66, 69; *wa'i-wari* (maun-alin), 60, 69; *dena'a* (kaben tama), 53; *umo kaisoru* (uma karau dikur), 54, 57; springs, 50-52, 54-56; house sacra, 58, 60; eels, 50, 62, 167; Bercoli domain, 50, 56, 59, 62; marriage exchange 53, 58, 63-64, 68, 72; house reconstruction costs, 66; post conflict and post-colonial issues constrain full recovery, 147-148; as a moral economy, 149
- Yeh, E., 162, 171
- Zerner, C., 15, 27, 142, 153