

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

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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.

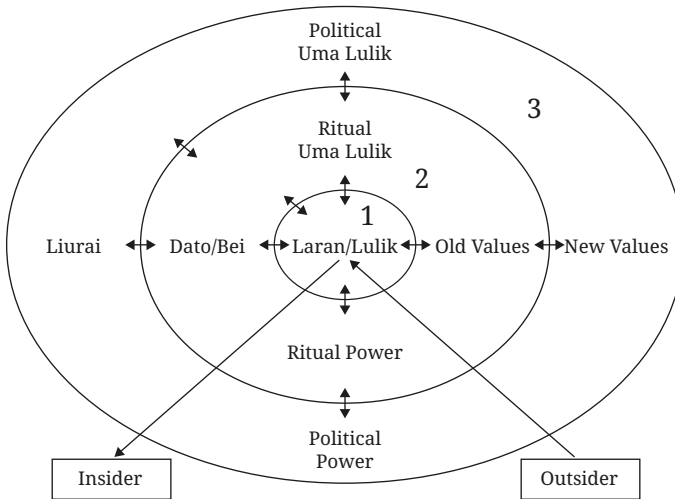


Figure 16: Traditional *lulik* circle. Source: Trindade 2008

(*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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