

Refashioning Fataluku origin houses

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Abstract

A prominent feature of post-independence Timor-Leste has been a sustained 'return to custom' across the country. This includes the phased rebuilding of clan origin houses (*Uma Lulik*: 'sacred house'), many of which were destroyed during the Indonesian occupation. As economic conditions improve, *Uma Lulik* are once again becoming architectural features of the rural landscape. In this paper, I reflect on the delayed re-emergence of the Fataluku equivalent of the *Uma Lulik* and the innovative changes that have been made to traditional construction in recent years. The changes speak to shared expressions of a characteristic pragmatism that epitomises Fataluku cultural adaptation to changing circumstances and the embrace of modernity. It also highlights what is arguably, following Gudeman (2016), a successful economic accommodation between mutuality and the market.

Keywords: Fataluku houses; economy; innovation; ancestors

One of the striking features of the post-independence landscape of Timor-Leste has been the sustained revival of Timorese customary practices. Susanna Barnes (2017) has described this trend as a 'return to custom' as the response reflected the limited choices that village communities faced in the immediate aftermath of the Indonesian occupation and the absence of functioning government and limited provision of support services (Hicks 2004, McWilliam 2008). Faced with few viable alternatives, a majority of Timorese households have stayed in place and embarked on the arduous task of economic recovery and re-building their shattered communities. They have done so by drawing on their own reserves of customary resilience, local resources and the enduring inter-generational relations of reciprocal exchange and obligation that have long shaped the sociality of their settlements and familial alliances (Barnes 2011; McWilliam 2007). Drawing on the language of Stephen Gudeman, we might see this choice as one of supporting the community base and economic relations 'kept for their own sake', in the absence of a supportive market economy (2001). Gudeman refers to these customary contexts as, 'high relationship economies,' where motives of mutuality, namely the meaning people seek in community relations and reciprocity, play a vital role in guiding

collective action (Gudeman 2016). In the context of the immediate post-conflict landscape of Lautém, practices of mutuality were especially prominent in the absence of operating banks, market trading and commodity supply chains (see Introduction, this volume).

Among the array of activities and household level projects that supported the recovery has been the well-observed rebuilding of ‘origin’ or ‘sacred’ houses, *Uma Lulik* in the Tetum vernacular, that have mushroomed across the landscape (Barnes 2011). Each House represents the focus of an extended kin group, originating from a revered founding ancestor (male or female depending on the mode of reckoning) and expresses simultaneously a social construction and a ritualised focus for the articulation of social relations and exchange among ‘house’ members’ (see McWilliam 2005, 28).

In a diversity of architectural variations around shared symbolic themes, the re-emergence of these origin houses asserts in striking material and public form, a kin group’s commitment to ancestral clan communities and the revitalised spiritual protection of its agnatic membership. An example of the intensity of these rebuilding projects, following decades of neglect and wilful destruction during the Indonesian occupation, is provided by Loch (2009, 99). He recorded roughly two hundred *Uma Lulik* under construction in the Baucau district over the two years of his residence during the early post-occupation period. The scale and extent of these efforts demanded considerable economic sacrifice on the part of the agnatic membership, to generate the resources required for both the construction and the demanding ritual costs that accompany the process. This commitment has been even more impressive, given the widespread economic impoverishment of the people at the time. Comparable efforts to reinstate *Uma Lulik* are occurring across the country with a similar kind of prioritising of scarce resources that underpins the deeply held esteem accorded these structures and their lasting significance (see Barnes 2017; Bovensiepen 2014).

Uma Lulik, ‘Houses of origin’ in Timor-Leste reflect local variations on a broadly shared Austronesian heritage of built structures where the particular configuration of posts, beams, platforms and thatched roofs provide what Fox (1993, 23) has termed, ‘a theatre of memories’ for the encoding and storing of cultural knowledge. Over generations, different language communities across Timor-Leste have developed their own distinctive styles of construction and decorative forms of *Uma Lulik* designs. Each provides a focus for the life cycle rituals of its clan membership and serves as a repository of ancestral sacra and other revered objects of venerated power (McWilliam 2005). The intense focus on *Uma Lulik* as a central structure for social identity and inter-generational, familial performance creates what Sandra Pannell has described as an “imaginative arena for living that signposts forms of social behaviour, rights, responsibilities and relations” (Pannell 1997, 165). Their complex symbolic and relational qualities speak to long histories of residence and

authoritative assertions of claim and entitlement over local resource domains. However, the process can also re-ignite old disputes and tensions over status and recognition among the agnatic group. Judith Bovensiepen for example, shows how Funar rebuilding of origin houses “led not only to the reproduction of previous modes of sociality but also to their reconstitution” (2014, 291).

The rebuilding of sacred houses across the settled landscapes of Timor-Leste has been a widespread feature of post-Independence and provides an important anchoring point and undoubtedly a psychological comfort for so many households whose lives were blighted during the struggle for liberation. But the process has unfolded unevenly across the country and not all customary communities have exhibited the same urgency to revitalise their *Uma Lulik* structures. One region of Timor-Leste where the rebuilding of ‘origin houses’ has arguably been slow and apparently not accorded the same level of attention as elsewhere, is the far eastern municipality of Lautém. Here among resident Fataluku language communities, whose distinctive and iconic house structures have long been viewed as the archetypal model of the *Uma Lulik* in Timor-Leste (McWilliam 2005, 31), redevelopment has been muted. For many years during the post-independence period of recovery and restitution, apart from a few externally funded project ‘houses’ built in the traditional style for heritage or perhaps tourism purposes, there were few new traditional style houses constructed. A scattered number of still impressive old style stilted, Fataluku houses remained intact and preserved, but they represented largely remnant structures that had survived the destructive rampage of the local pro-integration militia group (*Tim Alfa*) and the Indonesian withdrawal.

As elsewhere, the road to recovery in Lautém has been a slow and difficult one. Most families elected to repair their damaged houses to a habitable condition with whatever materials came to hand and then gradually improved the quality of construction as resources came available. Others constructed more rudimentary, one room, rectangular stilt houses (*lalu cu*) with split bamboo cladding and palm thatch or re-used corrugated iron roofs. Fataluku house designs of this type are still widely observed across the landscape of Lautém. However, they are mainly interim structures or stop gap measures while their owners generate the means to build in the now aspirational style of rendered rectangular cinder block houses, (known as *le varaca* or *le pitine* [white house]) with corrugated iron roofing (*kalen*) and tiled floors (*keramik*). It is only in recent years that a revitalised commitment to re-constructing the highly stylised and decorated family based ritual houses known generically as *le ia valu* (lit: House with legs/stilts) has emerged and with it, concerted efforts among growing numbers of lineage groups to publicly express their commitment to the built tradition.

In this paper, I reflect on the delayed revival of the iconic Fataluku origin houses highlighting a suite of factors that have influenced their re-emergence.

These include impacts of historical displacement and a gradual improvement in economic conditions; growing population numbers and the continuing vitality of ancestral religion, and not least, the advent of certain innovative changes that kin groups have made to traditional forms of construction in recent years. The changes speak to shared expressions of what I see as a characteristic pragmatism that epitomises Fataluku cultural adaptation to changing circumstances and their enthusiastic accommodation to modernity (McWilliam 2008, 2020). They also highlight the complexity of choices that confront contemporary Timorese households and economic ecologies as they strive to build prosperity and material well-being, while retaining their intense social obligations to customary relationships including ancestral ones. Finally, there is also the possibility that in terms of the politics of group identity, the delay in Fataluku origin house reconstruction may have more to do with prioritising the central role of the sacrificial hearth (*acakaka* or *lafuru tei*), than the material structure in which it is desirably housed. These are matters of interpretation and go to the definitional scope of terms like *Uma Lulik*.

Fataluku origin houses: Archives of memory

In her landmark study of the traditional houses of Lorehe village (Lautém), Maria O. Lameiras-Campagnolo (1975) charted in meticulous detail the range of residential structures that comprised Fataluku built heritage. Her study, undertaken during the late Portuguese period in the years before the Indonesian occupation, offers compelling insights into a time before the widespread destruction of traditional settlements and their residential dwellings, all of which were sourced from locally procured materials and laboriously, shaped, notched, fitted, thatched and tied together. From the humble and seasonal garden huts (*cu* and *mo*) to the grandly decorated and symbolically gendered, double houses with linked walkways (*le amaru*—‘twin houses’), each structure expressed in a variety of condensed forms the cultural heritage of Fataluku emplaced traditions and their rich symbolic associations.¹ To understand something of the significance of these structures into contemporary times, this chapter focuses on Fataluku customary ideas and practices associated with the house as a ritual and familial centre.

Fataluku refer to their four posted stilt houses with steep sided thatched roof and elevated living quarters as the *le ia valu*. This model follows a consistent architectural pattern and core structural features, but the finer details, arrangements of panels and decorative elements vary with house design (see Lameiras-Campagnolo 1975). They are typically specific to different origin group architectural heritage and ancestral histories. One of the largest and most impressive of these architectural styles are the imposing high peaked houses known as the *fia le*. The *fia le* house takes

its name from the distinctive black thatch roofing derived from the fibrous webbing that grows around the trunk of the Areng, ‘black sugar palm’ (*Arenga saccharifera*: F: *ma’arau*), a key resource for Fataluku households and one that is deeply implicated in the very constitution of Fataluku society (McWilliam, 2022b). The black fibre thatch has for generations, provided a vital element in the lasting integrity of the house roof. Four sheets of the thatch (80cm x 40cm x 3cm deep) are bundled together to form a large panel (*fia lafai ukani*) and dozens of panels are then layered over the roof battens and fixed with handmade *areng* and jungle rope ties (*taru*) to create a dense watertight covering that can last for decades with regular maintenance.

Historically and into contemporary times these tall, timber and black thatch structures that fade to grey over time, with their singular decorated rooves rising 6 metres and more above the base, are striking symbols of high-status households and the provenance of senior agnatic, land-owning lineages (*mua ocawa ratu*—lord of the land) within a settlement. The capacity to build in the *fia le*, *sei-mecen le* or *le lohai* (tall house) style was the privilege of high rank lineages (*ratu*). Conventionally built on the customary lands of the owners, each house has unique features and a bespoke ritual name that distinguishes its ancestral heritage and references the mythic origins of the ownership group (*ratu*) itself. The following example is the long form name of the *fia le* (house) of the Konu Ratu origin group:

Le lafai, Le pokala

Fia le, Taru le

Asi Renu ara, Ao Renu ara

O’o lo Kon ara, Moi lulur ara

*Sepe li ara, Kai ron ara.*²

Lesser status or subsidiary lineages typically did not aspire to constructing these structures, and consequently housing styles historically gave general, public expression to the ranking of social status between households (Lameiras-Camapagnolo 1975). A subsidiary house form was known as *Vata’asa le* (lit: coconut frond house) or with lesser status again, as a *Ver’asa le* (referencing their use of long grass thatch (*imperata*) gathered in open fields to create the thatching).³ Historically, these material distinctions reflected inherited caste-like status differences between the three main groupings in Fataluku society; namely *ratu*, *paca* and *akanu* families. The latter group is a ‘slave’, category with ancient origins across the region (see Chapter 4, this volume). During colonial times, war captives or households that became indebted and then indentured to more powerful patrons due to punitive colonial tax regimes have subsequently inherited that status. In the past, the *le ia valu* was a form to which most people aspired, but only the senior *ratu* status groups had the rank and means to build the *fia le*. In present day democratic



Figure 13.1: Image of twin houses (*le amarua*). Image credit: Andrew McWilliam.

Timor-Leste these distinctions are much more muted, but they remain important social categories with sensitive dimensions of difference between groups in a variety of arenas especially marriage and origin house structures.⁴

The size and expense of construction is one of the constraining aspects of rebuilding *fia le*, with their massive ironwood posts and beams, intricately carved timber panelling and roof structures sheathed in tightly fixed layers of black thatch. On the apex of the roof are attached elaborate comb fans (*leu loporu*) with decorated shell strings and large nautilus shells (*liliru*), and depending on the history of the group, carved wooden figurines or birds adorning the apex.⁵⁶ Each house expresses the public signature of agnatic group identities and, by inference, the networks of affinal households that coalesce around them in long-term relationships of reciprocal exchange and obligation. *Fia le* (houses) represent one of the crowning artistic and architectural achievements of Fataluku living heritage and remain richly symbolic and evocative structural expressions of their shared material culture. Many elements of the house, its verticality and orientation, as well as the architectural and stylistic aspects of construction convey multiple cultural meanings and significance. For this reason, it has long represented a key ritual arena for the conduct of performative life cycle transitions of the agnatic group and its constituent related households.

The construction of the origin house conventionally involves a collaborative project between the agnatic and affinal household networks involving reciprocal exchanges that mirror the pattern seen in marriage or funeral gifting and feasts (McWilliam 2011).⁷ The first structural element that initiates the construction of a new house is the planting of the primary house post (the ‘elder sibling post’: *tutu kaka*), traditionally a redwood or ironwood post (*ete materia*, or *fara*) harvested and carried from the forest, shaped and positioned facing the favoured eastern direction (*mua cao*—the head of the land). The process also initiates a series of sacrificial offerings and invocations to ‘strengthen the house’ and ensure the well-being of those who dwell and are protected within it. The following prayer is an example:

House and ‘nest’	<i>Le ho vari</i>
to cleanse,	<i>em varis em pai</i>
to strengthen	<i>em kesim pai</i>
to sacralise (protect)	<i>em tei pai</i>
so that illness and sickness are warded off	<i>nawar potina hara tana acone</i>
so that there is vitality	<i>nawar huhu meren ane</i>
there is life	<i>pupuk ane</i>
there is abundant growth	<i>lao-he ane</i>
there is increase.	<i>tune ane</i>

The ritual includes an offering of rice and distilled liquor (*tua harak*) in the conventional manner of presenting a series of small portions of food (rice and meat and small amounts of liquor laid out in a double row [7 x 2]). The offering is directed to the first 14 origin ancestors and the main house post is circled seven times before a chicken (*aca*) is torn open (to inspect its liver) and its blood is sprinkled over the offerings. A commensal meal accompanies the work on the construction.

Completion and inauguration of the new house also requires a celebratory commensal feast, with sacrificial offerings and ritual feeding (*fané*) along with the requisite divinations (*mu'u-fuka totole* and *lonia*) to confirm that all is in order and there are no lingering, unfulfilled obligations or errors of omission that might attract retributive spiritual measures.⁸ As a final stage, a house cooling ritual is undertaken that includes commensality for the participants and the splashing of coconut water mixed with blood (*vata ira*) on the walls of the structure and intended residents.⁹ Other protective measures include the placement of ritually charged invocations accompanying offerings of a whole egg placed over small forked sticks (*saka/aca*) fixed at strategic openings to the house. Known as *le o'o utu-natana* (guarding the door of the house) these devices are designed to ward off any unwanted malevolent forces (human or spirit in form) entering the domestic space.

Traditionally the origin house served as both a living space for senior households as well as symbolically charged repositories for ancestral sacra and protective regalia of the lineage.¹⁰ The most important element, however, was and remains the installation of the sacred hearth (*lafuru tei* or *acakaka*), which is always secured opposite the hatchway (*wai hula*) in the corner above the eastern facing support pillar (*tutu kaka*). Fataluku have commented to me that the principal role of the ritual house was and remains to provide a secure repository for the sacred hearth (*acakaka*). The reality is that the 'sacrificial hearth' is the primary focus for most households, more so in practice than the structure in which it is installed. It follows that it is possible to maintain the integrity of the sacrificial relation to the collective spirit world without the need to maintain an origin house (*le ia valu*). This has been the reality for most households since liberation.

The sacred hearth has the singular purpose of cooking sacrificial food and presenting prayers and offerings to house and origin ancestors, while enjoying commensality with immediate male agnatic kin (see Chapter 7, this volume). Sacrificial meat is referred to in parallel speech as *leura tei* // *ipilu tei* and may not be consumed by female members of the *ratu* lineages or non-kin.¹¹ Traditionally a separate boxed hearth (*lafuru*) is utilised in the house to prepare daily meals for family consumption.

In Fataluku cultural practice, the establishment of an *acakaka* is a gift from a father to his sons on the occasion of their marriage and the establishment of a separate household.¹² The process of initiating a new *acakaka* requires the passing

of a burning piece of firewood (*acakaka nana kafu*) from the father's ritual hearth to that of his sons to ignite the new hearth.¹³ The transfer is one replicated over generations of practice and means that conceptually and ritually all *acakaka* are ultimately connected to the original hearth of the founding ancestor of the origin group (*acakaka i irinu*). In this respect the idea of sacred hearth (*lafuru tei*) in Fataluku culture may be thought of as a conceptually distributed but ultimately indivisible protective and interactive field that extends across the living members of the *ratu* clan and encompasses group ancestors who maintain a watchful presence over their living descendants.

Over time, the development of extended families within the origin (*ratu*) group generates a disbursed but closely interrelated set of households with their own sacrificial hearths, shared family histories and a common identity within the group. In these circumstances, the *acakaka* of the grandfather (*calu*) or father (*palu*) of the group becomes a site where the sons and grandsons will gather (*acakaka na cuarê*) to seek blessings and protection through sacrifice and divination on special occasions, usually when there are matters arising that affect the wider group. These issues include concerns over illness, disputes and misfortunes affecting the extended family, as well as annual celebratory gatherings to renew familial commitments to one another.

The point to highlight here is that historically the preferred installation site of a sacrificial hearth was in its rightful place in the eastern corner of the elevated *le ia valu*, ancestral or origin house. For this reason, another name used for this style of house was and remains *le tein*, 'a sacred house', or an *Uma Lulik* in the Tetum vernacular, because it holds the sacrificial hearth. The apparent linguistic equivalence here holds even though it is evident that the Fataluku ritual house does not share the same attributes and centrality of the stand-alone origin group, *Uma Lulik* found elsewhere in Timor-Leste, often with specific named functions within a ranked ritual community (see Clamagirand 1975; Traube 1986).¹⁴ At the same time, its historical and functional role in social life remains strongly resonant.

The integral role of the *le tein(u)* in the conduct of Fataluku ceremonial life and religious practice came under intense pressure during the Indonesian military occupation (from 1976 in Lautém). Many houses were simply destroyed, or damaged beyond repair during the initial years of active warfare and the mass dislocation of local populations (1976-1978). This period was followed by highly restrictive movement and resettlement regimes, implemented as part of a sustained program to eradicate armed resistance and to separate the local populations from their Falintil relatives and *combatentes* operating in the forested uplands of Lautém district (1979-1999). In this protracted context of mutual suspicion and repressive control, one that included the promotion of Catholicism (over ancestral sacrifice) as the preferred religion of a modern Indonesian Timor-Leste, the capacity of

Fataluku agnatic communities to publicly perform their traditional practices at sites of ancestral veneration was severely curtailed. In the shared Indonesian view, any obvious continued attachment to tradition and customary practice was regarded with suspicion and people faced the real risk of being targeted as a 'communist' sympathiser of the resistance against Indonesian rule. In the face of persistent military repression and surveillance, for many extended families a focus on maintaining or rebuilding ritual houses was simply not a priority, nor one that was readily condoned by the authorities.

Ironically, however, even during those difficult times as the iconic Fataluku, *fia le* houses were disappearing from view, the occupying Indonesian government in a celebratory gesture promoting a generic Timorese customary identity was adopting the stylised images of the same structures.¹⁵ The distinctive architectural forms gracing the covers of government reports, tourist brochures and various public relations events reflect an unspoken appeal to an inclusive East Timorese integration within the Indonesian nation-state.¹⁶

Changing patterns of practice

The liberation of Timor-Leste when it finally arrived in the wake of the destructive withdrawal of Indonesian troops and personnel in 1999 ushered in a wholly new phase of independent governance and economic uncertainty. With the end of travel restrictions and intrusive surveillance, the achievement of independence brought with it a strong desire across the country to rebuild shattered lives and the familiar relationships of customary exchange that inform the conduct of community life.

Over the course of my field work and ethnographic writing about Fataluku communities, which has now covered over 20 years of regular, if intermittent field visits, I have written extensively about processes of social and economic recovery that have transformed social life in Lospalos and Lautém. Over that time, I had come to the view that Fataluku agnatic kin groups had reconciled themselves to the idea of no longer reconstructing their large and finely crafted origin houses. Their priorities simply lay elsewhere focusing on conserving the ritual hearth (*acakaka*) for ancestral protection. It is true that a small number of impressive new houses were built in selected locations in the years following independence, but the great majority of these were funded by external projects to encourage the preservation of Fataluku architectural heritage.

For most residents who needed to gather local resources for the task, there were simply too many impediments for such projects to proceed. These included the emotional difficulties of reaching consensus within the kin group about when and even whether to embark on the joint project at all. There is a strong Fataluku

convention that you should not declare your intentions to pursue a particular venture or activity if you do not subsequently intend to carry it out. Such actions attract spiritual sanction and misfortune especially in relation to activities that would arouse ancestral interest. There were also inevitable tensions over the shared costs associated with its construction at a time when general economic resources were limited. The costs included both sourcing the appropriate materials and a weighty ritual loading in sacrificial animals for different phases of the construction. At the same time there was a growing scarcity (and cost) associated with securing quality supplies of the heavy hardwood support posts (*tutu*). A key issue in this respect was the establishment of the Nino Konis Santana National Park covering extensive forest reserves in the region with regulatory restrictions on extractive timber activities (see McWilliam 2013). The desired fibre (*fia*) of the black sugar palm for roof thatching is available at a price, but the technical skills required to create a high quality steeply sloping thatched roof are in short supply. Finally, the commitment to honouring ancestral traditions also had to be weighed against the competing demands on scarce family resources and their aspirations for improved material well-being and quality of life. These tensions are a growing feature of contemporary social life across Timor-Leste where the expectations to meet customary obligations such as bridewealth exchanges (F: *valahana*, T: *bar-lake*) and elaborate funeral gifts, challenge the aspirational desire among Timorese families for self-provisioning and enjoyment of consumer goods and other markers of economic distinction (see Hicks 2012; Niner 2012; Silva 2018). In Lautém these confounding issues appeared to outweigh the customary imperative to install the sacred hearth (*lafuru tei*) of the *ratu* lineage in a finely crafted and symbolically charged, traditional stilt house.

However, as it turns out I was premature in my judgement on this matter, and over the past few years of travelling around Lautém, there has evidently been a growing number of the striking Fataluku stilt houses (re)-appearing in villages across the municipality. Their visibility is made more apparent with new constructions in relocated villages that line the main roads. The elegantly shaped buildings are immediately recognisable but often with a striking (purists would say, scandalous), modification of the traditional structure. In place of the thick black *fia* roof thatch are sheets of variably blackened corrugated iron roofing (*kalen*); and instead of the massive, hand carved support posts (*tutu*) with their encircling rectangular, carved wooden disks (*sala fuka*) and heavy timber cross beams (*fatu, pokala*), the whole base structure is at times fashioned out of moulded concrete.¹⁷ The effect is striking in its strong resemblance to the general appearance of the original timber and thatch models, especially as many of the new versions incorporate the older decorated panels and timber beams, reclaimed from the superstructures of previous traditional houses that had fallen into disrepair. This work of reclamation and reinstating



Figure 13.2 and 13.3. New style *Le ia valu* houses. Image credits: Andrew McWilliam.

original elements of the former ritual house into the new structure is a vital element of continuity and the symbolic transfer of protective ancestral authority.

In observing the emergence of this contemporary interpretation of the customary house, it was apparent that Fataluku agnatic groups may have resolved a series of long-standing concerns that have impeded its (re)appearance. The first concern was a practical one, given the propensity of the original building style to deteriorate over time in the tropical monsoon climate, especially without careful and costly maintenance. Thatched rooves rot and lose their waterproof qualities over time, as do support pillars, driven into the ground they gradually succumb to processes of decay and borer attack. The lack of alternative options may have constrained any enthusiastic prioritising of construction. But the recent appearance of relatively cheap corrugated iron sheeting available through an influx of Chinese traders in the markets of Lospalos and the now wide availability of imported cement and steel reinforcing from Indonesia, offered the prospect of a cheaper and more durable solution to the problem. These market developments were evidently not lost on many attentive Fataluku families, who were seeking to re-constitute their ancestrally authorised ritual centres for the celebration of agnatic solidarity and the social prestige and recognition that accompanies their restoration.

The next important requirement for ritual house reconstruction was the need to assemble sufficient resources and labour commitments from within the local kin group. The general absence of paid work opportunities in the local economy and a reliance on near-subsistence agriculture to provide sufficient food stocks and

resources to participate in obligatory social exchanges, may have all contributed to lengthy delays in the building of new origin house forms. But here again, two significant developments in Fataluku household domestic economies changed their fortunes. The first was a decision by the National government to pay old age pensions and cash compensation to the families of former resistance fighters (*vet-eranus*) who died fighting for national independence (Wallis 2015; Roll 2018). Many Fataluku families in Lautém and Dili benefitted from these direct social transfers and allowed them to cover household consumption costs. But of much greater financial benefit has been the dramatic expansion of informal labour migration to the United Kingdom (Britain) where some thousands of aspiring young Fataluku have been working in Britain on Portuguese passports, across a range of comparatively well paid, unskilled factory and services sector jobs. The savings generated from this work has seen a regular and very welcome flow of US dollars remitted to grateful family members in Dili and Lospalos (see Chapter 12, this volume; also McWilliam 2012; McWilliam and Monteiro 2019, McWilliam 2022a).

Much of this income has been allocated to immediate household priorities (especially consumption, education support for siblings, residential house repair and construction). There have also been funds available for cultural obligations and ceremonial activities (marriages, funerals, grave construction) that include the restoration of lineage based ritual houses. Putting this another way, the fruits of labour generated in the market economy of the United Kingdom have contributed the means to re-invest in the mutuality of ancestral traditions in Timor-Leste.

Overcoming financial constraints to construction may have changed the equation in relation to reinstating Fataluku origin houses, but there remained a third important dimension and challenge to finalise traditional house construction projects. This was the question of whether the ancestors (*kaka ho pal // calu ho papu*) would approve of the adaptive departure from the traditional building forms and techniques of the Fataluku ritual house. These structures are after all, culturally infused archives of human habitation and ritual knowledge. They serve as vital centres of protective ritual blessings for the agnatic community and via the transformative power of the sacred hearth (*lafuru tei*), a focus for the sacrificial feeding (*fané*) of house ancestors. Errors of omission or transgression of customary forms and ritual practice, risk spiritual retribution or misfortune in varying ways. Furthermore, most people are naturally cautious about changing well-established conventions, particularly the canonical stylistic features of named and ancestrally protected structures. Elsewhere in Timor-Leste, the idea of building *Uma Lulik* with concrete and corrugated iron is strongly resisted out of fear of retribution from angry ancestors.¹⁸ There are similarly Fataluku cultural advocates and general observers of these developments who remain uncomfortable and unconvinced about the new trend, considering the innovation a risky practice that may yet rebound on those

involved in the form of illness, misfortune and loss. One of the people I canvassed on this issue dismissed the trend as a form of household display of financial capacity and group aggrandisement. “But it makes no difference”, he added, “because everyone knows who they are”, referring to their existing social status.

However, in what I take to be an openness on the part of Fataluku culture for adaptive accommodation to contingent events and embracing new opportunities, the ‘modern’ style of construction appears to be readily accepted by many household groups, and so far at least without mishap. The use of the new materials still requires ancestral permission or at least their acquiescence via divinatory signs, for the integration of the new materials. But in the cases where I have sought confirmation on this point, there have been no outright refusals. One house member offered the insight that when they sought guidance through divination (*ari toto*—liver divination) about the use of the corrugated iron roofing, the initial red and white coloured sheets were rejected. Subsequently the idea of painting the roofing sheets black to mimic the *fia* thatch was accepted. 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* and invite their assistance’. Another interlocutor suggested that there was likely an element of prestige, pride and public signalling in being able to display a fine new *le ia valu*. At this point then, it seems that an innovation to a long-established set of customary procedures and protocols has been realised and provisionally accepted. It announces in a modified but celebratory way, the revival of the uniquely styled, Fataluku origin house.

Balancing pragmatism and preservation

The quiet reappearance of Fataluku *le ia valu* across the settled landscapes of Lautém, albeit in modified form that seeks to emulate traditional structural features and aesthetics while utilising new technologies and materials, signals a new phase in the process of post-conflict recovery. The changes to traditional structures arguably speak to a cultural pragmatism that epitomises Fataluku historical accommodations to processes of change and modernity. Having reached a point where immediate household needs and aspirations were now adequately realised, attention has focused on a renewed commitment to revitalising ancestral traditions as part of the age-old Fataluku concerns with health and well-being (McWilliam 2008). In this process, ‘modern’ technology has played a crucial role.

I have focused in this chapter on the re-emergence of the agnatic, origin group ritual house (*le ia valu*) as the obligatory repository for the sacrificial hearth (*acakaka*) and other sacra. It forms a key site for offerings and prayers directed to

the health of family members secured through the protective agency of ancestral blessings. The process of restoration has required a significant commitment on the part of related households and familial networks, providing household and group resources to projects for the common good. In Gudeman's terms, the interactive dialectic between mutuality and the market has found common ground in a shared commitment to reinstate the sacred house and with it, a public (re)affirmation of group identities and the ancestral spiritual commons on which they depend. The result is the re-creation of ritually potent and materially striking built structures for the celebration of life cycle transitions, especially the public formalisation of marriage alliances and the commemoration of death including the ritual curation of deceased souls (*i huma'ara*) into the ancestral collective (*calu ho papu*).¹⁹²⁰ But I would go further than this and suggest that the recent enthusiasm for re-instating origin houses as a focal feature for ceremonial life is but one aspect of an extended process of restoring Fataluku ancestral spirit ecologies into mainstream social and economic life (Palmer 2015). Fataluku have always directed significant resources to funerals and the commemoration of the death of loved ones, given the importance placed on their continuing protective agency as ancestral spirit guardians. The renewed desire to construct ritual houses has been accompanied by a gradual but marked increase in the scale and elaboration of a family member's grave. As household incomes and discretionary resources have improved, so too has the desire to honour the dead through investments in expensive graves and richly decorated memorials that highlight in a very public way, both the heartfelt expression of the family's loss but also the extent of resources assembled to honour their passing. Similar kinds of private commemorative projects have been extended to the remains of relatives and loved ones who suffered and died in the struggle for independence; their former simple graves constructed in a time of deprivation and shortage are now subject to expensive renovations and refurbishment in projects of redemption and care. But rites of death are also constitutive of social life (Grenfell 2012, 86), bringing together networks of kin and their affinal connections in obligatory gift exchange and commensality that extends to the ancestors of the house.

It is also worth noting here that the sustained revival of customary practices need not be seen as a turning away from the doctrines and ideologies of Catholicism towards a more animistic embrace of ritual sacrifice. Fataluku, like many Timorese communities (Grenfell 2012; Rosa 2019) have been able to accommodate both forms of religious practice as complementary and mutually reinforcing expressions of protective power, despite misgivings among the Catholic priesthood (Viegas and Feijó 2019; Bovensiepen and Rosa 2016). One only needs to witness the enthusiastic support offered by Fataluku families during the periodic overnight visits of saintly effigies and statues (*Nossa Senhora* or *Kristu Rei*) when they make their much anticipated rounds of the district. In the all-night vigils and prayers of the faithful

culminating in a thanksgiving service (*Missa agradementu*) for the forgiveness of sins and the healing of the sick and infirm, the Fataluku embrace of Catholicism is clearly and genuinely felt. It provides a now familiar and comforting set of practices in the social life of village communities that cohabit (Viegas and Feijó 2017) with the ancestral presence and the interactive benefits and mutual obligations that the enlivened spirit world confers.

Across Timor-Leste, customary communities continue their engagement with the rebuilding and restoration of their ancestral house traditions, especially the built form referred to as the *Uma Lulik* or 'sacred house.' The range and material expression of these structures of sociality are highly variable and reflect the specific ethno-linguistic traditions of their source communities. Their progressive re-appearance across the landscape highlights the high esteem and value attributed to their symbolic status as both a source and reflection of social identity, and the readiness of origin groups to commit limited resources to their reconstruction. I have argued that Fataluku origin houses share a range of attributes with the *Uma Lulik* traditions of Timor-Leste, but also significant differences, particularly with the central focus accorded to the sacred hearth (*lafuru tei* or *acakaka*) that instantiates the house as a *le tein* (*Uma Lulik*). In the end however, for Fataluku it is not so much the structural form sheltering the sacrificial hearth that matters, but rather the communicative value of the sacred hearth as a medium for invocation to and intercession of group ancestors.

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Notes

- ¹ Structures known as *cu* and *mo* are associated with simpler built forms made of timber and bamboo frames with loosely tied thatch. A *cu* is a basic residential structure within a settlement (*lata*) and may also be elevated on timber poles (*lalu cu*). The *mo* is usually associated with seasonal dwellings erected outside or on the edge of the settled areas. Garden huts (*pala mo*) or camps associated with the distillation of palm liquor (*tua mo*) are examples (see McWilliam 2022b).

- ² The *pokala* refer to the two large round 'head beams' that form the major structural cross beams and rest on the *fata* timber beams above the four supporting house columns. The term *taru le* means 'the tied house' and refers to the strong *areng* palm twisted black rope that secures the structural features in place.
- ³ There is some variation across Lautém on this matter, in drier areas where areng palm is not abundant, the use of coconut or lontar palm thatch was substituted.
- ⁴ These distinctions are not formally observed in contemporary housing styles, although relative wealth differences between *ratu*, *paca* and *akanu* households can be reflected in the scale and style of their respective housing choices.
- ⁵ The term *leu loporu* refers to a flowering plant in the forest with large cup-like flowers, that resemble the cone style structures that cap the roof.
- ⁶ In former times of endemic and internecine warfare, reportedly bleached human skulls (*cao hafa*), the result of victorious, headhunting raids sometimes were used to decorate the roof thatch (F. Santana, pers. comm.).
- ⁷ They comprise the agnatic 'brothers and fathers' (*kaka ho pale*), friends and acquaintances (*lan ho tava*) of the sponsoring house, and the affinal, 'sisters and children' (*leren ho moco*) and 'brothers-in-law and uncles' (*vain ho paien[ui]*). The groups exchange reciprocal gifts with one another—pigs and textiles flow from the sponsoring house to their daughters and husbands (*tupurmoko*) and buffalo and gold/money are reciprocated to the woman's natal house of origin (*omara/ara ho pata*).
- ⁸ These and other forms of divination remain important diagnostic techniques for ensuring the safety or appropriateness of courses of action (see McWilliam 2008).
- ⁹ The action mimics the use of Catholic holy water for religious blessings of new houses highlighting the historical influence of Catholic practices and expressive forms that by association have been integrated into the ritual techniques of the ancestral religion (see Rosa 2019 for discussion).
- ¹⁰ The traditional large *fia le* style house could also include an inbuilt, boxed framed storage structure under the main floor of the building with access from above via a trap door.
- ¹¹ Sacrificial meat is taken from the thorax and internal organs of the animal—boiled and roasted and cut into smaller portions to be served on shallow plaited trays (*neru moko*) to the male members of the *ratu* group.
- ¹² Unmarried sons will make use of their father's or older brother's sacrificial hearth.
- ¹³ It is conventional for the youngest son (*moco vehula*) to inherit the house and *acakaka* of his father upon the latter's death. If a man has no sons, his *acakaka* will be closed down and laid to rest on his grave following death.
- ¹⁴ I note that Fataluku also use the phrase *le tein(u)* (sacred house) in reference to a Catholic Church and its priests as *ma'a tei*, loosely translated as 'man of the *lulik*'. Similarly, a very old ritual house which contains the sacred objects and other potent symbols of power, may be referred to as the 'sacred house' (*le tein*) for a dispersed clan group.
- ¹⁵ In the early 1980s in a demonstration of defiance by the armed Falintil resistance, many of the iconic Fataluku *le ia valu* were torched in strategic raids on Fataluku settlements to demonstrate to the Indonesians that their resolve and capacity for resistance was undiminished.
- ¹⁶ The same gestural reflex is observable in contemporary, post-Independence, Timor-Leste where the state has adopted a similar appropriation of Fataluku *fia le* images for their own promotional purposes.
- ¹⁷ A structure to stop rats climbing into the house and despoiling stored food and grain.
- ¹⁸ Changing times however, can prompt a rethink of older practices as in the recent trend among Mambai *Uma Lulik* (*fad luli*) in Ainaru to install reinforced concrete support pillars in their otherwise intricately worked traditional timber and thatch houses. The thinking here is that the

innovation will guarantee structural integrity and facilitate easier maintenance of the overall structure in the years to come.

- ¹⁹ Ceremonial activities focused on the origin house combine the ritual language of marriage exchange and agreement with various aspects of the architectural qualities of the house itself. A series of bridewealth gifts for example are linked in ritual verse to the steps of the house ladder (*ke'eru*) that permits the groom access to his bride in the platform above.
- ²⁰ In Tetum these key elements are summarised as *lia moris* and *lia maten*.

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