

Waima'a House Cultures: Emergence, Connection, Reconstruction

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Corridors of connection

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

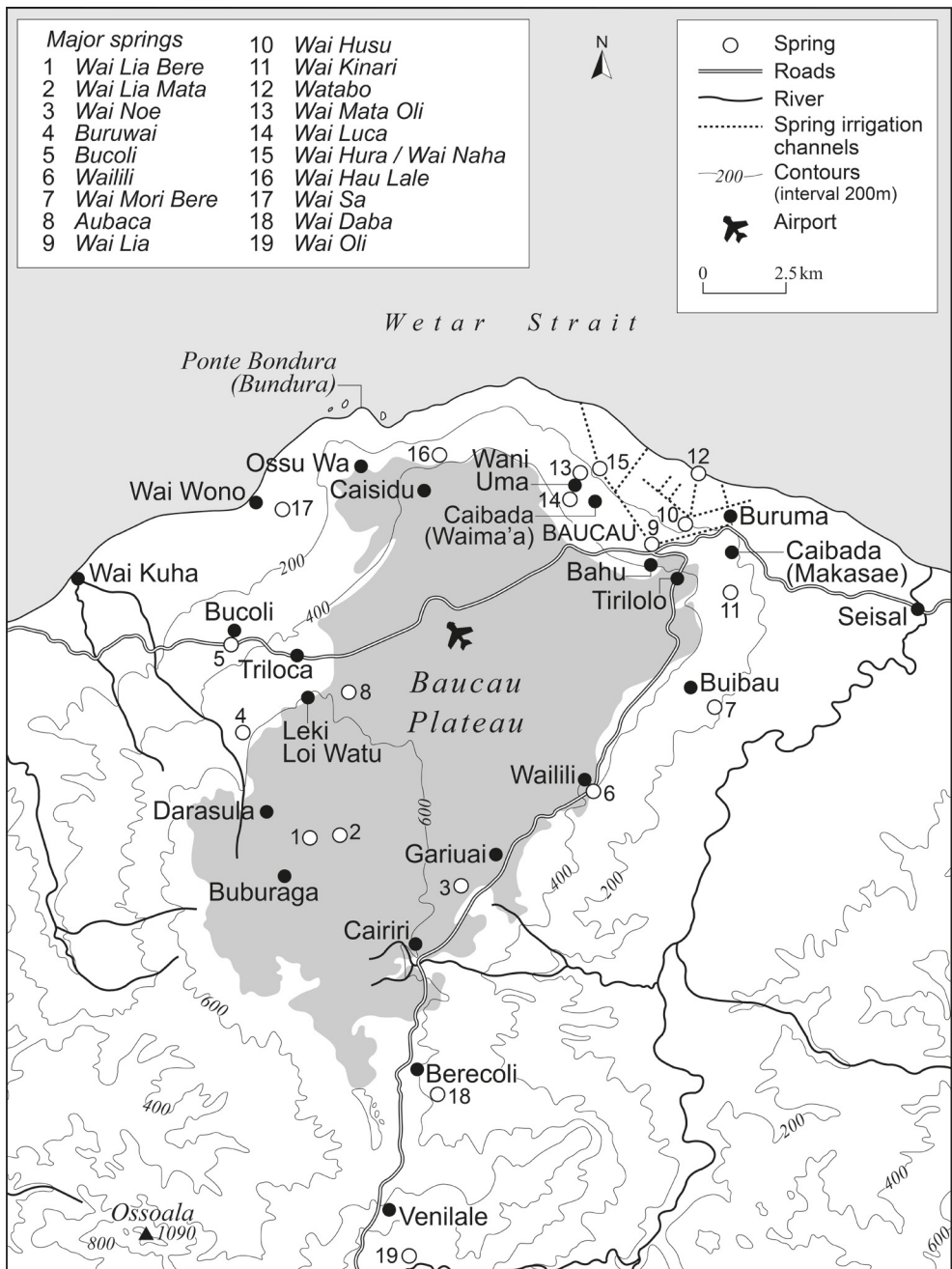


Figure 4: Waima'a north-south transect and major springs. Credit: Chandra Jayasuriya.

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

Houses and their kin

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

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

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

House styles

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

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

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

House relations

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

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

Rebuilding houses

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Risking reconstruction

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rebuilding the Ocabai House: Two houses, one trunk

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

Issues in the rebuilding phase

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Ocabai house and the wider Bercoli domain

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

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

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

The junior Ocabai house

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Modernising houses and dynamic traditions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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