

Mambai Houses and Ritual Centres

Lisa Palmer, Andrew McWilliam, and Jorge Lopes

Abstract

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Constituting the wider domain

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

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

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

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

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

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

Celebrating and Strengthening the Domain

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

Reinstating the House

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge the support and hospitality of the community of Maubisi-Mauloko in hosting our visits to the area and their willingness to engage in lively discussions and patient explanations about their cultural traditions including the mythic origins of settlement, the nuanced complexities of sacred house relations, and the annual commemorative cycle of life-giving agriculture. We thank,

especially, the assistance of Manuel Mendonsa, Bento Lopes, Jacinto Tilman, Antoni (Hatuliu Liurai), Joaquin Mendonsa, Francisco (former Chefe Aldeia), Lucy Martine Perreira, and Etervina Mendonsa.

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