

Houses of Koba Lima: Unity and Division

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Abstract

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Domains of Koba Lima

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

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

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

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

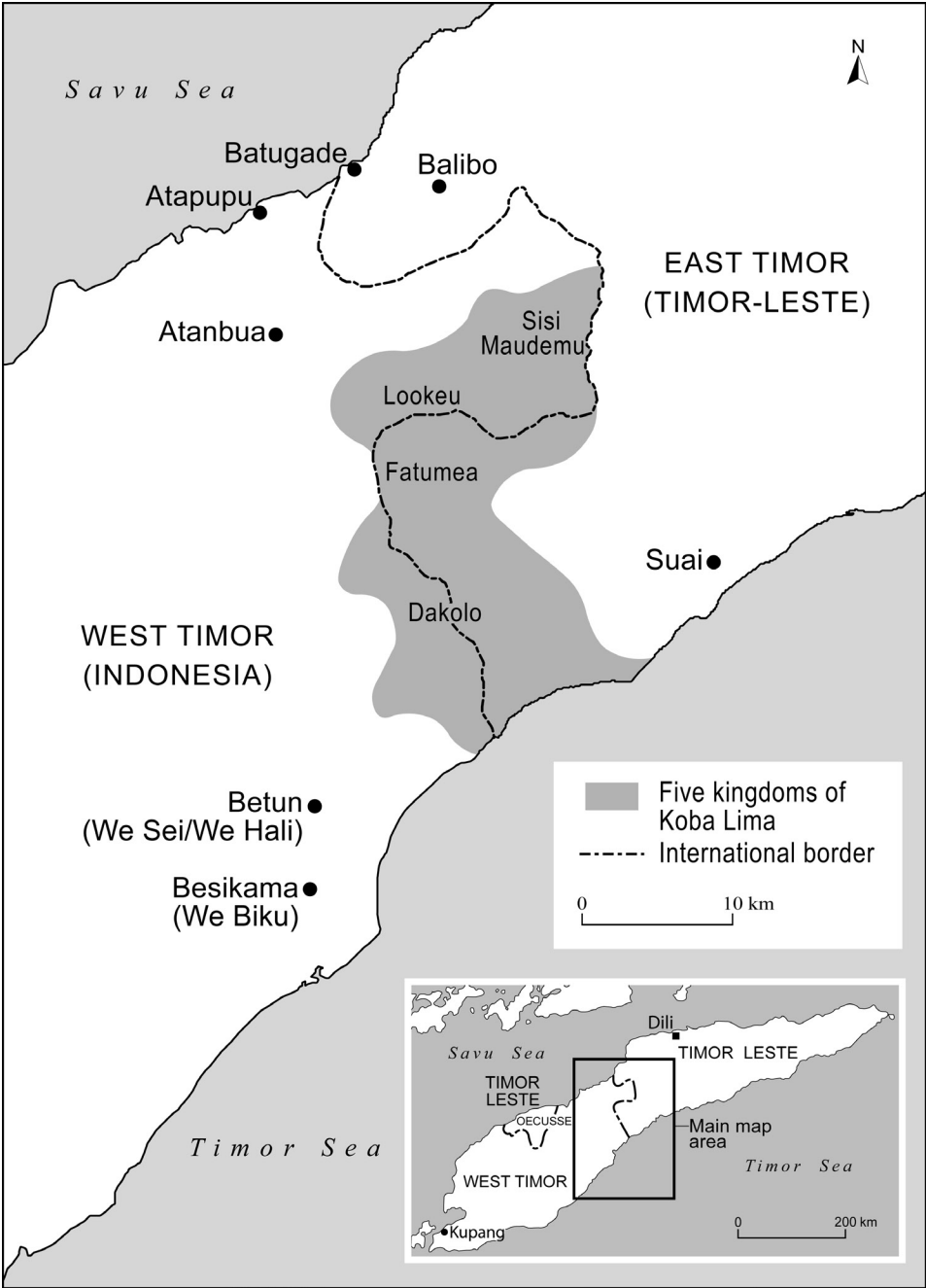


Figure 11: The Five Domains of Koba Lima. Credit: Chandra Jayasuriya



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Parliament: stories of creation

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

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

⁴ Civet cats are culturally associated with headhunting across Timor.

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

The founding myth of Fatumea⁶

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

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

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

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

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

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

Political divisions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Returning to the source: The consecration of Uma lulik

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Order and division in the borderlands

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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