

Spirit Ecologies of the House: Customary Governance in Post-independence Timor-Leste

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Abstract

The renewal and revitalization of complex social and cultural exchanges across Timor-Leste engages the co-production of custom and governance across scale; from the micro-social dynamics of household and domestic economies to broader issues of social alliance, resource entitlements, landed authority, and collective endeavour. These 'spirit ecologies' of practice, as we interpret them, incorporate each of these realms of activity and more. They reflect local orientations to diverse forms of agency, both human and non-human, that are fundamental to the multiple tasks of keeping life going and sustaining personal and intergenerational wellbeing over time. As such, they also raise important questions about the resilience and capacity of indigenous institutions to address governance gaps in post-Independence Timor-Leste and contribute to innovative forms of environmental governance with relevance to the wider region. By exploring the comparative and cross-scalar possibilities of these locally relevant spirit ecologies, this introduction frames spirit ecologies as relationships between people and place, and between customary approaches to nature on the one hand and national governance policies over land and waters on the other. In this regard, contemporary Timor-Leste offers an instructive Asia-Pacific experiment in nation building from the ground up.

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

Introduction: Houses of Origin

A widespread feature of the post-independence landscapes of Timor-Leste has been the sustained revival of cultural practices as part of a well-recognised, 'return to custom' among the many rural communities that constitute the majority population of the country (Barnes 2017; Loch 2003; Hicks 2004; McWilliam 2008). These practices include a renewed focus on ritual exchange among extended family networks, typically expressed in the celebration of life cycle transitions, especially marriage and funerals, as well as a strong reassertion of practices associated with mythic origins of settlement, ancestral blessings and sacrificial veneration among different groups.

An integral component of this sustained cultural activity has been extensive rebuilding of many distinctive origin group houses, known generically in Tetun as *uma lulik* or ‘sacred’ houses, which serve as a focal point for social and sacrificial activities. Many of these iconic structures were destroyed by fire or fell into disuse during the resistance struggle or during the destructive withdrawal of pro-integration militia groups from Timor-Leste in 1999. Each of these specialised built structures from different origin groups across Timor-Leste reveals a rich architectural tradition and decorative diversity reflecting the distinctive ethno-linguistic cultural histories of their source communities. At the same time, the stylised and symbolically elaborated *uma lulik* designs, typically canonical in design, also highlight a wider and shared Austronesian heritage focused on the house: one that provides many points of comparison between language communities across Timor-Leste and the wider Austronesian world (see Fox 1980, 1997).

The ethnographic literature from the Timor region has long made clear the links between kinship, marriage exchange, social reproduction, and the ‘flow of life’ (Fox 1980; Traube 1986; Hicks 2004). Collectively, this literature shows how families of specific lineages are organised around origin group founding houses (*uma lulik*) that situate families in intimate, intergenerational social, political, economic, and spiritual relationships with their extended consanguineal kin and affinal relatives from other origin groups. Within this particular rendering of a kin-based, ‘mutuality of being’ (Sahlins 2013), each of these houses is embedded in a lifeworld of exchange, obligation, and reciprocity built around recurring socio-cosmic dualisms such as male/female, fertility giver/fertility taker, younger sibling/older sibling, indigene/settler, and political authority/ritual authority. The dualism includes a suite of socio-botanical metaphors such as trunk and tip, stem and flower—the harmonious (or conflictual) relations that ensure (or hamper) the ‘flow of life’ (Fox). Concomitant with the widespread use of these ‘metaphors for living’ (Fox 1980) is the Austronesian idea of a spiritual potency or life force flowing through all physical forms and phenomena, an idea that has been referred to by Fox (1987) as the ‘immanence of life’.

In this book, one of our aims is to explore the structural forms and performative practices of the *uma lulik* (and its many local language variants) as a site for the celebration of shared group identities, especially kin-based ties and ancestral protections in Timor-Leste (see Carsten and Hugh Jones 1995). Drawing on five broadly comparative case studies from different regions of the country, we highlight the specific character of different House structures and their mythical, moral, and spiritual dimensions, all of which facilitate the pursuit of intergenerational wellbeing among their interrelated memberships. *Uma Lulik* structures provide important focal centres for the celebration of enduring social alliances between related groups. In the process, they create a venue for making visible the shape

and strength of the constituent social relations, as well as broader-level customary governance on matters associated with resource claims and emplaced political and ritual authority. In different regions of Timor-Leste, customary political authority and associated governance structures are constituted in and through allied clusters of *uma lulik* groups. These political federations, typically founded in origin mythologies and reproduced through periodic ritual confirmation and public celebration, provide the enduring basis for the continuity of the ritual domain over time and the preservation of its ancestral environment.

In the years since independence (May 2002), the rebuilding of *uma lulik* structures has progressed at different rates in different regions across the country. The reasons for this phased recovery are complex and variable. But economic hardship and slow recovery have been a likely and strong contributing factor where households need to direct available resources and efforts to their immediate livelihood requirements and often delay collective work on rebuilding group *uma lulik* or making do with interim structures (*uma simples*) (McWilliam 2008; Fitzpatrick et al. 2012). For many communities, it is only in recent years with the convergence of enabling factors—the availability of resources, sufficient group enthusiasm, and a shared commitment to the common objective—that the re-emergence of so many striking and evocative *uma lulik* forms has been seen, appearing mushroom-like across the settled landscape. In the process, local groups and communities also exhibit varying degrees of innovation and creative redesign in their contemporary iterations of the ‘ancestral house’. Each reflects pragmatic solutions to perennial problems in the preservation of the unique and impressive constructions of posts, platforms, beams, and covering roofs.

Today Timor-Leste ancestral origin houses (*uma lulik*) are increasingly retaking central stage in local celebrations of marriage alliances, funerary rites, and seasonal ritual celebrations of life for house members and allied groups. On each of these occasions, varying combinations of agnatic kin and affinal relatives—networks of *fetosan no umane* (T.) relations—meet in celebration and obligation to express their connections to one another and reinforce their abiding attachment to specific places, and their constituent resources, spirit ecologies, and emplaced histories (Sousa 2010; Barnes 2011; Bovensiepen 2015). These emphatic statements of cultural revival with support for customary institutions and the abiding local authority structures which they instantiate, provide insights into local patterns of customary governance and a broad desire to build social cohesion across post-conflict Timor-Leste (McWilliam 2008).

To illustrate both the shared qualities of the ‘sacred house’ complex in Timor-Leste and the lively diversity of its structural forms, as well as material and political ecologies of practice, in the following chapters, we present a series of discrete house-based case studies. They reflect a considered selection of geographically

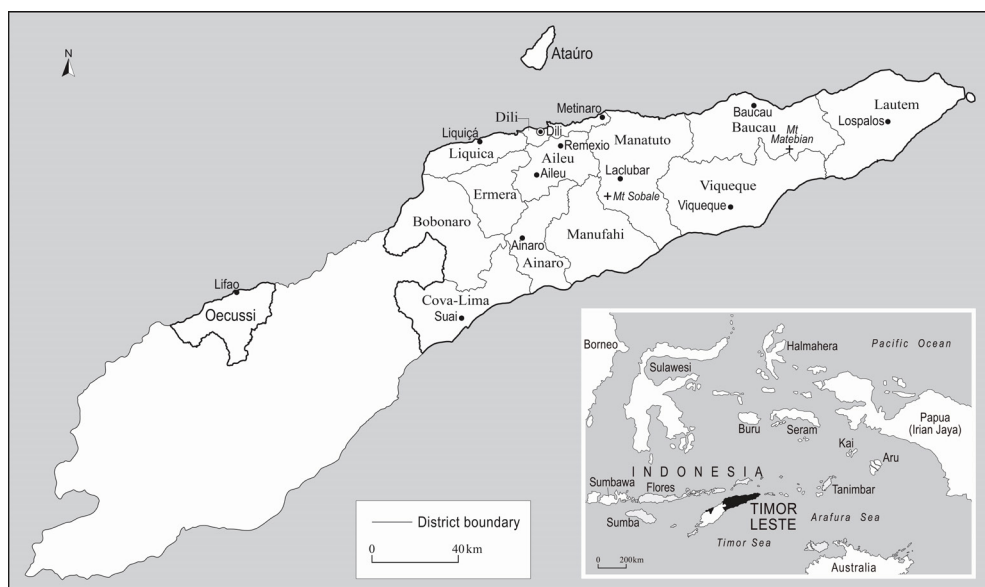


Figure 1: Map of Timor-Leste and municipalities. Credit: Chandra Jayasuriya.

dispersed locations and ethno-linguistic communities based on extended periods of field research and ethnographic analysis. The case studies include Fataluku *uma lulik* rebuilding in the far eastern municipality of Lautem, Waima'a house communities in Baucau, Uato-Lari performances from Viqueque, Mambai house renewal in the highlands of Ainaro, and the complex challenges facing house communities in Koba Lima in the western borderlands of Cova-Lima and West Timor. Each chapter presents an exploration of the relationship between different kinds of 'ritual or sacred' houses and the socio-spiritual connections that bind house members to one another. Collectively they express a celebration of their ancestral origins and the contemporary social networks of relation and mutual exchange that extend across the living landscape establishing enduring social ties.

Spirit Ecologies of Practice

The renewal and revitalisation of complex social and cultural exchanges across Timor-Leste engage the co-production of custom and governance across scale: from the micro-social dynamics of household and domestic economies to broader issues of social alliance, resource entitlements, landed authority, and collective endeavour. These 'spirit ecologies' of practice, as we interpret them, incorporate each of these realms of activity and more. They reflect local orientations to diverse forms

of agency, both human and non-human, that are fundamental to the multiple tasks of keeping life going and sustaining personal and intergenerational wellbeing over time. As such, they also raise important questions about the resilience and capacity of indigenous institutions to address governance gaps in post-independence Timor-Leste and contribute to innovative forms of environmental governance.

In seeking to address some of these questions, our second broader objective in this study has been to explore the comparative and cross-scalar possibilities of these locally relevant spirit ecologies. Specifically, and methodologically, we are interested in the ways that they can help frame relationships between people and place, and between customary approaches to nature on the one hand and national governance policies over land and waters on the other. In this regard, contemporary Timor-Leste offers an instructive Asia-Pacific experiment in nation building from the ground up and a striking version of what has been referred to in the literature as environmentalism of the poor (see Martinez Alier 2002).

A key component of this engagement has been the introduction of so-called 'best-practice' state management of social and environmental governance. However, like the experience in other parts of the world, these measures of impact frequently suffer from a critical blind spot. That is, they overlook and marginalise the interests, rights, and traditional entitlements of constituent customary communities. Consequently, they fail to consider how pre-existing bodies of knowledge, institutions, and praxis contribute to local and regional governance regimes (Jackson and Palmer 2012; Palmer 2015; Paris 2004; Zerner 2003). In the process, older established customary practices of land management are often marginalised and even criminalised in an ongoing political ecology of appropriation (Robbins 2012: 22).

A case in point for Timor-Leste is the complex of locally constituted resource regulations known in Tetun as *tara bandu* (literally 'to hang a prohibition' [usually on a post]). These customary practices are widely deployed to protect ripening crops, limit cultural burning, resolve conflicts, restrain transgressive behaviour, and even constrain the inflationary post-war effects of increased ceremonial exchange of animals in life cycle events. In the light of their local purchase, these cultural practices have found favour with state institutions in recent years, but too often the nature of the traditions is elided or ignored in favour of finding ways to appropriate them for broader, state-based environmental and political ends.

Conversely, we would argue that by identifying the depth and significance of customary approaches to social and environmental governance in Timor-Leste (and, indeed, elsewhere), we can generate a more nuanced comparative understanding of how these practices are being mobilised to address processes of social and economic recovery and resilience in complex environments. In our use of the term 'spirit ecologies' we are concerned with the ways in which human forms of sociality evolve alongside relations with more-than-human beings, including places in the landscape,

particular animals, spirits, and the enduring ancestral presence. We deploy the concept as a way of understanding the relational nature of personhood in Timor-Leste, and the ways that human and more-than-human networks of reciprocal obligation and interdependency are constitutive of 'house-based' societies (McWilliam 2005). We argue that rather than reducing these spirit ecologies to the sphere of 'belief' or 'religion', they should be understood as ways of 'being in the world' that underpin diverse modes of localised customary governance. In this respect, our research contributes theoretically to a body of work in Southeast Asian studies that has paid renewed attention to human relations with the 'more-than-human' environment (e.g., Lansing 2007; Tsinjilonis 2004; Allerton 2013; Arnhem and Springer 2016).

In Timor-Leste, Bovensiepen (2015) has demonstrated how ideas of personhood are configured and emerge through relations of separation and reunification with the landscape. Similarly, Palmer (2015) has investigated human relations with water in Timor-Leste and the ways that water 'management' rituals are integral to the beliefs and practices of localised spirit ecologies. In this book, we continue the task of mapping the relationship between Timorese conceptions of personhood (Bovensiepen 2015), ancestrally constituted house communities (Fox 2011), and the complex local ecologies upon which the livelihoods and the material and spiritual wellbeing of Timorese households depend (Palmer 2015).¹

In tracing the effects of these spirit ecologies on modes of Timorese social and environmental governance, we recognise the contemporary significance in Timor of a broadly shared Austronesian heritage of ideas and practices around fundamental notions of connected life processes. These relational fields are expressed through a rich repertoire of what Fox (1980: 333) has described as 'metaphors for living [...] encoded primarily in a pervasive binary form'. Prevalent among these customary associations are the many complex botanical metaphors of growth and renewal (trunk and tip, roots and climbing tendrils, rhizomic replication of sugar cane and bananas) and the rich spatio-temporal metaphors of journeys and well-travelled pathways (paths of origin, the wide path of alliance; see Fox 1997).

These customary ideas of life processes also resonate with the work of Tim Ingold (2011, 2012: 431) and his concept of the 'meshwork', which we draw on to follow the 'material flows and formative processes' of localised spirit ecologies. According to Ingold, places in this 'meshwork' are like 'knots', from which flow a multitude of relational threads:

A house, for example, is a place where the lines of its residents are tightly knotted together. But these lines are no more contained within the house than are threads contained within

¹ For consideration of these themes in relation to people and the marine environment, see Abbott (2024).

a knot. Rather, they trail beyond it, only to become caught up with other lines in other places, as are threads in other knots. Together they make up what I have called the meshwork (Ingold 2011: 149).

Ingold's concept of intersecting lines and pathways through places, 'houses', and a wider ecology of things illustrates the ways that life both comes into being and is continuously becoming through exchanges between living and non-living organisms, and between cultural meanings and physical forms. In this 'meshwork' of 'things' (which may encompass state institutions and practices) across 'generations', we show how the past, present, and future can be experientially coeval and how the properties of 'materials' and their continuous exchanges form a continuum of life, a relational coherence that grows and is grown.

In this conceptual schema, the flow of the living meshwork is also selectively shaped by processes of resistance and separation, of an active 'holding apart' of different types of matter that constitute fundamental features of the relationship (Palmer 2018). By investigating local struggles to influence and assert agency over the more-than-human, our aim is to make visible these flows and points of resistance and separation in localised spirit ecologies and the social and environmental governance in Timor-Leste. Our approach to elucidating Timorese spirit ecologies through a meshwork of matter connects an endogenous theory of more-than-human 'intergenerational wellbeing'. This theory extends beyond a generalised notion of human concern for future generations and/or the living environment to understandings of a broader more-than-human, kin-based sociality in Timor-Leste (Palmer 2015; see also Trindade 2008). Finding form in everyday practices is a way of being in the world, a state that focuses people's attention on the need to honour and attend to particular pathways of connection (Strathern 2014) between human beings (the living, the dead, and the not-yet-born) and their more-than-human relational kin (for instance, particular species of animals, lands, and waters constituted in myth) (see also Metzner Yoder 2011). As pathways towards wellbeing (and the associated constraints on these flows), they guide people's interactions with their local spirit ecologies and announce the basis for a continuous (re)constitution of people's relations with one another and with the wider world around them. In the associated ritual and ceremonial engagements, these performative practices work to 'bring forth, define, and empower social relationships' (Lansing 2007: 15). To this extent, our concern in Timor-Leste is with the multiple ways that objects and artefacts, 'natural' elements, and non-human living organisms, evoke meaning within relational human networks and are enrolled in the everyday and multiple tasks of keeping life going.

An account of these emerging networks and practices of environmental governance in Timor-Leste must also consider the strong influence of formal institutional religion, which exists in pluralist tension with ancestral forms of religious adherence. The historical power of the Catholic Church is highlighted by the fact that its influence overtly shapes approaches to religiosity and ritual practice, especially in urban Timorese contexts where ‘being modern’ has long meant being both educated and Catholic (Palmer, Barnes and Kakuma 2017, Silva 2013). Yet, to the extent that these Catholic, State, and ancestral practices intersect, we contend that it is these seemingly contradictory forms of sociality, relationality, and subjectivity that are inevitably and uniquely interwoven through a meshwork of practices, including religiously inflected ones.

Ann Salmond makes a similar point writing on freshwater governance approaches in New Zealand. Governance there implicates a more-than-human personhood and ontological complexity with slippage both within and between Maori (*indigenous*) and *Pakeha* (settler) communities, as she notes:

[i]n these people, practices, and places, ancestral Maori concepts are active and alive, adapting to changing conditions, including various modernist assumptions about reality. The process of juxtaposition and exchange has generative effects. It makes it possible to deal creatively with competing and shifting universalisms without feeling the need for an ‘eye of God’ account in which only one set of propositions about reality can prevail. (Salmond 2014: 301).

Spirit ecologies of practice in Timor-Leste exhibit similar contingent generative qualities and effects in the context of State attempts to integrate their institutional aspirations for environmental and social governance. By exploring the mobilisation and state support of customary, *tara bandu* regimes in the second half of the book, we show how, within this historically contingent and fluid space, local communities pursue creative possibilities for bringing into the conversation various and often juxtaposed, messy, and slippery dimensions of being and reality. This process includes an ontological dexterity that selectively brings things and matters together and, importantly, holds them apart. In the process, we identify some potential limits to this dexterity and the various exceptions and resistances that, for customary communities, are disabling rather than generative. For its part, the state and its bureaucratic apparatus is also struggling to reconcile its ‘built-in’ desire to improve, appropriate, and control governance processes (Li 2008), while at the same time seeking to benefit from the agentive power of these uniquely cultural approaches to nature and resource management (Simiao and Silva 2020).

Ritual Communities in Timor-Leste

The mountainous, half island nation of Timor-Leste contains a remarkable diversity of 32 spoken indigenous languages of varying population size; each reflecting long histories of assertive cultural identity politics and mutual accommodation.² The language diversity is itself a product of successive waves of seafaring Austronesian-speaking and Papuan-speaking settler populations carving out territories over centuries of occupation and interaction (Hull 1999, 2004; Schapper 2011). This deep history combined with the more recent disruptive impacts of European colonialism and subsequent Indonesian occupation has generated the complex mosaic of contemporary settlement patterns that we see today.

In post-independence Timor-Leste, linguistic differences are also reflected in the dynamic preservation and renewal of local customary practices. They include a widespread commitment to reciprocal gift exchange as part of a broader revitalisation of familial alliances—a reverence for the ancestral spirit realm and the customary management of environmental resources to ensure intergenerational wellbeing. At the core of these obligations is a commitment to the iconic clan-based, ritual houses known in Tetum as *uma lulik* ('sacred' house) with multiple language variants. Across the nation, Timorese communities are engaged in renewed efforts to rebuild and reinstate *Uma Lulik* with their distinctive structural forms, cultural protocols, and decorative features. Marked differences between ritual communities across Timor-Leste are expressed in the highly stylised variations of *uma lulik* architectural forms across the country (Cinatti et al. 1987). They also differ in the degree to which core *uma lulik* structures of politically allied communities are dispersed across ancestral landscapes or concentrated together into potent centres of ancestral origin. These spatial dimensions reflect varying historical trajectories of settlement and political continuity. In the following chapters, we focus on five language communities drawn from the eastern, central, and western regions of Timor-Leste, and each case study illustrates in different ways the continuing vital importance of the clan-based 'sacred house' and its role in customary governance.

Fataluku

Our first case study presents perspectives on the process of renewal and revival of customary traditions among the Fataluku-speaking communities in the most easterly Municipality of Lautem. In a region where the resistance movement against

² "Table 13: Population distribution by mother tongue, Urban Rural and District". Volume 2: Population Distribution by Administrative Areas, 2010 (PDF). Timor-Leste Ministry of Finance. pp. 205–206.

Indonesian occupation was particularly strong and prolonged (McWilliam 2020), Fataluku communities were subject to a variety of coercive restrictions on the conduct of customary practices and limits on social gatherings, as well as periodic reprisals against support for the resistance movement. The dramatic end of occupation in 1999 and subsequent achievement of independence has seen renewed attention accorded to the conduct of customary practices and their attendant obligations, including the rebuilding of the Fataluku ritual houses (*le teinu*) as sites of veneration and group status rivalry. Recent innovations to these 'sacred' structures highlight both Fataluku pragmatism and their adaptive readiness to accommodate change, while maintaining their commitment to ancestral spirit ecologies (Viegas 2019).

Waima'a

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

Uato-Lari

The chapter authored by Susanna Barnes and Josh Trindade explores the intricate web of social, spiritual, and territorial relationships within the ritual domain of *Ina Ama Beli Daralai Babulo Mane Hitu*, a predominantly Naueti-speaking community in the south-eastern sub-district of Uato-Lari. A communal ceremony known as *Babulo Mane Hitu* (E: The Seven Brothers of Babulo) acts as a focal point for exploring the dynamic interplay of human and more-than-human elements within specific landscapes, illustrating the reconstitution of reciprocal obligations and interdependencies among human and more-than-human entities against the backdrop of specific landscapes. The ceremony, commemorating the domain's founder-ancestors, embodies the community's efforts to sustain and negotiate its

social and moral frameworks amidst historical upheavals and contemporary challenges. Through detailed ethnographic insights, the chapter unveils the dynamic processes of renewal, contestation, and affirmation of communal identities, emphasising the pivotal role of ritual in maintaining the continuity of the social fabric. This narrative not only highlights the community's dedication to preserving ancestral ties and managing communal harmony but also reflects on the broader implications of such practices in shaping Timor-Leste's socio-cultural landscape in the post-conflict era.

Mambai

Our next case study focuses on cultural traditions of Mambai speakers, the second-most populous language community in Timor-Leste³ who occupy the central mountains of Timor-Leste. Mambai regard their lands as the centre of the world (*T: 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* (E: 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.

Koba Lima

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 border division and further challenges relating to the drift of their youth to towns and cities in search of more economically prosperous livelihoods. In this

³ Up to 130,000 native speakers (<https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/east-timorese-culture/east-timorese-culture-population-statistics>); 16.6% of 1,413,958 (2021) = 234,717 Mambai speakers.

chapter we examine the ways in which these House-based domains are negotiating and engaging with, the challenges and opportunities offered by the current two-state border solution.

Governance matters

In developing the concept of intergenerational wellbeing from its base in an ever-transforming customary realm, we also need to ask how these ideas and practices might be integrated successfully within secular state policies and government service delivery. To date, these issues of long-held customary practices and orientations have been largely ignored or quietly sidelined. Exemplifying this challenge in Timor-Leste is the customary practice of periodic prohibitions on harvesting or cultural burning deployed under the restrictive customary process of *tara bandu* (to impose/raise the ban). In this next chapter, we examine these multiple, locally enacted customary practices of ritualised prohibitions designed to regulate diverse place-based social and environmental relationships. Now officially valued and promoted by the state as a local mechanism to conserve and promote the preservation and sustainable use of natural resources, we argue that what is usually missing in this collaboration is an engaged respect by those in power for the context-specific, spiritually sanctioned, dynamic traditions and moral expectations that underpin local *tara bandu* institutions. Further, we find that these transformations and the implied renegotiation of power and ritual-political structures are being impacted by state-sanctioned intentions to harness or subvert their potential. In this protracted struggle for recognition, we locate a continued purpose and strength in the Timorese commitments to honouring their spirit ecologies. Chapter 7 presents an extended discussion of these customary practices and political ecologies in post-independence Timor-Leste with case material drawn from Fataluku and Waima'a ethnographies.

Indigeneity

In this chapter, we explore the broader aspirations and tensions between House-based orders and the bureaucratic impulse of successive Timorese governments to contain and co-opt these processes. Here, we consider the distinction between two key *Tetun* language terms that carry powerful emotional resonances. These terms include the concept of *rai na'in* referring to the traditional custodians of the land and that of the *rai Timor* which speaks to the wider nation of Timor-Leste. The tumultuous achievement of nationhood required the active involvement and

sacrifice of multiple traditional Timorese communities—*rai na'in*—to bring the new nation—the *rai Timor*—into existence (McWilliam and Traube 2011: 17). But while acknowledging the significance of what Ben Anderson (2003) has described as the triumph of ‘aggregated nativeness’, Timor-Leste’s nation-making agenda remains mired in the search for inclusive futures for its citizens. Too often, governments overlook or subsume the sub-regional collective claims of customary communities to political and cultural rights, within the wider frame of the national interest. In this penultimate chapter, we examine both the shifting ‘indigenous’ ontologies of local communities and the varied governmental recognition of ‘indigeneity’, thus illuminating the socio-political challenges of carving out spaces for plural identities and meaningfully diverse economic futures in Timor-Leste.

Notes on Methodology

The development of the present study brings together the results of long-term collaborative field research to present a series of richly nuanced ethnographic studies of customary communities in post-independence Timor-Leste. Three of the case studies, focusing on Fataluku, Waima’a, and Uatolari have been developed out of long-term research engagement and exploration by the authors, McWilliam, Palmer, Barnes, and Trindade. Much of this work, as noted earlier in the chapter, has sought to combine detailed and long-term studies of selected communities with productive analytical frameworks and comparative concepts to elucidate the cultural dynamics of Timorese society and their collective capacity for resilience and renewal.

The remaining two case studies of Mambai and Koba Lima communities reflect a more recent combination of research interests among the principal authors, but they too have been the subject of extended research covering multiple visits over a number of years. Their inclusion in this collection, we believe, extends our comparative understanding and appreciation of the range of variation that informs the house-based conduct of social politics across Timor-Leste. Two examples can help illustrate this point. It is often the case that the senior leaders of ritual communities are highly reluctant to divulge the mythic histories of their house-based groups. This is typically regarded as restricted or sacred knowledge and closely guarded by the senior practitioners. In the Mambai case study community in the mountains of central Timor, however, their openness to divulging and discussing the mythic foundations of the community and the ritual practices on which they are founded, was a striking contrast. As it was not hidden knowledge as such, this allowed for more extensive conversations to gain a deeper appreciation of the origins of myths and contemporary networks of the ritual community.

The second example draws on our experience of research in the mountains of Koba Lima with its ancient mythic connections to the former kingdom of Wehali: Wewiku and its turbulent colonial history in the context of Portuguese and Dutch borderland rivalries. The more recent and dramatic achievement of independence for Timor-Leste has resulted in a renewed process of dislocation among the ritual community, now living on both sides of the (international) border with Indonesia. In this otherwise highly disruptive context, the enduring values of the ritual house complexes of the domain and the need to periodically revitalise these links reveal their enduring capacity to sustain and renew its ancient ties with kin and affines across an otherwise formidable frontier. At this point, we wish to acknowledge the diverse and significant contributions of our key research collaborators, the majority of whom are Timorese. They have drawn on their own familiarity and cultural expertise of different language communities to contribute insights and expertise towards deeper ethnographic understandings. For this reason, we style the present volume as a multigraph (rather than a monograph) to recognise their contribution as co-authors and their nuanced understandings of Timorese life worlds. The latter aspect is highly significant as it facilitates a greater depth of translation and understanding to inform the analysis.

Finally, it is also important to note that the conduct and direction of long-term, intermittent field work among Timorese communities is very often shaped and guided by the expectations and accepted protocols of ritual leaders and cultural knowledge holders. In most Timorese communities, there is a marked gender distinction made in matters of public performances around ritual exchange and ceremonial activity. Senior men and leaders of ritual houses are prominent public figures and typically take on central roles in the conduct of rituals. In these contexts, researching matters of ritual significance tends to be guided, at least initially, by key male ritual figures who have the authority to speak. But it is quite evident that the performative aspects of House and domain-based rituals require the enthusiastic participation of all members of the ritual community, especially women who are symbolically and practically at the centre of these vital House communities. Our research has therefore sought to balance the perspectives and contributions of a diversity of contributors to generate ethnographic understandings and informed analysis.

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