

LOCAL ECONOMIC DYNAMICS

On the existence and persistence of the social category of *atan* in contemporary Timor-Leste

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Abstract

This paper considers the historical category of *atan* (slave) in Timor-Leste and its significance to contemporary social relations. While Indigenous forms of slavery existed on Timor island before the arrival of the Dutch or Portuguese, distinctions between *liurai* (rulers), *povo* (common people) and *atan* (slave) were produced, reinforced and modified by colonial modes of production and extraction. These categorisations continue to be re-enacted ceremonially, economically and politically in contemporary Timor-Leste. The paper first considers the category of *atan* from a historical perspective. Secondly, gathering traces of evidence in ethnographically grounded research, it examines how the category of *atan* is imagined, resisted and embodied in contemporary East Timorese society. Lastly, it considers the implications of the persistence of this phenomenon.

Keywords: Slavery; dependence; kinship; agency

This paper considers the historical category of *atan* (E: dependent/serf/slave) in Timor-Leste and its significance to contemporary social relations. While Indigenous forms of dependency existed on Timor island before the arrival of the Dutch or Portuguese (Hägerdal 2012), social categories and distinctions between *liurai* (rulers), *ema* or *reino* (common people) and *atan* (dependents/serfs/slave) were produced, reinforced and modified by Portuguese colonial modes of production and extraction as well as Indonesian military occupation. Although the constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste upholds the principal of equal rights for all its citizens, these social categorisations continue to be re-enacted ceremonially, economically and politically in contemporary Timor-Leste (RDTL 2001; Kammen 2010; Shepherd and McWilliam 2013). Drawing on historical descriptions and regional comparisons, the paper will first consider the category of *atan* from a historical and linguistic perspective. Secondly, gathering traces of evidence and data collected in ethnographically grounded research in Timor-Leste, it will examine how the category of *atan* is imagined, resisted, embodied and enacted in contemporary East

Timorese society. Lastly, it will consider the implications of the persistence of this phenomenon particularly in relation to kinship and agency.

Slavery and other forms of dependency in historical perspective

Most historians of Southeast Asia agree that 'slavery' existed in the region prior to the expansion of European shipping and trade (Gunn 1999; Ward 2011; Hägerdal 2012). How 'slavery' was understood in the region, however, was complicated by the fact that it included a diversity of forms and practices ranging from chattel slavery and forced labour to debt bondage and other forms of dependency (Ward 2011, 163). Some scholars argue that a distinction should be made between a 'slave' understood as 'a person held to be saleable property, of low social status, and obliged to perform labour and other services for a superior without payment', and other forms of 'bondage' that existed within a broad pattern of social relations based on differential status and mutual obligation (Reid 1983). Demands for labour in expanding regional economies undoubtedly fuelled the trade in slaves across the region. But it is also true that many Southeast Asian societies, including those found on Timor island, were "governed by laws and customs that embedded [these] vertical relations of bondage and reciprocity as the basis of social, economic, and political relations" (Ward 2011, 164).

The scope, motives and forms of slavery and other forms of bondage present on Timor island varied in response to changing socio-economic and political circumstances. While further research is required to understand the extent to which Chinese and Makassarese traders in the region engaged in the slave trade in Timor prior to the arrival of the Europeans, historians suggest that "... after sandalwood, for which the island was famous, slaves were 'the next most profitable commodity' to be found on the island" (Boxer 1968, 189 quoted in Kammen 2010). From as early as the sixteenth century slaves were obtained by both Dutch and Portuguese who engaged in slave raids or collected slaves from the ports of Kupang, Manatuto and Ade (Vemassee) (McWilliam 2007; Hägerdal 2010; Kammen 2010). More commonly however, it was Topasses from Larantuka and Lifau who raided and sold slaves destined for Java and Macau (Kammen 2010). Local rulers were active participants in this trade exchanging beeswax, sandalwood and slaves for counter-gifts of fire-arms and other manufactured goods (pottery and cloth) (Hägerdal 2010).¹ Stories from older East Timorese suggest that the trade in persons continued well into the late nineteenth century. For example, from Viqueque *atan* were sold as slaves at the port of Beasu in exchange for 'guns and bullets' (T: *kilat no musan*) (Barnes 2017).

While the slave trade became increasingly important in the region following the arrival of European trader/colonisers, Hägerdal has argued that the volume

of trade in slaves from Timor island was never very significant (see de Castro 1867, 320; Hägerdal 2010). A lack of evidence in the colonial record, for the trade in slaves, might be explained by the fact that slaves were not prominent in European cargo lists or, the fact that much of the slave-trade was intra-regional carried out by Chinese and Makassarese traders and not directly by the Portuguese or Dutch (Kammen, pers. comm.; Hägerdal 2019). It is also possible that trade in ‘persons’ or ‘slaves’ was not a priority for Timorese rulers whose power and wealth was based on the number of people under their immediate control rather than the extent of territory they controlled (Barnes 2017). It is often said that Timorese rulers were ‘rich in people’ rather than land and a person’s worth and social standing is still calculated in terms of their capacity to establish and maintain bonds of reciprocity and mutual obligation (McWilliam 2011; see also Chapter 7, this volume).

Scholars maintain that pre-colonial societies on Timor island were divided into three social categories or ranks commonly described as comprising of chiefs and nobles (*liurai*), commoners (*ema*) and slaves (*atan*) (Gunn 1999; Cinatti 1987; Hicks [1976] 2004). However, given the diversity of forms and practices that have come to be defined in scholarly literature as ‘slavery’, the categorisation of *atan* as ‘slave’ requires further consideration.

The Tetum term *atan* is commonly translated as ‘slave’ in English, and this is also the most common meaning attributed to the word and its variants in Indonesia. However, linguists suggest that locally and regionally *atan*, and its equivalents in other Austronesian languages, has a range of different meanings. For example, in Timor and Flores it may also be used to mean simply ‘person’ or ‘human’ (Schaepper, pers. comm.). Blust has also suggested that *atan* could mean ‘stranger or outsider’ (2013). These linguistic pointers suggest two things; firstly, that those who fell under the category of *atan* may not necessarily have been considered possessions, objects or non-subjects; and secondly, that if they were conceptualised as ‘outsiders’ or ‘others’ there were distinctive ways in which persons included in this category could be integrated into local social structure.

I would argue that colonial processes of classification, categorisation and translation established a false equivalency between the notion of *atan* and the category of ‘escravo’ making it synonymous with Euro-centric notions of ‘slave’ and ‘slavery’. In their book *Slavery in Africa: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, Miers and Kopytoff (1977) argued that Euro-centric notions of slavery, and in particular English language scholarship on the topic, were heavily influenced by ‘imaginaries’ of slavery that drew heavily on the specific experience of plantation slavery in the Americas (Carvalho Ferreira 2019, 51–52). Such notions of slavery presented an image of ‘the slave’ as a person devoid of any rights, freedoms or capacity for choice. For Miers and Kopytoff, however, the position of ‘slaves’ in the African cultural context had to be understood in relation to the concept of ‘rights-in-persons’

(1977, 7). Rights-in-persons were defined by local laws and the subject of complex transactions. Rights involved 'transactions' between individuals, offices and corporate groups, rights that were mutual but seldom symmetrical, rights that could entail labour and services but also total rights over a person (ibid., 8-9). The concept of 'rights-in-persons' provides a useful framework for conceptualising the position of *atan* in East Timorese societies. Rather than representing a category of persons that would fit Euro-centric definitions of 'slave' described above (p. 2), I would argue that *atan* encompassed a broad category of persons who, as Ward (2011, 64) suggests, found themselves at the bottom of the vertical relations of bondage and reciprocity, a situation which arguably also placed them on the margins and made them vulnerable to forms of extreme exploitation including slavery.

Historically, persons included in the category of *atan* on Timor island were war captives, debtors or serious violators of custom, procured through warfare, as gifts from allies or tribute from vassal kingdoms (Forman 1978; Hägerdal 2010; Kammen 2010; Blust 2013). Historians argue that those persons classified as *atan* generally fell into two categories. Drawing on the terms *ulun-houris* and *lutu-hun* used by Tetum-speaking populations, they suggest that a division existed between what is commonly described as 'chattel' slavery and other forms of more-or-less permanent dependency. *Ulu-houris*, meaning 'living head', was used to denote war-captives, often women and children, who owed their lives to their master. Hägerdal (2010, 270) suggests that *ulun-houris* were 'chattel' slaves, treated as commodities to be bought and sold or even gifted and offered as tribute (see also Kammen 2010). *Lutu-hun*, meaning either the 'dwellers at the bottom of the enclosure' or 'from the bottom of the enclosure', on the other hand, was used to describe those who worked the fields and tended the cattle of the *liurai* (rulers). *Lutu-hun* could not move from their land but neither could they be bought or sold and as such occupied a position similar to that of *serf* (de Castro 1867; Hägerdal 2010). Portuguese anthropologist and public servant, De Menezes (2006, 69) states that *lutu-hun* were considered 'communal' property while *atan* were individual property; a view which was also proposed by De Castro who stated that *lutu-hun* cannot be sold by the king (*rei*) because they belong to the people (*reino*) (de Castro 1867, 320). The extent to which these distinctions were fixed and the degree to which they are applicable across Timor island is debatable. Ethnographic evidence from Viqueque district suggests that chattel slaves could well become serfs, and not only serfs, but also commoners, may have been sold at slave markets. Moreover, not all war captives became slaves. In some cases, they were incorporated into local house-based groups either as allies or vassals (Barnes 2017).²

How *atan* were treated by rulers and commoners is a subject that requires more in-depth research. The conditions under which *atan* lived likely depended on time, place and the personality of individuals involved. According to local histories

from Viqueque for example, *atan* were at the mercy of the ruler (*liurai*). Elders from Viqueque reported that, in the not so distant past, *atan* were exchanged as gifts and on a ruler's death could be killed and buried with them; they also suggested that during certain rituals such as the planting of house-posts *atan* were sacrificed in lieu of buffalo or pigs (Amaral, pers. comm.; see also Bovensiepen 2015, 113). However, evidence also suggests that over time the descendants of *atan* were given specific tasks and roles associated with ruling (*liurai*) ancestral houses (many would have also been descendants of the men [and also women] of the house) and in some cases incorporated into these ancestral houses albeit without the same entitlements as full-members (Barnes 2017).

The British explorer/anthropologist Forbes, who travelled across Timor in the late 1880s, suggested that *atan* in Timor were relatively well treated and could be freed at any time through the payment of a fixed sum. This is a view shared by Affonso De Castro the Governor of Portuguese Timor (1858-1863) who wrote "the slaves of Timor are not subject to the same ill-treatment found in other countries. If there has been any mistreatment it has been at the hands of the inhabitants of Dili rather than in the kingdoms (*reinos*), where slaves are almost considered family members and do not find any problems in obtaining freedom" (1867, 319).³ Portuguese poet and ethnographer, Rui Cinatti, wrote, "At the bottom of society lived the slaves, prisoners of war (*lutuhum*). Or people bought (*ata*). Slavery is not very rigid... permitted serfs to become free men" (Cinatti quoted in Kammen 2010). While conditions may have varied depending on circumstances, the category of *atan* clearly does not fit neatly into Euro-centric notions of 'escravo' or 'slave'. However, what also appears to be clear is that persons classified as *atan* had limited freedoms and could be tied to their master's house inter-generationally. It is perhaps the lack of social recognition as members of an independent house-based ancestral group that distinguishes *atan* as 'other' in East Timorese societies.

Although the Portuguese officially abolished 'slavery' in 1869 (Hägerdal 2012), the categorical distinctions of *liurai* (noble, chief), *ema* (commoner) and *atan* (understood broadly as serf/slave/dependant) persisted well into the twentieth, and some would argue the twenty-first, century.⁴ Indeed, when in the late 1800s the Portuguese began to establish cash crop plantations (coffee, coconut and candlenut) in an attempt to make the colony more profitable, they benefitted from the 'free' labour 'recruited' by local rulers who were obliged to provide labourers for plantations a certain number of days each month. Local rulers who were 'rich in people' were able to draw on the *atan* class to work on the plantations and expand their own holdings.⁵ Free labour on plantations was provided not only by those categorised as *atan* but following the imposition of the head-tax in the early twentieth century, individuals unable to pay their tax (including commoners and some nobles) were forced to work as *auxiliar* (auxiliaries) providing manual

labour on plantations or building and road works, or as *ordenaça* working as domestic servants for civil servants and local rulers (Clarence-Smith 1992; Kammen 2010; Shepherd and McWilliam 2013). In her ethnography of Funar, in the region of Manatuto, Bovensiepen describes how villagers confided that they had been given as children to the *liurai* because their parents had not been able to pay the taxes the local rulers had collected for the Portuguese colonial government. The children who carried out housework in *liurai* houses were locally known as *ornassa*—a corruption of the term *ordenaça* (Bovensiepen 2015, 113). Similarly, in Babulo, Uato-lari, where I undertook my fieldwork, the term *asuliar*, a corruption of the Portuguese ‘auxiliar’ (Barnes 2017, 66), became part of local vocabularies to denote persons held in debt bondage or positions of servitude.⁶

Kammen has written convincingly of how this history of ‘forced labour’ fed into nationalist discourses that pitted Portuguese ‘masters’ and their Timorese elite collaborators against a Timorese mass of ‘oppressed’, which included both *ema/reino* (commoners) and *atan* (serf/slave/dependants). Collapsing the categories of *ema* and *atan*, Kammen argues, effectively silenced the reality of Indigenous forms of, what he calls, ‘slavery’ (see analysis of Araujo’s “Timorese Elites” in Kammen 2010, 263–264). Kammen suggests that the unspoken legacy of Indigenous forms of dependency and servitude continues to affect contemporary East Timorese social relations. While many East Timorese are reluctant to speak openly about *atan*, and most are quick to state that “We don’t have slavery any more”, Kammen argues most “[East Timorese] are acutely aware of who is a descendant of a legitimate traditional ruler, who is a descendant of a Portuguese-appointed chief, who obtained positions by collaborating with the Indonesian occupiers. They also know “who was a commoner and who was a slave” (2010, 75). Shame is attached to the fact that East Timorese enslaved other East Timorese, yet *atan* ancestry continues to affect individual and communal aspirations and many descendants of former *atan* remain on the margins. Moreover, a variety of forms of servitude including debt bondage and other subtler forms of temporary and permanent dependency persist (Bovensiepen 2014; Trindade and Barnes 2018).

Atan in contemporary ethnography

Although people were initially reluctant to speak of it during my field work in the *suku* of Babulo, Uato-Lari subdistrict, the topic of *atan* was unavoidable. Babulo is comprised of eight hamlets, each of which broadly correspond to an ‘origin’ group, a group of families sharing a common ancestor and centred on a common sacred house (*Uma Lulik*). Sometimes referred to by other groups within *suku* as the ‘aldeia without land’, the hamlet of Roma was established in 2002. Unlike the majority of

the *suku* population, the people of Roma hamlet are largely of Makassae rather than Naueti descent. According to one history of the origins of this group, the Roma are descendants of *atan* who served a *liurai* from Babulo who lived in exile near Quelicai. When this *liurai* was invited to return and rule over the people of Babulo it is said he agreed on condition that he could bring his “own people” who “stuck to him like seeds of a long grass” (Trindade, pers. comm.). There are no Roma ‘house’ structures in Babulo. Historically, members of this group were incorporated into their masters’ houses as ‘people of the house’. The Roma were not granted specific areas of land on which to farm or settle but were servants to the chiefly houses of Babulo. Their main task was to watch over the herds of buffalo which belonged to their masters. In time, however, the descendants of the Roma started farming near the animal pastures and enclosures they guarded. Now many of this group claim these plots of land as their own based on long-term occupancy rights.

The hamlet of Roma was created after independence by the then Fretilin government in recognition of the Roma people’s part in the struggle for independence. There can be no doubt that the aspiration of the people of Roma hamlet resonated with Fretilin’s rhetoric concerning putting an end ‘to all forms of domination of our people’ (Jolliffe 1978, 331). Despite their gains in achieving recognition in the eyes of the state, however, the people of Roma hamlet remain marginalised within the *suku*.

Discussing relations of dependency and *atan* in Babulo is a sensitive issue. For example, at first members of chiefly houses were reluctant to speak to me about the people of Roma hamlet, but as time went past and in more relaxed settings, they would let down their guard. Although there is a general consensus that they should no longer be referred to as such, members of the chiefly houses and main ritual houses continue to identify the people of Roma hamlet as former *atan*. In hushed and embarrassed tones, I was told that they are sometimes pejoratively referred to as *kilat no musan* (guns and bullets) (see above). Some members of chiefly houses told me that during the Indonesian times, education had a levelling effect, and ‘people like the Roma’ were able to improve their situation through economic activity and employment. A middle-aged member of one of the main ritual houses suggested to me that levelling social relations was not necessarily a good thing and that social tensions were a result of people ‘like the Roma’ “not knowing their place”.⁷

During the course of my fieldwork one incident in particular highlighted the reality and continued social exclusion of some members of Roma hamlet. In 2006, members of the house of Aha Bu’u (the ancestral house of the former *liurai* and *xefe suku* of Babulo) began collecting material to rebuild their ancestral house. In the past, the ancestors of the people of Roma hamlet would have performed this task as servants to the house of Aha Bu’u. In this instance, however, and perhaps

as a result of the Roma community organisation to assert their rights in the eyes of the State, the headman of Aha Bu'u had arranged with the new headman of Roma hamlet to recruit members of the hamlet to collect *unu* (T: *tali metan*, Bot: *arenga pinnata*), a type of fibre obtained from black sugar palm, for which they would receive cash in exchange.

One morning, as I made my way to a wake near the secondary school and old-*posto* of Uato-Lari Leten I was stopped by two men, one of whom was a local secondary school teacher. They told me that a murder had just been committed a few hundred metres up the road. A Roma man who had been collecting *unu* for the house at Aha Bu'u had killed the Roma hamlet chief with a machete. Later, I received news that the suspect had handed himself in to local police and was being detained at the sub-district police post in Darabai. In the village, rumours began to spread about the incident. The general agreement was that the suspect had acted out of desperation. A witness to the incident said that the suspect had approached the hamlet chief to discuss the payment for some *unu* he had collected for the house of Aha Bu'u. But the hamlet chief informed him that he was not permitted to collect *unu* and refused to pay him. At this, I was told, the suspect grew agitated threatening the hamlet chief and declaring, "What can I do? I have no land to farm and I cannot collect *unu*? How am I going to feed my family?", He then struck the hamlet chief with his machete and broke down.

The incident prompted much discussion about the predicament of those who do not have access to land or depend on others to gain access to land and other resources within the village. I was told that while the suspect did in fact farm a small piece of land, he had eleven children to clothe, feed and send to school and no means of earning cash. The teacher I had met in the morning suggested that as a citizen of independent Timor-Leste everyone had the same rights to access land and other natural resources; a member of one of the senior ritual houses, however, argued that if the Roma wanted land and other resources they should return to their village of origin.

The nature of social relations between Roma and other groups present in Babulo is more complex than the story above suggests. Descendants of Roma have become 'incorporated' into various 'chiefly' (*liurai*) and 'commoner' (*ema/povo*) ancestral houses including the house of the former *liurai* and *xefe de suku* as well as the houses of the *liurai rai nain* (N: *rea netana*, E: source of the land). Over time, some descendants of former slaves and their former masters have become kin either by birth, or more rarely, through marriage. Yet, unless they are officially adopted by their former masters' house, the descendants of *atan* are commonly considered to be dependents not descendants of the house (see also, Hoskins 2004). While this mechanism of partial or nominal incorporation into a house group is commonly used to cover a range of non-ideal marriage arrangements (see

Fitzpatrick, McWilliam, and Barnes 2012; Barnes 2017), the fact remains that there are no socially recognised *atan* ancestral houses and as such the descendants of *atan* remain on the margins of customary social arrangements.

During my fieldwork in Babulo and elsewhere in Timor-Leste, I also encountered other perhaps more ambiguous yet common forms of servitude and dependency affecting men, women and children. The transfer of people between houses has historically occurred in the context of marriage exchanges between fertility-givers and fertility-takers (Bovensiepen 2015). Bovensiepen has described how marriages between *liurai* in Funar sometimes involved fertility-givers 'giving' slaves or one or two children from a commoner house to their fertility-takers along with other gifts such as cloth and pigs (2015, 113). While expressed in the language of kinship such transfers reveal the stark status inequalities that persist in Timor-Leste, particularly in cases where houses of 'chiefly' status request the payment of debts from their fertility-takers (*ibid.*, 114-115).

In Bobonaro district, for example, men can become bonded labour when debt is owed to their bride's father. In the ritual community of Leosibe, the practice of uxorilocal residence continues whereby a husband must reside in his father-in-law's house and work on his land until marriage debts are repaid either to an agreed amount or in full. During this time any children born of the marriage do not inherit from their father's descent line but the descent group of their mother (Fitzpatrick, McWilliam, and Barnes 2012).

In Babulo, debts between fertility-givers and fertility-takers could (and do) involve the transfer of a person. Depending on the wealth and status of individual families, some households include one or two distant to destitute kin, or individuals who are the descendants of *atan*. Although these household members are not spoken of as servants or *atan* but as 'family,' they are socially inferior and under obligation to serve other members of the household. In exchange for food, shelter and, in some cases an education, these dependent household members are expected to perform a number of tasks including cooking, fetching firewood and water, working the fields and caring for younger children. While other household members also take part in these activities, often the main burden of this work falls on these dependents.

One family in Babulo took on a child as a ward or foster child (*oan hakiak*). Described to me as the child of a 'poor relative', the boys' status was not equal to other children of the immediate family who were also raised as *oan hakiak*. Although he went to school and played with the other children of the family, he was expected to do much of the manual labour of the household. In her ethnography of Funar, Bovensiepen recounts how one young man made explicit the connection between fostering and slavery: "there are two types of foster children (*oan hakiak*): real foster children and slaves. But no one talks about this anymore. Nowadays we just call them all *walin* (younger siblings)" (2015, 113).

The practice of taking orphans or removing children from their parents is complicated by the Indonesian occupation when East Timorese children were taken by Indonesian soldiers. East Timorese children were frequently ‘recruited’ by the Indonesian military to perform menial tasks and many others were forcibly removed from their families and taken to be raised in Indonesia. The conditions that these children encountered varied greatly, while some were cared for and educated others were not so fortunate (van Klinken 2012; CAVR 2013). Similarly, women were often ‘married’ (often under coercion) to Indonesian soldiers or kept as sexual slaves (CAVR 2013). The historic reality of the taking of war captives, slavery and servitude, both in Timor-Leste and other parts of Indonesia, may well have provided a precedent for the actions of the Indonesian military and others in this regard.

Beyond the framework of kinship relations there are other cases that blur the boundaries between orphan/domestic, servant/slave, person/possession. For example, in addition to the boy, the family discussed above had also taken in and given shelter to a woman with a history of mental illness who had been abused and accused of witchcraft by her own relatives. Theoretically, she was free to leave but in practice she was indebted to the household and would have found it very difficult to do so. While the living conditions that this woman and the foster child experienced were harsh, they were not as desperate as that of another woman who lived with family of chiefly descent. Although I was never able to speak to her directly, this young woman was clearly the servant of the family. Subjected to verbal and physical abuse by the women of the house, she was tied to the household by status, bonds of personal obligation and fear.

Agency, dependency and kinship

What the descendants of the Roma, the foster-child and female servants described above have in common is that they are all formally denied agency in one way or another; however, they are people with will and desires, who can and do act—even if their actions are heavily constrained by their structural position in society (see Hoskins 2004, 92). Social inequalities express themselves in cultural forms and it is often from within a shared cultural framework that individuals and groups seek to act out their aspirations and desires (see Appadurai 1996; Ortnor 2006).

Drawing on Bourdieu’s notions of the ‘rules and strategies’, Hoskins argues that marriage in Sumba is a key arena where the “games of social status are played”. In order to be considered full subjects, people of ‘slave’ descent must find ways of manipulating the ‘rules of marriage’ to achieve some degree of freedom (Hoskins 2004, 92). In Babulo, descendants of *atan* have sought to manipulate the ‘rules’ of

the game of social incorporation. Not only have they achieved independence and recognition in the eyes of the state following the creation of their own administrative hamlet (see above), they have also re-negotiated their position within the local ritual community.

In the context of political violence that erupted in Uato-Lari sub-district during the Presidential campaign of 2007, the people of Roma hamlet ritually re-affirmed their allegiance to the chiefly houses of their former masters and the houses of the local *liurai rai nain* (N: *rea netana*, E: *source of the land*) by swearing under-oath to protect the domain under the leadership of the former *liurai* (hereditary chief) and *xefe de suku*. Such a move may at first sight appear to be counterproductive to efforts to assert their civil and political rights; however, in renewing their commitment to the chiefly houses of the domain, the people of Roma achieved recognition in the eyes of the ritual community independently of their former masters. During the rice harvest of 2008, for the first time, the people of Roma hamlet were called by name to receive their portion of the ritual meal and ancestral blessings—an acknowledgement of their collective rights to independent group identity.

At an individual level, descendants of slaves can also seek to renegotiate their status by mobilising resources, to improve their condition and achieve social recognition. For example, in 2006 I met a teacher Alberto, who lived in a modest house in the Indonesian-era settlement of Kampung Baru.⁸ Alberto, whom everyone referred to as ‘Mestre Alberto’ is a descendant of former slaves. I was told that Alberto was a messenger, fixer and go-between who served the Source of the Land. The first time I met him he was negotiating the procurement of animals necessary for a ritual sacrifice to be performed by the Source of the Land on behalf of the construction company building the bridge across the Be-Bui river. At the time, he was somewhat flustered finding himself accused of making money from the contractors by members of a subsidiary house of the Source of the Land. Five years later, during another period of fieldwork, I was surprised to find Alberto one afternoon deep in conversation with one of the senior ritual elders of Babulo, the *liurai* Source of the Land (N: *liurai rea netana*, T: *liurai rai nain*). It was immediately apparent to me that his situation had changed from the last time I had been in Babulo. While in the past I had seen him address ritual elders with a degree of humility and servitude, he now sat confidently opposite Source of the Land dressed in new clothes, his fingers adorned with gold rings and a visible thick gold chain around his neck. In the intervening five years I discovered that Alberto had been able to accumulate a small fortune renting out his house to Chinese technicians working on the national electricity grid and had established a few businesses of his own. He still served the Source of the Land as a fixer and negotiator, but his social standing had improved somewhat. When I inquired about his status to members of the Source of the Land’s house, I was told that Alberto’s ancestors had *always*

traditionally served as intermediaries between the Source of the Land and other houses—the suggestion being that Alberto's ancestors had always been 'more than' slaves. Rather than seek status and power from other sources of authority, such as the state for example, Alberto continued to 'serve' the Source of the Land, investing in custom to enhance his status within the ritual community. Following a familiar strategy of incorporation and accommodation of outsiders, the Source of the Land was able to benefit from Alberto's wealth and connections while reaffirming their authority and legitimacy.

Returning to the cases of contemporary forms of dependency and servitude described above, those unable to mobilise individual or collective resources remain marginalised or exert their limited agency by resorting to either clandestine or more visible forms of resistance and rebellion. For example, once he was of age and finished primary school, the foster-child from Babulo ran away to Dili, the capital. The city offered some anonymity, but he could not cut ties completely with the family. Given shelter by a relative, he continued to meet with the sons and daughters of his foster-parents in order to gauge the likelihood of reconciliation or possibility of continued support. The woman with mental health issues, who was taken in by the family I lived with was known to have 'bouts of madness' and disappear for several days. The other of the women of the household confided in me that during this time she usually returned to her husband's house. The young woman, who served a prominent household and was perhaps the person with least agency I encountered, was nevertheless able to rebel in her own way, and on at least one occasion violently. Pushed to the limits while the husband was away in Dili she lashed out at his wife and sister forcing them to seek shelter in the house of my host family for several days until she had calmed down.

Conclusion

In this paper I sought to reconsider the historical category of *atan* in Timor-Leste and its significance to contemporary social relations. By drawing attention to the different meanings of the word *atan* and the way *atan* were historically portrayed in the literature, I called into question understandings of *atan* that tend to reflect Euro-centric notions of 'slave' and 'slavery' based on experience of the Atlantic slave trade (see Miers and Kopytoff 1977). While rejecting these narrow correspondences with the notion of 'slave' and 'slavery', I have illustrated the myriad of ways the social category of *atan* persists today and how individuals and groups seek to transform or resist categorisation. This is by no means an exhaustive survey or analysis—there are modern forms of slavery, servitude and dependency present in Timor-Leste, including those linked to the trafficking of humans, and the conditions

of workers, domestic and other. My aim here is to start a conversation and open up avenues for further research.

I have focused in this paper on my own research conducted mainly in the village of Babulo; however, since my initial fieldwork in Timor-Leste the rate of migration from rural to urban centres has increased dramatically, particularly among the 15-35 age group. Often migrants are supported by their parents or relatives already settled in urban centres like Dili. Shame and fear of stigma characterises conversations about *atan* in Timor-Leste. While social categories are well known at village level this is less true of urban settings where the heterogenous population provides a degree of anonymity. Yet, Silva's research on marriage practices in Dili suggests class, family trajectories and education play an important part in shaping urban-based marriage negotiations, and the suspicion of *atan* ancestry feeds into distinctions and prejudices that revolve around the notion of *ema foho* and *ema Dili* (Silva 2018). This raises questions regarding the spatial and social mobility of people on the margins, descendants of *atan* or in positions of servitude, their capacity to access resources through education and employment and/or transcend their social categorisation through strategic alliances.

The question of the persistence of social categories extends more generally to the growing population especially in urban centres, the emergence of a new middle-class and the growth in social and economic inequality. In his discussion of metaphors of slavery in Timor, Kammen raises questions regarding the social origins of East Timorese militia members. In Lautém, militia members tended to be recruited from the descendants of former *atan* (F: *akanu*) while in Liquiçá militia leaders mobilised plantations labourers, former *asuliar* (Portuguese: *auxiliaries*). Kammen speculates that “those at the bottom of the social scale may well have feared that independence would mean the reassertion of *liurai* or landlord power, and hence the revival of internal social stratification” (Kammen 2010, 272). The same questions could be asked in relation to the origins and structure of East Timorese martial-arts groups and other gangs or, in relation to new political movements that seek to represent “the voice of the oppressed” (*ibid.*).

Across both rural and urban Timor-Leste, the category of *atan* persists and speaks to the reality of unpaid labour not only of women but also vulnerable men and children in contemporary society (see Introduction, this volume, 10-11). It also draws our attention to other entanglements between community-based and market-driven values and arrangements. As observed by McWilliam (see Chapter 13, this volume) and Palmer (2010, 2017), the resurgence of customary or community exchanges that underpin the relations of dependency from which the category of *atan* emerge, is occurring in the context of political and economic transition to a largely neoliberal economy and governance regime (see Introduction, this volume, 19). However, in this context, and perhaps against neoliberal logics,

individuals and groups, such as Alberto described above, choose to invest in the community economy seeking social integration and prestige within kin-based networks of gift exchange and alliance (see Chapter 5, this volume). In making these strategic investments they actively seek to re-negotiate and re-define their *atan* status within, and not beyond, the community-based economy.

To conclude, relationships involving *atan* are often presented as an extension of kinship relations. Some argue this strategy has been used as a moral backing for slavery around the world (see Meillassoux 1991). Refocussing on both the nature of gift exchange and dependency in Timor-Leste may shed new light on the boundaries between freedom and disenfranchisement, and just how fragile these boundaries may be (see Hoskins 2004, 90).

Notes

- ¹ Slaves formed part of tribute provided by vassal kingdoms to larger coastal kingdoms who traded with outsiders (Forman 1977).
- ² For example, in Babulo a group of war-captives were incorporated into the local house-based social structure. Incorporation involved the exchange of gifts, and the granting of a *rota* (sceptre, rod) from the sacred house of the source of the land to the in-coming group. Slaves may well have been part of these exchanges (Barnes 2017; see also Kammen 2010).
- ³ Author's translation from original Portuguese.
- ⁴ According to Clarence-Smith (1992) "chiefs, headmen, and leading warriors disposed of considerable numbers of slaves long after the export trade in slaves had been stopped, and it was only in the mid-1900s that the Portuguese made hesitant moves to abolish slavery".
- ⁵ Clarence-Smith (1992) suggests that local potentates had the right to *corvée* labour to cultivate their specially demarcated plots or tend to their livestock well into the 1920s. It is possible that individuals entered into arrangements with local rulers and land-owners as a means of avoiding taxation. However, how common or widespread these forms of 'resistance' were, requires further investigation.
- ⁶ Of interest here is that the word '*asu*' often used as an insult in a derogatory manner to deprive a person of dignity and personhood, is sometimes used as a form of self-referential humility—much in the same way as the expression '*Atan hau*' is used in Tetum. For example, in a ritual setting in Babulo persons refer to themselves as '*asu*' and not '*ema*' in deference to the ancestors.
- ⁷ Underpinning this comment is an understanding of local social organisation predicated on intricate networks of affiliation and alliance within and between ancestral houses that serve to legitimate and confirm the relative standing and entitlements as well as differential social ranking (Fitzpatrick et al. 2012).
- ⁸ Alberto is a pseudonym.

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