

Fataluku Ritual Houses: Status, Relation, and Renewal

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Abstract

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 Indonesian occupation was particularly strong and prolonged (McWilliam 2020), Fataluku communities were subject to 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 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 highlights both Fataluku pragmatism and their adaptive readiness to accommodate change, while maintaining their commitment to ancestral spirit ecologies.

Keywords: Timor-Leste, Ritual house, custom, Fataluku, governance

Fataluku Houses and Hearths

In the most easterly region of Timor-Leste can be found examples of the aesthetically striking Fataluku ritual houses, known generically in the Fataluku language as *le ia valu* (stilt houses). They provide contrasting and comparative examples of the vital role that ancestral house structures play in the enactment of social relations and the reproduction of alliance and spiritual relationships that constitute Fataluku living communities. Like the social qualities of many other Timorese sacred houses (generically: *uma lulik*), the dispersed membership of any Fataluku ritual or origin houses is defined through agnatic kinship to paternal male ancestors (F: *calu ho papu*).¹ They are derived in turn from a common founding figure and original mythic settlement site (F: *lata irinu*) which may be marked with an altar post (F: *ia*

¹ Systems mirrored in the matrilineal reckoning of Tetum-speaking southern coast communities and upland Bunak language groups where agnation follows female descent.

mari tuliya—footsteps of the ancestors) or other significant topographical features in the landscape. In this latter respect, people recognise a variety of large coralline boulders and rocky outcrops as the ‘fossilised’ remnants of ancestral sea-going boats (F: *loiasu mataru*) that ‘beached’ on Timor in the mythic past.²

The origins of the named ‘house’ community form the basis of authoritative claims to social and political authority over specified territories via inherited rights over land and its living resources (McWilliam 2011). Fataluku house communities, like their patrilineal counterparts across Timor-Leste, are exogamous, and daughters of the house marry out in exchange for elaborate bridewealth gifts (F: *valahana*). They marry into the houses of their new husbands bringing with them the prospect of babies to ‘strengthen the marriage house’ with new members. These processes of engagement and reciprocal exchange generate life-long bonds of alliance between the ‘marrying’ groups where all key life cycle transitions (especially births, marriages, and deaths) are marked with ritual exchanges and commensal feasting to acknowledge and reiterate the enduring reciprocal ties between them.

Fataluku stilt houses (F: *le ia valu*) are referred to by a variety of more specific names such as, *fia le*, *sei mecen-le*³, *tali sorok le*, and *le lohái*, which all reference different structural variations on a broadly shared design platform (see Lameiras Campagnolo 1975). Standing on solid ironwood posts and beams with intricately carved timber panelling and high roof structures, some of the larger examples of these houses can rise 6 metres or more above the ground, their steep roofs sheathed in tightly fixed layers of black *arenga* palm thatch (F: *fia*). The apex of the roof is usually decorated with a variety of house-specific elements including comb fans (F: *leu loporu*), shell strings with large nautilus shells (F: *liliru*) as well as carved wooden figurines or birds (F: *olo*) referencing their distinctive identity and origin. One variant of these house styles is the grandly decorated and symbolically gendered—male (F: *namí*) and female (F: *tupur*)—double-gendered houses with linked walkways (F: *le amarua*—‘twin’ houses) which are associated with specific, named group traditions.

Fataluku ritual house styles, and their diverse variants, are often assumed by non-Fataluku, to be local equivalents of the familiar sacred house (T: *uma lulik*) found across Timor-Leste; and there are some clear parallels with those traditions. For example, they provide sites for the conduct of sacrificial offerings and

² Most myths of named Fataluku *ratu* (E: clans) have their origins beyond the island of Timor and arrived by diverse forms of travel, including sailing *perahu*, walking along the ocean floor, hitching a ride on a crocodile, or as human transformations of various marine megafauna and other sea creatures (whales, dolphins, dugong).

³ This style of house has an enclosed box-like structure under the elevated main floor and was formerly used as a sleeping space as well as overnight confinement for household slaves (F: *akanu*).

invocations to group ancestors. They also serve as a focus for family celebrations of life cycle transitions, and their specific structural design and decorative built forms are the property of the origin group itself inherited from its founding ancestors. But there are also some important and fundamental differences that distinguish the Fataluku house from comparable *uma lulik* forms elsewhere (see later chapters). Two aspects, in particular, are especially pertinent here.

Firstly, ancestral or origin houses often serve as both a living space for senior households of the group as well as a symbolically charged repository of ancestral sacred objects (F: *falo*, *manuscrito*) and other protective regalia of the lineage (F: *ratu*). The most important element is and remains the installation of the sacred hearth (F: *lafuru* *tei* or *acakaka*), which is always secured opposite the hatchway (F: *wai hula*) in the corner above the eastern facing support pillar (F: *tutu kaka*)⁴ of the house. Indeed, Fataluku have commented to me at different times that the principal role of the ritual house was and remains being to provide a secure repository for the sacred hearth (F: *acakaka*). In other words, the ‘sacrificial hearth’ remains the primary focus for most households in communicative relation with their ancestors, and in many ways, more so in practice than the structure in which it is installed.⁵

In Fataluku cultural practice, the creation of a new sacrificial hearth is a gift from a father to his sons, typically following their marriage and the establishment of a separate household. The process of initiating a new *acakaka* requires the passing of a burning piece of firewood (F: *acakaka nana kafu*) from the father’s ritual hearth (or that of the most senior agnatic male relative) to that of his sons to ignite the new fire. This transfer is one replicated over generations of practice and means that conceptually and ritually, all sacred hearths (*acakaka*) of an origin group (F: *ratu*) are thus ultimately connected to the original hearth of the founding ancestor (the ancient hearth: *acakaka i irinu*). It also follows that there is considerable scope for replication of the house and (sacred) hearth structures among the typically disbursed agnatic group. In this context, it is usually the ‘eldest’ (more senior) hearth and house, that becomes the focus for group rituals. However, it is possible to maintain the integrity of the sacrificial hearth in relation to the collective spirit world without the need to build or rebuild an ancestral house (*le ia valu*) at all. This has been the experience of many Fataluku households following the end of Indonesian occupation when most of these houses were destroyed or had fallen into disrepair. In these cases, it was the sacred hearth (*acakaka*) that was retained as the vital sacrificial link to paternal ancestors. Here, male house members gather at the hearth (F: *acakaka na cuaré*) to seek ancestral protection and share sacrificial

⁴ The *tutu kaka* (E: elder sibling post) is the first to be ‘planted’ and provides what Jim Fox has described as the ‘symbolic attractor’ in the house where key rituals are conducted (see Fox 2006).

⁵ All houses also install a conventional internal hearth (*lafuru*) where meals are prepared.

meat (F: *leura tei :: ipilu tei*) with the ancestral presence. That said, and in terms of the received tradition and its obligations, there is a general and largely unvoiced expectation that, the ritual house (*le ia valu*) of the group—sometimes referred to as the ‘sacred house’ [F: *le tein(u)*—will eventually be constructed as a repository for the ancestral hearth and a site for the conduct of rituals associated with the life cycles of the agnatic kin group.⁶

Secondly, across many traditional politico-ritual structures in Timor-Leste, the domain or territory (F: *mua*, T: *rai*) is constituted in and by a set of original founding houses that provide the functional ritual and political governance of the community, each with its own specific set of roles (e.g., Clamagirand 1975; Forman 1980; Traube 1986). The enduring ritual centre of *Tartehi* in the Mambai domain of Maubisi Mauloko (see Chapter 4) is an exemplary case in point where clusters of ranked *uma lulik*, enjoined though myth and affinal networks of alliance, constitute the contemporary ritual governance structure of the domain. Fataluku customary domains, by contrast, tend to be more singular and smaller in their mythic constitution with relatively little group differentiation. Historically, the creation of settled places (F: *lata*) is generally attributed to the presence of a single founding ancestor or set of brothers. This founder (group) assumes the title of *mua ocawa* (E: lord of the land). Over time, through processes of sacrificial engagement and domestication of the spirit guardian/s of the land (F: *tei ma varin pai'i*)—also referred to as *mua ocawa* (T: *rai na'in*)—the relationship generates a powerful, mutually reinforcing authority over the land and its living resources (McWilliam 2011; Fitzpatrick et al. 2012). This doubly constituted nature of the *mua ocawa* (T: *rai na'in*) between a visible living owner/s and a largely invisible spirit guardian has qualities of consubstantiation—a shared coexistence of substance and authority, and for this reason, a bond that is difficult to usurp and dangerous to ignore.

Over time, others seek to settle and establish social and political relations with the land-owning *mua ocawa* household/agnatic founding group, very often through marriage. In so doing, subsequent settlers are usually granted rights to reside and utilise areas of land under the overall authority of the senior house (F: *mua ocawa*, T: *rai na'in*). Historically, this pattern has played out in variants around a common set of cultural ideas and practices, mediated by warfare and shifting alliances across the Fataluku lands of Lautem (McWilliam 2011). The result of this process of successive and nested partitioning of territory eventually established a diverse number of individuated ‘landowner’ groups (*mua ocawa*) with authority over their respective and geographically limited jurisdictions.

⁶ The Fataluku phrase, *le teinu* (sacred house), is these days usually applied to the Catholic church, but it is not uncommon to refer to the Fataluku stilt house in the same way, possibly to imply nominal equivalence in terms of the sacred.

Historically, the size of Fataluku settlements also tended to be small and relatively mobile. They were typically organised around semi-permanent residential sites, known as *ot(u)* which were composed of separate households and located close to bush gardens (F: *pala*) and other food resources. There was, to my knowledge, relatively little political differentiation and institutionalisation of roles and duties within these bounded domains and between resident lineage groups (*ratu*). But attention to social status differences was highly marked and provided some of the strongest distinguishing socio-structural features of these small settlements. Here, I would like to highlight three dimensions of these social distinctions, all of which have implications for the kinds of residential and ritual structures developed by different groups.

The first dimension is the segmentation over time of the founding kin group (*ratu*) into distinct sibling (birth order) lineages. In Fataluku reckoning, it is the oldest sibling group (F: *moco kaka*- first born), that carries seniority and precedence in terms of authority of the founding group or *ratu*. Younger sibling lineage groups (F: *moco ulu pen(u)* and youngest last born, *moco vehula*) remain integral members of the broader group (*ratu*), but subsidiary in terms of the overall status and seniority of the *moco kaka* lineage. The distinction is an enduring one and a vital point of difference and potential segmentation.⁷

Secondly, among Fataluku *ratu* (E: clan or origin group), membership is composed of three clearly defined classes or caste-like (inherited) categories of people referred to by the terms, *ratu*, *paca*, and *akanu*. They speak to an elite born status (F: *ratu*) a group of ordinary members (*paca*), and a subordinate or slave category of house member (F: *akanu*). These distinctions derive from the mythic past but continue to inform contemporary relations to varying degrees and retain their inherited, discriminatory influence until the present day. The relationship between *ratu* and *paca* is asymmetric and unequal but conventionally respectful and mutually supportive. They refer to one another as ‘siblings’ (i.e. common origins) (elder younger: *noko kaka*).⁸ But their respective standing is potentially a point of tension and resentment which can lead to social division. The slave category

⁷ It is the youngest son, however, who inherits their father’s sacred hearth (*acakaka*) who is said to ‘keep it burning for him’.

⁸ The origins and meaning of the distinction between *ratu* and *paca* segments of the ancestral group are subject to much uncertainty and dispute. They appear to represent a form of dual structure within the descent group now much modified. Lameiras Campagnolo (1975: 43) has discussed one mythic version (among many) of the relationship in which one group (F: *paca*) were responsible for producing consumption goods from the land (food and palm liquor), while the counterpart group (*ratu*) were responsible for producing exchange goods, including the woven textiles (*lao* or *tais*) produced by their wives. The distinction was subsequently translated into enduring status distinctions which is reflected in the value accorded different woven designs (see also Forshee 2014).

(*akanu*) refers to households whose ancestors became war captives or had been made destitute by former colonial taxation regimes (*finta, capitação*) (Gunn 1999) and subsequently indentured themselves to a more powerful *ratu* benefactor. They are said to become ‘servers and helpers’ in the ‘house of the Ratu’ and remain low-status members of the group over generations.

The third key status distinctions are those recognised between the founding *ratu* lineage/s (F: *mua ocawa*) and subsidiary in-marrying (*affinal*) households from other *ratu* groups,⁹ which establish their own residential presence with the permission of the landowners. Elite *ratu* land-owning groups (*mua ocawa*) prefer to marry off their daughters to high-status, *ratu* settlers (in a local version of the stranger king mythology; see Sahlins 2008). In this way, subsequent settlers can secure rights in land, while both groups preserve their high social status and that of their children over generations of continuing marriage alliance. As in-marrying affines and cultivators of the land, migrants are said to enjoy the ‘oil and fat’ (F: *mina ho vai’a*) of the land controlled by their affinal land-owning hosts (*mua ocawa*). Conversely, a marriage with a *paca* or lesser-status family, is socially damaging particularly for a *ratu* woman and her subsequent children. For that reason, close attention is paid (to this day) to the history and quality of the ancestral pedigree of prospective marriage partners to ensure that young people marry partners of commensurate status.¹⁰

The point to draw from these closely observed status distinctions is that they also translate in de-facto customary terms, into implicit differential rights and capacities to construct decorated Fataluku ritual houses. Historically, for example, it was really only households with *ratu* status that had the relevant authority and economic wherewithal to build the larger and elaborately decorated stilt houses such as, *Le lohai*, *Fia Le* or *Sei Mecen le*. Similarly, it was expected that ‘younger brother’ (F: *noko*) lineages could not build larger houses than their elder sibling relatives (F: *kaka*), and these aspects of status became much more evident with the success of the Colonial ‘pacification’ campaigns in Lautem from the early twentieth century and the pressure to concentrate populations for purposes of control and governance (McWilliam 2007; Péliissier 1996). In the process, greater numbers of co-located customary house structures (*le ia valu*) were established, and the respective status of different households (and their implicit financial capacity) was signalled more publicly in the divergent scale and variable decorative splendour of the House structures that were subsequently built.

⁹ Many groups acquired settler rights in territory through political alliances or protection during former internecine warfare, which have been subsequently strengthened through marriage alliance.

¹⁰ One of the expressed concerns of parents with children taking up labour migration options to the United Kingdom and Australia has been that they might find love matches with a lower-status partner and bring loss of face upon the family.

Rebuilding Fataluku Ancestral Houses

Variations on the distinctive Fataluku thatched stilt houses were common sights in Lautem among the scattered villages (*suco*) and hamlets (*povoçao*) of the territory during the latter years of Portuguese colonial rule. But as elsewhere in Timor-Leste, the ravages of the Indonesian military invasion and subsequent armed struggle for independence along with the widespread use of intimidation for political purposes, saw many of these iconic structures destroyed—their membership displaced and resettled beyond locally claimed territories and into more concentrated settlements along main roads. During the repressive years of occupation with restrictions on gatherings and free movement, the capacity to repair or rebuild the iconic ancestral houses was severely constrained and often discouraged by successive governing administrations.¹¹

In the years since liberation, high levels of poverty and continuing poor employment prospects have also delayed the re-development of Fataluku decorated stilt houses. Indeed, for many years, most people elected to construct much simpler houses including a range of commonly seen residential dwellings such as the one room, rectangular stilt houses (F: *cu*)¹² of split bamboo cladding and palm thatch, or small concrete block houses (F: *le pitine*) sometimes with palm rib cladding and re-used corrugated iron roofs. Until recently, the difficulty of mobilising a group-wide commitment to re-construct economically and ritually expensive ancestral origin houses, has precluded such undertakings.

It is only in recent years that there has been a flourishing re-emergence of *le ia-valu* house projects. This has been made possible by a growing prosperity and improved household incomes, derived in part from the flow of government social transfers (for veterans of the war of liberation or their families) and old age pensions (Wallis 2019), but also from the flow of cash remittances delivered by youthful labour migrants working in a range of comparatively well-paid factory and shift work on Portuguese passports in the United Kingdom (McWilliam 2020).¹³ The impetus for this renewed enthusiasm for reinstating lineage-based ritual houses (*le ia valu*), I would argue, is a shared sense among House members of a

¹¹ Ironically and despite the loss of many of these structures, the Indonesian government often used the emblematic Fataluku ritual house as a symbol of East Timorese cultural heritage (see McWilliam 2021).

¹² The term '*cu*' (and *moh*) refers to different basic shelters. For example, *lupu cu* is a basic garden shelter and *Tua moh* is a resting place/shelter for distilling palm liquor.

¹³ A practice and opportunity now much attenuated following the implementation of Brexit regulations restricting migrant access to British employment opportunities. That said, many Fataluku households have relatives who remain in the UK and continue to send cash remittances (see McWilliam 2020, 2022).

need to create a focal point for the ritual celebration of life cycle transitions and a venue for periodic commensal engagements with the wider kin group and alliance network (see also Viegas 2019).

In the following examples, I highlight something of the significance of the Fataluku ancestral stilt house in these multiple dimensions. Their re-development and contemporary prominence provide an emphatic expression of the continuing value placed on the protective ancestral presence and the enduring sacrificial relationship that informs practical action in the world. They remain sites for the articulation of social status and the public celebration of relational group identity and social alliance. They are also a built form where innovation and adaptive modification to customary building practices reflect pragmatic contemporary choices and changing resource options.

Innovation and Renewal

The widespread interest in redeveloping an ancestral ritual house, observed in the increasing numbers of new and refurbished *le ia valu* appearing across the settled landscapes of Lautem, all reflect an extended process of negotiation and debate, that is entered into by members and affiliates of the House/Ratu group. Rebuilding a ritual house and especially installing the sacred hearth (F: *lafuru tei*), is conventionally a collaborative project between agnatic male members (F: *noko kaka*|| *kaka ho pal*) and their affinal relatives (via married daughters and sisters of the House—F: *tupurmoko*, *leren ho moco*). The latter are invited to contribute labour and reciprocated gifts commensurate with exchanges played out in the context of weddings or funeral gifts and commensality (McWilliam 2011).

As a ritual focus and gathering centre for constituent households, the purpose-built stilt house (*le ia valu*) is linked through patrification to a core lineage group of ‘fathers’ (F: *palu*), brothers (F: *noko kaka*), and sons (F: *moco nami*). The activity brings together the normally dispersed house membership into a series of discussions to secure commitments pledged towards the House-building project. There are substantial financial and time commitments involved here, including the sourcing and cost of building materials, securing skilled practitioners to manage the construction, and committing to the high cost of sacrificial animals and commensal feasting that accompany the many stages of construction. The latter practices are crucial elements ensuring the integrity and strength of the building and the spiritual protection of its broader membership. The re-building and inauguration of a Fataluku sacred house (*le ia valu*) is therefore a major commitment for the relevant group of inter-related households, which in the process, makes visible the relational field of sociality that comprises the kin group and its affinal allies while reinforcing their group identity and standing in the community.

The widespread reconstruction of Fataluku ritual houses across Lautem reproduce many of the distinctive structural forms and decorative features of the traditional house styles. In many cases, carved panels and other decorative elements are salvaged from previous weathered structures and re-purposed in the new constructions, providing significant points of continuity with previous ancestral houses. However, Fataluku have also embraced two key innovations of the traditional design. The first of these changes is a shift away from solid timber support posts and cross beams that form the structural base of the house and towards the use of moulded concrete to replicate the structures. In a pattern replicated widely across the settled landscape, in place of the familiar, four, hand-carved and shaped support posts (F: *tutu*) topped with encircling rectangular, carved wooden disks (F: *sala fuka*) and massive timber cross beams (F: *fatu, pokala*), the whole base structure is now frequently fashioned out of moulded concrete. Similarly, instead of the thick black *fia* roof thatch traditionally fashioned from Arenga palm webbing, there are sheets of variably blackened corrugated iron roofing (T: *kalen*), designed to mimic the customary pattern of older-style buildings. In both cases, the effect is striking in its resemblance to the general appearance of the original timber and thatch models but has the distinctive advantage of being far more durable. The changes highlight the two principal points of weakness in the traditional timber and thatch structures that are susceptible to weathering effects and deterioration over time from the impact of borers and rot. Even with regular maintenance and repairs to the roof, the old-style structures can rapidly fall into disrepair within a decade or two.

A second motivating factor in the decision to shift away from the traditional building materials, has been the change in the availability and practicality of building resources. On one hand, the effort and specialist skills required for fashioning secure palm thatch roofing material has been in long-term decline raising the cost of the exercise. On the other hand, the widespread pattern of re-building residential dwellings across Lautem, financed by improving prosperity and particularly by the flows of cash remittances from youthful Fataluku participating in transnational labour migration (McWilliam 2020, 2022), has attracted greater supplies of concrete and corrugated iron roofing to local markets and trading centres. The result has been a confluence of beneficial changes that have facilitated a pragmatic shift to an alternative cost-effective house design modification.

These two design features of the traditional Fataluku stilt house are striking innovations to what are usually, long-standing stylistic conventions reinforced by customary sanctions against transgressive action. Elsewhere in Timor-Leste, for example, the idea of building sacred structures (*uma lulik*) with concrete and corrugated iron is generally strongly resisted, mainly out of fear of retribution from angry ancestors. There are similar kinds of sentiments expressed by some

Fataluku cultural advocates and observers of these developments who remain uncomfortable and unconvinced about the new trend. They consider the innovation to be a risky practice that may yet rebound on those involved in the form of illness, misfortune, and loss. Others appear more sanguine on these matters, such as my Fataluku colleague who explained that, “we don’t mention the changes in the house [to the ancestors]; we just refer to the *le tein* (*uma lulik*) and invite their assistance.”¹⁴ Either way, all perform the requisite divinations and sacrificial offerings to secure the agreement of House ancestors about the change and protect its residents.¹⁵ Another interlocutor observed that there was likely to be an element of prestige or pride in one’s extended family group and public, signalling that they are able to display a fine new *le ia valu*. The new streamlined and functional innovations provide a desirable way to achieve that result and garner community esteem in the process.

My friend, Edmundo, dismissed this trend as an indulgent household display of financial capacity and group aggrandisement where people are ‘looking for a name’. “It makes no difference,” he added sardonically, “because everyone knows who they are,” and in so saying highlighted the entrenched nature of inherited or inter-generational status differences that cannot be easily undone by wealth effects.¹⁶

Either way and judging by the prevalence of these new design features, it seems that a significant change to the long-established set of customary procedures and protocols has been realised and provisionally accepted. The developments announce, in a modified but celebratory way, a popular revival of the uniquely styled, Fataluku origin house, but also an openness to adapting and incorporating new materials into an old design.¹⁷

¹⁴ This is someone of a senior local status but whose ratu origin group have not yet re-built their own *le ia valu* or *le teino*, since the late colonial Portuguese period.

¹⁵ Part of this process involves placing small, forked sticks above the doorway on which are placed chicken eggshells (F: *o’o le’u utanatana*) that have been activated with protective mantras against the ingress of unwelcome or wild spirit forces (F: *ono e’e jete*).

¹⁶ Fataluku acknowledge the right to build large stilt houses with the phrase *Fia le moco, Taru le moco*, which might be glossed as ‘a child of a “great” house’, where *fia* is the Arenga palm thatch, and *taru*, the intricately tied forest vines that secure the thatch of the house.

¹⁷ These adaptations also find willing participants in other regions of Timor-Leste. Among the members of Mambai *uma lulik* (M: *fad luli*) in Ainaru, a rethinking of older practices in the reconstruction of their sacred centres has seen a recent trend to install reinforced concrete support pillars in their otherwise intricately worked traditional timber and thatch houses. The process, while radically different from the ritually complex acquisition of support tree trunks from the forests, still involves a lively participation of house group extended family members in the ritual ‘planting’ of the pillars in the required configuration.

Renewing a Naja Ratu ritual house

On the northern coast between the villages of Lautem and Com, several new settlements have been established over the last decade, carving out housing and garden space from the dense *gewang* palm forests (*Corypha elata*) on either side of the road. In one house yard, a fine new Fataluku *le ia valu* has been constructed and commissioned for use by a lineage group of the Naja Ratu clan. The core group includes two brothers, their sons, and families (now some 20 people), most of whom have relocated to the new settlement taking advantage of available land, road access, and electricity connections. Their decision to restore their *le ia valu* (sacred house) in the new settlement exemplifies aspects of the current widespread enthusiasm for reviving ritual structures.

The new ritual house is a variation on the general Naja Ratu (clan) House design (F: *fia le*) but reflects distinctive decorative elements that signify sub-group identity and reference the historical connection to a specific ancestral genealogical path of the descent group. It also features modern elements and reclaimed materials from the former ritual structure in the old settlement of Serenida on the Nari plateau (*Planalto do Nari*) some 8km to the south. A decision to relocate the structure to Ipairira was precipitated by the death of one of the senior group members and the dilapidated state of the ritual house.

The new House was built in several stages. The first and most significant ceremonial occasion was held at the original settlement site of the old Naja Ratu ritual house in Serenida, to ‘inform’ the house ancestors (F: *calu ho papu*) of the decision to relocate the structure. Sacrificial offerings of meat (F: *leura tei::ipilu tei*) were made in the customary way as well as the obligatory divinations (F: *lonia, mu’u fuka totole*) to confirm that there was no transgressive or moral impediment to the move. On this occasion, the group invited both sets of affinal relations to participate in the process, all of whom are expected to exchange gifts on the occasion. This included the relatives known as *omara* and *ara ho pata* (base and post) (T: *umane*), who represent the wives’ and mothers’ natal houses of Naja group men, as well as the *tupurmoko* (i.e., the daughters and sisters of the Naja ratu¹⁸ group including their respective husbands and children) (T: *fetosawa*). All attendees participate in the vital first stage of construction, namely securing the major timber support pillars (*tutu*) for the elevated house design. Beginning with the east-facing first post (*tutu kaka*), a large pig was killed as a blood sacrifice to ‘strengthen the post’, and the meat used in the sacrifice (F: *leura tei*) was consumed by male members of Naja ratu, while the remaining muscle meat was distributed to the representatives of the *tupurmoko*

¹⁸ Referred to formally as *Naja fanar* (women of Naja)

groups. Each subsequent post required another pig sacrifice (or goat) to ‘reinforce’ the supporting base for the series of cross beams that lock the structure in place.

In addition to a commensal meal to celebrate this stage of the construction, all the assembled *tupurmoko* affines, received a blessing from the ritual leader of the Naja group (F: *laficaru*), which comprised a betel nut and water mixture (F: *pua ira*) spat/blown onto their foreheads. Designed as an invocation for a ‘healthy life’ (F: *pupuko lauhé/lauhutē*), the action also references the blood of fertility that has been transferred from the wives’ natal group (Naja) to that of their husbands. At the close of the events, all the participants were also ritually cooled (from the potentially dangerous heat (F: *timiné*) of ancestral proximity), with a sprinkling of coconut juice and blood (F: *vata ira*). Here they used a coconut husk implement reminiscent of the liturgical aspergillum used in applications of Catholic holy water.¹⁹

For the Naja family group, a hiatus followed the completion of the first stage, as they continued to assemble the necessary materials to complete the upper section and roof. A second stage of building included completion of the roof cladding and installing the sacred hearth (*lafuru tei*). This work was undertaken by the immediate agnatic family members with assistance from some of their locally resident *tupurmoko* affines. In terms of building materials, and against the concrete trend, a decision was made to source timber for the house posts and structural beams (F: *fara*—ironwood).²⁰ The posts, however, were set within a concrete and stone platform on the ground in a variation on the customary enclosing timber base (F: *tuku*). Another innovation was the choice of a corrugated iron roof in place of the customary *Arenga* palm (*fia*) thatch (see McWilliam 2016). In this case, the roof was initially clad in multi-coloured sheets of iron (white and red) purchased from the Chinese trading stores in Lautem. However, subsequent divinations determined that ancestors were displeased with the choice, and the roof was then painted black to mimic the former thatch cladding style (see Figure 2).

The Naja group ritual house project highlights one example among many similar exercises currently under way across the Fataluku settlements of Lautem as part of the longer-term processes of post-conflict recovery. The re-emergence of these ancestral structures and their adaptive presence in the contemporary environment speak to the convergence of a combination of enabling factors and motivations. They include a gradual improvement in household incomes across the region, combined with a desire to provide a ritual focus for the celebration of life cycle transitions that inform kinship relations and networks of social alliance. They also confirm the continuing powerful and protective influence of ancestors on the lives of the living.

¹⁹ I have often queried the striking similarity in the application of *vata ira* (bloodied coconut water), but Fataluku generally disavow any connection to Catholic practice.

²⁰ The reasons for this are not clear but, in my experience, it is likely to be associated with the unfavourable result of divination signalling ancestral displeasure.



Figure 2: Restored Naja Ratu ritual house (*le ia valu*). Photo credit: Andrew McWilliam

The politics of house construction

Not all ritual house rebuilding projects go smoothly, however. On the deteriorating main road that winds up from the coast at Lautem towards the municipal capital, Los Palos 30km to the south, over several visits from 2018, I had observed the slow construction of a large new Fataluku stilt house (F: *fia le*). The structure also featured the striking design variations on the traditional form, namely the use of pre-cast concrete posts and beams that formed the key structural support elements and the fashioning of a steep black painted corrugated iron roof, mimicking the black *Arenga* palm thatch (*fia*). Discussions with local households in the village of Maina 1 revealed that they were undertaking a new construction of their former ritual house that had long since fallen into disrepair at their previous settlement of Pisa. They had been motivated to initiate construction following a chicken liver divination (F: *aca foté*) undertaken for a very unwell family member that had indicated the need to reinstate the sacred house (*le teino*) to facilitate recovery and ensure the health of the wider group. Over several decades, the group, which comprised the descendants of four brothers, had grown to nearly 100 members who, like the Naja Ratu house community, were motivated to redevelop the ancestral house as a focus for their life cycle celebrations.

Since the decision to recreate their ritual house, new foundational posts and beams had been installed and the appropriate animal sacrifices made to ensure their integrity and strength. The striking new roof had also been partially completed, and there was anticipation that the project would be finalised and inaugurated in the coming months. However, as it turned out, this enthusiasm was evidently misplaced as the project remained unfinished through the following year.

Sometime after my visit to the new *Le ia valu* (*fia le*) under construction, I was introduced to Snr Faustino da Conceição, who had a keen interest in the development in Suco Maina and was highly critical of the construction process. In our extended conversation, he relayed a complicated background story of its provenance and the reasons behind the then (2019) stalled construction. The new House it turned out, was indeed an iteration of the structure that had formerly stood in the settlement of Pisa, but the design recreated another, formerly revered sacred house that once stood at a place named Solo Resi overlooking the Malalada River which flows north to the coast of Lautem. More significantly, the sacred house at Solo Resi had been the focal ritual centre of the former ruling Fataluku family of the area named Uruha'a Ratu which, as far back as 1701, had been recognised by successive Portuguese colonial governments as the ruling house (*regulo*) of the Fataluku Kingdom of Sarau (see Leitão 1948). This former 'kingdom' encompassed the northwestern coast and hinterland of the contemporary Lautem Municipality, and the ruler had been closely allied with the Portuguese colonial government. The



Figure 3: New House construction in Maina 1. Photo Credit: Andrew McWilliam

last ruler of Sarau, a man named Dom Paulo, governed until the early twentieth century. He was a member of the Uruha'a Ratu clan group and had been baptised with the Christian family name of Da Conceição.

The wholly dilapidated state of their former sacred house and the absence of a suitable replacement was a key motivation for the agnatically related Uruha'a families in Suco Maina to relocate and rebuild the house at a new site in the village (itself established in the 1980s during the Indonesian period of governance (1975-1999). Here, they sought to cater for the members of four agnatically related sibling groups who were looking to enact life cycle rituals and secure the ancestral protection offered by the presence of their own ritual centre within the settlement.

However, according to Faustino, the protagonists in the plans to reconstruct the ancestral house of Uruha'a lacked the authority to lead the process. They belonged to a younger sibling line [*moco ulu pen(u)*] of the main descendants of Uruha'a ratu and therefore required the expressed permission of the senior (oldest brother) agnatic lineage, the *moco kaka* of Uruha'a Ratu, in order to complete the house. More pointedly, Faustino suggested in fact that the protagonists were originally a refugee group (from one of the internecine wars of the late nineteenth century) named Latu Loho Ratu, who had been integrated into the greater Uruha'a Ratu ruling group for political protection. The inference here was that their claims to even a subsidiary sibling status in the origin house were potentially suspect. Either way, when the Maina group belatedly sought the support of their patrilineal 'cousins' (their 'older brothers'—*noko kaka*), a dispute erupted around the protocols and customary authority with the result that their blessing and permission to proceed with the project were withheld resulting in an acrimonious impasse and deferral of any further construction of the house.

At the time of my discussions with Faustino (September 2019), there was no clear resolution in the making. He observed that really the only way forward was for the Maina group to speak 'from' (i.e., on behalf of) Uruha'a Ratu, as a kind of delegated status. "Otherwise," he said, "there will be no one with the rights to make offerings at the sacred hearth (*acakaka*) and eat (sacrificial meat—*leura te'i*) on the platform above"—as is customary for senior members of the ratu. Faustino's comments here speak to the ritual etiquette of sacrifice in relation to the elevated Fataluku *le ia valu*. The entitlement to share and consume sacrificial meat (*leura tei*) that is cooked and presented to the ancestors at the sacred hearth (*aca kaka* or *lafuru tei*) is restricted to male members of the relevant ratu group. But due to the constrained space within the elevated ritual house, it is the higher-status (*ratu*) members of the lineage who take precedence in the ritual enactment. Fataluku allude to this distinction with the metaphor of 'eating (the meat) above' (*le hia nana i leura*) while subsidiary *paca* status agnates and other patrilineal relatives

consume the sacred meat (*leura tei*) below (*mua na'ana*), that is, under the house and its immediate surrounds.²¹

But Faustino also urged patience in the matter and said, “let’s see what happens; already, someone close to them has died suddenly!” And in so saying, he was alluding to the supposed illegitimacy of the protagonists of the Maina village house project and the death that surely signalled the displeasure of their ancestors. Resolution of the dispute was clearly some way off.

Indeed, it was not until late in 2020 during the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic that a path to resolution was negotiated and ultimately resolved. As is often the case with issues of disputes ‘within the house’, at some point there needs to be an acknowledgment of wrongdoing that opens a pathway to acceptance and agreement. Fataluku use the phrase, *horo cuare*²²—a coming together—to resolve their differences. In this case, the senior status of Uruha’a Ratu prevailed and the *uma lisan* (*le’i ia valu*) could be completed along with the gifting of five head of cattle by the ‘younger sibling’ group as restitution.

The stalled plans to develop an ancestrally charged *le ia valu* in Suco Maina are illustrative of a broader range of social and politically charged issues that need to be taken into consideration when deciding to recreate and reinstate any group’s own elevated ritual house. Of critical importance is the need for consensus and participation across the wider lineage of the dispersed *ratu* membership. At the same time, having made the commitment, the emergence of delays and disputes that postpone the completion the project are equally fraught and likely to have serious, often spiritual, consequences that include sudden illness or deaths among the related House group membership. The stalled *Uruha’a ratu* building project in Maina 1 was a case in point where social divisions and status rivalries damaged the prospects for unity within the agnatic community and undermined inter-generational wellbeing.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the resurgence and reappearance of the iconic Fataluku ancestral *le ia valu* stilt houses across the landscape of Lautem over recent years reflects the growing prosperity of households. Many have benefited from government social transfers (pensions, veterans’ payments) (Wallis 2019) and a

²¹ This group can include allied *ratu* men who share agnatic mythic origins but subsequently separated into two descent groups and still refer to one another as siblings (*noko kaka*).

²² The term has similar connotations to the Tetun phrase, *Nahe biti* (rolling out the woven mat of reconciliation).

vibrant flow of remittances from youthful Fataluku labour migrants working in the UK (McWilliam 2020, 2022). The redevelopment of ancestral ritual houses is thus part of a broader process of post-conflict social and economic recovery in the years since the end of occupation and national liberation—one that is directed towards age-old religious and cultural concerns around the health and wellbeing of extended family networks.

The *Ratu* (clan or origin group) specific design features of these distinctive *le ia valu* stilt houses derive from the mythic histories of ancestral groups and reflect their group identity and prominent social status as ‘high’-born members. In this respect, the reappearance of prominent *le ia valu* speaks to both the continuing importance of ancestors and ritual sacrifice/commensality in the life of the agnatic community, but also to a reassertion of prescriptive social status in the public sphere by senior lineage groups—all keen to showcase their ancestral credentials and contemporary economic capacity. As part of this process, Fataluku have been integrating innovative structural elements into the formal designs of their ritual houses. In particular, the use of moulded concrete basal posts and crossbeams along with black-painted corrugated iron are now common features of the characteristic Fataluku *le ia valu*. I interpret these modifications of long-established ancestral designs in terms of a cultural pragmatism and willingness to innovate in at least two vital areas of House design that are susceptible to weathering and decay. In the process and subject to ancestral divinatory agreement, house communities can significantly extend the longevity and utility of the buildings. In these and related ways the Fataluku ‘return to custom’ via the celebratory acknowledgement of sacrificial rituals and revitalisation of ancestral religious practice, reinforces the intimate connections between living households, agnatic communities, and the spiritual blessings derived from ancestral territories and the bountiful natural resources on which their lives and livelihood still depend.

A striking example of these enduring, intimate connections or co-presence (Viegas 2019b) sustained between the living and the ancestral dead may be observed during funerary proceedings honouring the death of senior members of the agnatic group (*ratu*). During such gatherings, a narrative performance known as F: *nololo* (or *nere ca’a*), which can be loosely translated as ‘recounting the path’, is directed towards the spirit of the recently deceased. The intent of this speech performance is to honour the deceased and convey the newly instantiated ancestral spirit (F: *i huma’ara*) back to the ancient founding settlement of the agnatic ancestral group. In this respect, *nololo* recitations represent a kind of spoken rewinding of the deceased’s biography and the significant places and people who figured in their lives along the ancestral path from which they and their kin have come. Performed prior to the burial procession to the graveyard, usually by a senior member of the deceased’s *ratu* group, the hovering spirit is urged to return ‘home’ via the

circuitous pathway of successive former settled places where they will meet their ancestors (*kaka ho palu:: calu ho papu*)²³ and all their immediate family who have pre-deceased them, and remain there at rest and in peace.²⁴ In this way, Fataluku *nololo* eulogies to the dead represent an imaginative reverse recounting of the agnatic (*ratu*) path of origin and of the curation of group identity and affiliation over generations of memorialisation. The performative aspect of *nololo* also reinforces the understanding that the creation of ancestors is not an automatic property of death, but a ritually prescribed process of active intervention by the living descendants to nurture and generate ancestral wellbeing in return for which the ancestors provide a watchful and protective oversight of their living progeny.

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²³ Translated as 'Elder brothers and fathers, grandfathers, and great grandfathers'.

²⁴ In an allusion to this same concept, anthropologist, Maria Lameiras Campagnolo, observed that Fataluku sometimes say of the death of someone that 'they have gone to plant coconuts in the land of the first village' (1975: 75).

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