

# Nation building and resource management: The politics of ‘nature’ in Timor Leste <sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper examines the role of custom and tradition in the process of nation building and resource management in post-independence Timor Leste (East Timor). While customary land tenure is alluded to but not explicitly recognized under the Timorese Constitution, it is clearly stated that all natural resources are owned by the State. However, this paper argues that rather than waiting for the government to create land and resource management related laws, local people in Timor Leste are making and remaking their own laws, mobilizing their customary practices and, increasingly, ‘performing’ their traditions in public demonstrations of their extant capacities. In part, this process can be read as a way of enticing in outsiders, making them a party to the law making process, a witness to its legitimacy. Often critical to such processes, is the ability of local level leaders to draw in outsiders through their engagements with the idea of ‘nature’ – a concept which allows diverse interests to come together in conversation and build relationships despite what is often a dissonance in the meanings and priorities attributed to the concept (see Tsing, A.L., 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford). The paper focuses on a view from the margins – Tutuala in the far east of the country – and ways in which this community is attempting to both resist and embrace the developmental hegemony of a centrist state. This, it is argued, is a case which demonstrates the power of the local (both ritually and politically) to shape and intervene in the national development process and the associated discourses of nature preservation.

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## 1. Introduction

In post-independence Timor Leste people are seeking to rebuild the local and regional social and economic ties which were repressed under the violent twenty-five year

Indonesian military occupation of their country.<sup>1</sup> In the districts, sub-districts and villages across the country people are embracing a dynamic process of cultural revival grounded in the norms and principles of local customs and traditions. This paper explores what this cultural

<sup>☆</sup> In this paper language translations for key Timorese concepts are provided in the national language of Tetum or less frequently in the local language of Fataluku (in which case they are identified as such in the text or by the placement of an F: prior to the English translation).

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<sup>1</sup> The occupation of the country by Indonesia from 1975 was characterized by intensive military control and surveillance of local populations and opposing guerrilla warfare by Timorese forces (CAVR, 2006). The occupation included as well large numbers of civil servants and in some regions the implantation of transmigrants from elsewhere in the Indonesian archipelago and the construction of new settlements. The Timorese suffered abuses of human rights, and the widespread loss of life (c200,000 individuals, CAVR, 2006) and property. Prior to Indonesian rule, Timor Leste was an effective colony of Portugal for more than 400 years. For an account of the Portuguese colonial period and the occupation of Timor Leste by Indonesia, see Dunn (2003).

revival might mean in the context of nation building and resource management. Our central thesis is that while these processes might emanate from the local, they are as much about people seeking a voice in national and regional politics and planning. We describe in detail the activities of one community in the far east of the country and the ways in which they are seeking to combine such a reinvigoration of their customs and traditions with an increased social and political visibility for their lifeways at the national level. We show how they have done this, in part, by ‘performing’ these traditions for the nation, not through a calculated strategic essentialism, but we will argue, through their own political reading of the power of these customs and traditions to reformulate ‘outside’ concepts and in this process engage others in the fabric of their own lifeworlds.

Exploring the dilemma of marginality, this paper turns attention away from “political centres” to “political peripheries” (Tsing, 1993, p. 27). We do this, however, while also acknowledging that the Timorese government itself has only recently made the transition from a struggle for independence on the periphery of Indonesian rule to centre stage in the building of its own nation state. Achieving nationhood under the banner of what Benedict Anderson (2003) has termed ‘aggregated nativeness’, Timor Leste’s nationalist agenda is now engaged in the search for futures. Yet, in the struggle to rebuild Timor Leste’s economy, infrastructure and institutions, the issue of power-sharing and centralisation is increasingly contentious (Philpott, 2006; Kehi, 2005).<sup>2</sup> With most land and resource management laws as yet unformed, critical issues for debate include the extent to which the national development agenda is allowing spaces for the active involvement of indigenous Timorese traditions, practices and priorities in the governance and economic development of the nation.<sup>3</sup>

Chopra (2002) and Philpott (2006) have both argued that the governance of the nation state in Timor Leste has been informed by the lasting legacy of the United Nations Transitional Administration (UNTAET) era from 1999 to 2002, when the United Nations (UN) administration mandated with temporary sovereignty over the territory took a ground zero approach to rebuilding the administrative and governance structures of the new nation. While for the Timorese it was a significant moment of new nation-hood, for the UN it was a significant opportunity to build a state from the ground up. It was an

approach that the then Timorese leadership and its government-in-waiting criticized as being exclusive and neo-colonial. Yet, undeniably it was a strongly centralised approach that also characterized the inaugural Timorese national Government<sup>4</sup> and the development of an administrative system, where despite the rhetoric and promises of imminent decentralization, district and local government officials had no capacity or budget of their own to plan for development or implement programs.<sup>5</sup>

The influence of a highly centralized style of governance on the implementation of national development plans and the creation of new systems of land administration and resource management cannot be underestimated. Within such statist approaches to land and resource management, there is little room for the recognition of locally specific governance regimes and aspirations. Yet in a tiny half island nation where the majority of the land and resources are presently held under complex systems of customary ownership, systems often referred to in Tetum as *fiar-malu* (trusting/believing/having faith in one another), the misrecognition of extant governance capacity and systems of management is both a waste of human resources and ill-informed approach to human development creating mistrust and disbelief between the institutions of government and its citizens. Yet for now at least, the reach of the modern bureaucratic state in Timor Leste is far from complete and within this bureaucratic vacuum people are getting on with life, making and upholding their own laws and building alliances with others in order to manage, and hopefully benefit from, change and uncertainty. This paper, which centres on a sea worm harvest which occurred in the far east of the country in early 2006, is an account of one such process.

The meta-narrative of the paper involves an examination of national and international interest in the preservation and protection of the ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ heritage values of this particular part of Timor, and analyses this in the context of efforts made by local peoples to encourage the understanding of the area as a lived social landscape where ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ are overtly integrated into local lifeworlds. The paper explores the ideological tensions at work between these differential ‘cultures of nature’ and examines the consequences of the public interplay between them.

## 2. A view from the margins

On 19 March 2006 in the vicinity of Tutuala (see Fig. 1), a subdistrict of Lautem in the far east of Timor Leste, local community members began the ritual ceremonies required to usher in the annual mass harvest of a much anticipated

<sup>2</sup> This has only been more starkly highlighted by the 2006 political and security crisis which at the time of writing has resulted in the reinstatement of an international peacekeeping force in the country. This crisis is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> The value of these customs and traditions are enshrined in the Timorese Constitution. Section 2.4 of the Constitution provides that ‘The State shall recognise customary laws of Timor Leste, subject to the Constitution and to any legislation dealing specifically with customary law’. Section 6 (g) of the Timorese Constitution guarantees ‘To assert and value the personality and the cultural heritage of the Timor Lesteese people’.

<sup>4</sup> National parliamentary elections were held on the 30 June 2007 resulting in a change of Government.

<sup>5</sup> Decentralisation is also enshrined in the Timorese Constitution. Section 5.1 states that ‘On matters of territorial organisation, the State shall respect the principle of decentralisation of public administration’.

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