

Making Histories: Whose Stories Are Told? Some Considerations From Maubara

Steven Farram and David Mearns

Introduction

As a new state and post-conflict society, Timor-Leste faces many difficulties in writing a national history. A national history can be an important tool for nation-building and legitimising the state, but to be truly inclusive in Timor-Leste such a history will need to overcome language and ethnic divisions, and other significant historical schisms. This paper considers the role of traditional oral histories in the writing of a national history, and uses recently-collected examples from the Maubara subdistrict. Custodians of traditional Maubara histories desired that their stories be recorded and passed on to outsiders explicitly to ensure that their culture is recognised, valued and available for future generations. How do such stories intersect with the evidence-based history associated with Western scholarship, and is it possible to incorporate them into a national history? We argue that oral traditions have an important contribution to make to our understanding of Timorese history. We further argue that the attempt must be made to incorporate oral traditions into Timor-Leste's national history, otherwise a large section of the community will be effectively de-legitimised and 'written out of history'.

Why should oral traditions be used in writing the history of Timor-Leste?

In general, Western academic historians gave little credence to oral sources as historical evidence until the 1960s. Before then, such sources were generally classed as unreliable or, at best, of secondary importance to written documentary evidence. Yet many of the documents readily relied upon by historians are created on the basis of oral evidence, such as reports of commissions of inquiry or census reports. News reports are also often used by historians, but such reports are frequently based on oral sources and have been shaped by the reporter's subjective interpretations of what is important, or influenced by the reporter's biases and editorial policy (Douglas, Roberts and Thompson 1988, 17, 21-22). Since the 1980s, anthropologists too have become very aware of the 'situatedness' of both informants and ethnographers in constructing their representations of other cultures and societies (for example, Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Clifford, 1988). Confidence in producing 'scientifically objective' accounts of society has taken a heavy blow and a methodological shift has occurred. It is now thought to be obligatory to contextualise thoroughly the information that is produced in the course of studying any population. Even the written accounts that anthropologists sometimes receive from local people stand simply as specific versions generated for specific audiences. This is even more so for oral accounts. Thus, it is important to understand and document the circumstances in and purposes for which any piece of information was produced.

Much of the written history of Timor-Leste from the colonial period is based on documents created by colonial officials, secure in the biased belief of their own superiority. Jacob van Leur (1967, 261-89) has given many examples of pre-Second World War historiography of Southeast Asia that assume that soon after Europeans arrived in the region, they attained control of the local political and economic systems. Van Leur, however, proposed that at least until the nineteenth century, Europeans had to fit into the existing systems and were no more than equal players with the indigenous power holders, and often much less than that. This was certainly the case in Timor, but by the early twentieth century, the European colonialists were firmly in control. It is this group's voice that is now heard most loudly in the written history; the voices of the Timorese themselves are seldom discernable. Ranajit Guha (1988, 35, 38-39), a member of a group of writers who sought to express the voices of the 'subalterns' (those of inferior rank), has argued that although there was a dominant group in society that should be considered when writing that society's

history, it should not be given the 'spurious primacy' it has usually received. The difficulty, however, is how to let the 'subaltern' speak? How does one write a history 'from below' for Timor-Leste?

While the Timorese had no written history before the arrival of outsiders to their island, they did and do have a rich oral tradition. In non-literate societies, oral tradition is usually entrusted to individuals specially trained and ritually sanctioned to recall events and details important to the community. Experience tells us that such ritually important material can have a remarkable stability throughout time. Yet many Europeans have dismissed this source as unreliable. H.G. Schulte Nordholt, for example, was a former Dutch colonial official-turned anthropologist who spent much time talking to West Timorese people to gain an understanding of their political system, but dismissed their oral traditions as of no use in making an historical analysis, because they did not supply 'concrete data'. For Schulte Nordholt (1971, 157), the only reliable sources were the documents written by 'outsiders'; essentially, the records left behind by the Dutch and Portuguese. The value of colonial records in the writing of Timorese history is undeniable, but it is rash to disallow any validity to the Timorese oral tradition. These stories are one of the few sources available for understanding events from a Timorese perspective. Like any source they have to be treated with caution, and a whole literature has developed about the appropriate evaluation and use of oral traditions as a tool for the writing of history (for example, Vansina 1985). This is not the place to expand on that literature, but we assert that if there is to be any attempt made to write history 'from below' in relation to Timor then these sources must be given attention. In our view, all oral traditions, where known, should be considered alongside the written documentary evidence in order to give a more balanced perspective, and to give a sense of history as the 'lived experience' of the people whose lives are being documented. It is perhaps particularly important that a national history should resonate with the experience of the citizens, but this notion is challenged by the diversity of local traditions and the varied circumstances of the many ethno-linguistic and cultural groups that inhabit Timor-Leste. Negotiating these problems will not always be easy, but we believe it is an effort worth making.

How can oral traditions be used in a national history?

An author often quoted by those writing about the Timor region is anthropologist James J. Fox. Fox's early ethnographic work in the region contained an added historical dimension, which he stated was a 'counter to ethnographic narrowness and a corrective to oversimplified generalizations'. He argued that 'often historical records cannot be understood without ... intimate knowledge of the ethnographic situation' (Fox 1977, viii). We concur with the latter statement and believe that the history of Timor-Leste can be best taught with adequate reference to the customs and traditions of the local people. Models for such an approach do exist. Michael Leach (2010, 129) reports on the example of the national high school history curriculum of Vanuatu, which incorporates knowledge gained from oral traditions into mainstream Western historiography. In the Vanuatu model, students are encouraged as part of their studies to seek information from traditional sources (for example, village elders) on matters such as land tenure. This approach has the virtue of alerting students to the potential use of oral traditions to enhance an understanding of the past. Furthermore, as Leach (2010, 129) notes, the example of land tenure is particularly pertinent to Timor-Leste, where land ownership disputes are matters of ongoing concern. The example highlights how local perceptions of the past can have a continuing impact on the problems of the present. Indeed, at the local level, history is the lived experience of the population transmitted through the oral traditions maintained by their elders. In the search for 'objectivity', it would be both unwise and disrespectful to dismiss local truths as not sufficiently factual. The 'lived past' as a cultural force is as much a determinant of present action as any recorded list of events or avowed past policies.

Some examples from Maubara

The authors of this paper are David Mearns, anthropologist, and Steven Farram, historian. In 2010, Mearns began ethnographic research in the Maubara subdistrict, while Farram began researching the documentary history of the region. Mearns spent time with various elders in Maubara who, after the performance of

appropriate rituals, recited to him some of the histories of that place for recording. The origin stories of Maubara are clearly of the mythological variety, as the original inhabitants of Maubara are said to have emerged from the ground, had hairy tongues and ate their food raw. At some point, however, they were joined by others who came from the south, and it is from this point that the story appears to display factual content and becomes of interest to the historian. The newcomers came from Loro Liurai, in the Suai region. The stories talk of various migrations and places of habitation. There is also a story about conflict over territory with people from Liquiça, who were chased away. These stories may be of use in tracing migration patterns and could possibly be tested against archaeological evidence. They could also be compared with traditions from other areas of the island. Peter Spillett (1999) travelled throughout Timor over many years, collecting traditional oral narratives as he went. Stories from the important south coast kingdom of Waiwiku-Wehale, not far from Suai, name Loro Liurai as that region's first king. Subsequently, representatives of Wehale who used the same name ruled on its behalf in various places, including Liquiça. Spillett collected similar stories in the Liquiça subdistrict.

Since the structuralist revolution in anthropology led by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969) in the mid-twentieth century, we have been cautioned against accepting such myths as simply muddled history or as 'charters' legitimating the present reality. In the structuralist's hands, myths become gateways to unpacking central cultural themes within a society. However, the various approaches are not necessarily incompatible and may be employed to varying degrees to illuminate local understandings of the past. The Maubara stories fit a recognised cultural pattern (see Fox and Sather 1996; and Fox 1997, for example) and relate how newcomers from the Suai region came to occupy the position of *liurai*, or king, in Maubara, while the original inhabitants had control of the important position of *lia nain*, or 'keeper of the word', responsible for ritual practice and customary law. Such a division of function is still acknowledged in Maubara today. This knowledge remains important for comprehending the contemporary social relations of different groups in the community and is crucial in understanding the actions of groups or individuals, both in the past and the present. Indeed, as Andrew McWilliam (2005) has noted, in the period of resistance to Indonesian rule, it was the strength of traditional social and cultural patterns of kinship and marriage alliance that provided the framework of trust required to operate as clandestine groups.

Mythical histories, or more respectfully, local oral histories, as assembled by ethnographers, tend to be collected in a somewhat piecemeal fashion, as opportunity arises or can be initiated. As a result, they often come across as somewhat rambling narratives, struggling to take shape and with numerous recursive references to other local knowledge. The result can be a knot of confused threads to unpick. While certain individuals may carry the authority to recount the tales, as Mearns rediscovered in Maubara, they are not above needing prompting from other knowledgeable elders when their memory is not perfect. This is why one rarely or never hears the same tale told exactly the same way twice. The result is that unlike a documentary source that is already a fixed object (though subject, of course, to differing interpretations), oral accounts do not remain entirely consistent, and there is a great danger in imagining that the first version can be written down and 'fixed' as *the* local history. Moreover, the transmission of local histories is normally from one qualified individual to another eligible person within the local lineage or house (*uma*). It is a personal and interpersonal process. How one tells the tale, where one places the emphasis and what one decides to omit or include or elaborate all affect the outcome. In a sense, local oral history is remade every time it is told. These are all matters that must be kept in mind by the historian who wishes to use such sources.

Of most interest to the historian are the stories that mention identifiable individuals and events known from the documentary evidence. Most of the stories Mearns was told related to the origins of the Maubara people and their customs. These stories are typically invoked as the basis for customary law, or *lisan*, which is the system that sanctions and legitimises power, authority and the distribution of resources, such as land. A person seeking to explain his or her position in the local social and geographical space will do so by reckoning connections to leading figures of the past. In the process, stories of past conflicts within the local region may be recounted. Thus, in the stories Mearns was told, there was some reference to wider internecine warfare and rebellion against the Portuguese, and mention of individuals, such as Dom Kleto, Dom Karlou and Mau Vili; all of whom are known from other sources already considered authoritative.

Typically, East Timorese narratives have some common elements. These include tales of ancestors emerging from the land as noted, but also outsiders versus ‘natives’, old houses and ‘newcomers’, power versus ritual authority, stories of usurpation via trickery and betrayal, and so on. All of these can be and are being adapted in relation to more recent history. The coming of the Portuguese, the invasions of the Japanese and the Indonesians, even the coming of the modern state, are susceptible to structurally similar styles of narrative account.

Let us give one small sample of a section of a story collected in Maubara subdistrict to illustrate some of the points we are making. This part of the narrative was collected by Mearns, in the presence of the *liurai* and his younger brother, from the *lia nain* of one *uma lulik* that was the nucleus of a Maubara Lissa *aldeia*. He said,

I will continue the story from there to the re-inauguration of Bei Besi Mau Lesu, Kaisamba, Bei Bere Mau Bau, Tapo Tukudu, Suso o Gere Gua (These are all the names of places). They took gongs. Wandering continuously from the districts in the south. Arrived and took authority and the people from us. They made an agreement, not to just seize it all like that. If that continued, finally there would be conflict. The newcomer ancestors said: Power over the people is in my hands, but the decision of life or death for any person is in the hands of you natives of the place. Thus I am raja and you are the great judge that administers justice to the people who have done wrong. It is your law that must be upheld.

The story seeks to explain the origins of present political and geographical arrangements as people in the village experience them. It also seeks to assert the continuing importance of the original holders of the law and their ritual status. For local people, the immediate world around them only makes sense if they can understand how and why it came to be thus. This is the history of the ancestors whose presence is recognised not only in story, but in important rites that take place before the shrine house of the area. It is these rites, usually associated with marriage and death, which regularly and spectacularly demonstrate the ongoing importance of the lived history of the past.

Conclusion

In the present instance, these stories were collected as part of a study of local culture, but for the purpose of writing a national history of Timor-Leste, such stories should be collected throughout the country in a systematic fashion. Such a collection could be used to augment what is known from the documentary evidence and would certainly help to bring a Timorese perspective to the writing of a national history. Citizens who have their own history recognised and respected are much more likely to subscribe to an ‘official’ national history that emphasises what the population have in common.

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