

## Negotiating nation and tradition: Analyzing East-Timorese state-formation from the perspective of Brazilian Anthropology<sup>1</sup>

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Since Van Wouden's pioneer work (1968 [1935]) marriage exchanges and their effect on social organization have been hoisted to the position of an important diacritic in the recognition of East Indonesia as a cultural region *sui generis* in Austronesia. As a result, to analyze their contemporary configurations has become strategic to those interested in grasping to what extent the dialectics of modernization have been imposed on East Timor, shaping that country as a specific socio-political frontier.

Indeed, bridewealth, called *barlake* or *hafolin* in Dili, is a common practice in the capital city among various social segments, although there is no consensus as to its nature, meaning, and ideal pattern. In fact, it is by exploring its meaning that certain individuals and collectivities negotiate their place in the world. Just as in the indigenous villages, in Dili's urban setting bridewealth is a strong political mover around which multiple discourses are deployed. For instance, if someone says that *barlake* is merely about "buying" a wife, and hence, a *barbaric custom*, he/she is presenting himself as a person from Dili (*ema Dili*), that is, a *modern/polite/civilized* individual. On the other hand, one may say that *barlake* is a way of recognizing the "value" and the "origins" of the bride. By saying that, a person is presenting himself as an authentic Timorese, someone who knows and honors his own traditions and understands the "real" meaning of *barlake*; someone strongly connected to the hills.

In this paper we explore to what extent certain discourses on "tradition" (of which *barlake* is taken to be central) can be associated with different ways of imagining and negotiating the nation. We regard these discourses as beacons that signal the genealogy of the phenomena involved in the dialectics of modernization in East Timor. Our analysis expands both the research field and the theoretical discussions currently deployed in the diverse anthropologies practiced in Brazil, thus involving a broader field of intercommunication with them. Toward the end, we look at some of the intellectual lineages of Brazilian anthropology we deem important for the way we have articulated our questions and the analysis presented in this text.

### The role of *usos & costumes* in nation-building

In a city such as Dili with approximately 200 thousand people with a complex formative history, it is inevitable that marriage rituals are structured in ways that accord with the dynamics of class, ethnic origin, religious persuasion, family trajectories, education records, and so on. Nevertheless, marriage negotiations between houses/families are always present. Whether or not *barlake* is requested conveys the ways in which the relevant parties handle their reciprocal duties and identities in the urban context. To be married in Dili almost always involves a ceremony in the Catholic Church which is also charged with the civil registry of marriages.

Matrimonial demeanor implies attention to the expectations of the houses/families involved so as to heed their respective *usos e costumes/lisan/adat* regarding marriage<sup>2</sup>. Total observance of these

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on research supported by the following grants from the Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development: 401609/2010-3, 201269/2011-2 and 308500/2009-1. The grants back the research projects entitled "*Marriage prestations, customs and nation building in Timor-Leste: the dialect of modernization seen from Dili*" and "*Legal Equality and Cultural Diversity in comparative perspective*". We are grateful for the useful suggestions presented by the review.

<sup>2</sup> As already asserted by Silva (2004) and Roque (2011), the idea of "tradition" – translated, invented and negotiated throughout the Portuguese expression "usos e costumes" – has been part of the colonial knowledge used by the Portuguese administration to deal with the multiple indigenous realities. Although never systematized in a code (as has been done in Mozambique, Goa and Macau), the idea of "usos e costumes" (customs) was a way of dealing with local knowledge in an assimilative way, supposing it will be, in the appropriate moment, superseded by the moral values of "civilization". Nowadays, the challenges of dealing with indigenous knowledge

traditions is considered proper for the construction of satisfactory family relationships based on mutual respect. Concretely speaking, this means to negotiate the obligations between the parties both at the wedding and in the future. It must be decided, among other things, whether or not there will be a *barlake* or other kinds of marriage prestations (such as *aitukan-be'manas*, literally *firewood* and *hot water*)<sup>3</sup>, as well as the amount and type of goods to be exchanged in the wedding, be they for the festivities (meals for both the bride givers and takers) or to seal the agreement between the parties. The kinds of goods, resources, and duties negotiated in the *barlake* can change its configuration substantially. It can be defined according to the ancestral *usos e costumes* of the parties involved, the prestations paid by the bride's mother, the current social position of both families, and ultimately the bride's social condition – whether or not she is a virgin, has a higher education, has a good job, and so on.

The various attitudes toward *barlake* express different ways in which East Timorese elites in Dili approach indigenous notions of *usos e costumes*. Through these, they nourish their place in the world as well as the moments and positions they took in the process of imagining the nation. In our 2008-2009 field research on Dili marriage prestations, we observed that individuals belonging to houses/families that had migrated to the city less than twenty years before, and/or men over fifty tended to request *barlake* and value it. In contrast, those whose house/family had lived in Dili for over twenty years and/or were young people, and/or those associated with the women's movement, and/or the offspring of people seen as assimilated or mestizo (mixed blood) during the Portuguese colonization tended not to request *barlake* and actively devalued it.

In general, we suggest that this variation in *barlake* practices and discourses in Dili is connected to at least two factors. On the one hand, it reflects the diversity of form and content of the usual 'total prestations' between the various ethno-linguistic groups that live on the East Timor borders (the hills) with whom many Dili dwellers keep some sort of tie. On the other hand, this variation in Dili discourses reveal important aspects of the status of "assimilated" (*assimilado*) and now of "modern folk," (*ema modernu*) as deployed in the auto-identification of certain of the country's population segments. In the colonial period, those considered to be assimilated were people who adopted Christianity, spoke Portuguese, and, as a consequence (assumed by the colonizers), were "freed from their *usos e costumes*." Hence, to adhere to *barlake* and other forms of *usos e costumes* marked – and still does – social distinctions that are ambiguous and express a certain sense of drama.

Justification to adopt *barlake* is frequently based on the perception that it is a tool for "mutual aid," for valuing women, maintaining family unity, and paying respect and deference to the ancestors. In turn, criticisms of *barlake* are often grounded on the view that it amounts to the selling of women. As such, it is judged to be illegitimate following the (Western) ideology that persons and things are incommensurable. Added to this is the reproach of what is seen as the irrational use of goods and resources attributed to hill people or the "uneducated" in Dili. This criticism implies that these people would endure long sacrifices in order to accumulate goods and money for the performance of wedding rituals and feasts, thus exposing themselves to unacceptable expenses with objectionable results: failure to send their children to school and feed them properly, living in precarious unhygienic conditions, dressing poorly, etc. *Barlake* and other indigenous practices are thus regarded as irrational and backward.

Unlike post-independence Indonesia, we see in East Timor the rise of certain discourses among local elites that attribute to the investment in ritual practices by those they reckon to be the country's poor, an obstacle to amass the minimum wealth necessary for "development." It is not by chance that projects for their domestication have been put forward by different agents, in many cases funded by international cooperation agencies for development which, in the last ten years, have been retrieving the idea of culture as a government category.

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and practices are being expressed in discourses around categories such as "adat", "lisan" and "culture", still carrying the marks of the colonial times and seeming to be an important challenge to the nation building.

<sup>3</sup> The terms *aitukan/bee manas* are metaphors which express the effort put in by the bride's family in her upbringing, and, have mountain practices as their main reference. In order to give birth, expectant mothers are confined to their houses and a fire is lit beside them to heat the water to be used during labor. After the birth, women are kept at home or a few weeks, always bathing in hot water..

If the meaning of *barlake* is controversial among the Dili urbanites, its recognition by the state is even more problematic. One of the institutional sites where it is most difficult to interpret the possible meanings of marriage prestations is the courtroom where criminal suits for sexual assault usually bring out debates about the meaning of compensation deals that accompanied previous attempts to settle the victims' marriage. In our research we followed up cases in which such deals were quickly condemned by local and international judges who interpreted them as attempts to unduly interfere in the judicial process. The attitude of these law agents in such cases in part reflects a wider outlook common among East Timorese elites that hold positions of power and are reluctant to acknowledge as legitimate representations of duties and justice that fall beyond the pale of the formal legal models. In the discourse of some of these agents, the word "tradition" is associated with a backward way of life to be changed by state disciplinary action.

Some East Timorese judges regard this scenario as clearly divided into two sets of opposed values: one is "backward," characterized by obligations that disregard individual rights and serve the control and power interests of local authorities; the other is "modern," "progressive," characterized by individual freedom and concerned with the nation's future development. The former must be superseded by access to education or exposure to Dili's urban ambience. This sort of speech can be found among a generation of Timorese judges trained during the UN administration who tried to strengthen their own position as "assimilated," thus reinforcing the opposition between Dili and the hills as distinct moral spaces (Silva 2010a, 2010b).

In Southeast Asia to value cultural *usos e costumes* is a complex process which, up to a point, is a sort of revival (Davidson, J. and D. Henley 2007). Recent studies emphasize the folklorization of cultural differences during the Suharto period, when East Timor was subjected to Jakarta policies that minimized the importance of local values in favour of a strong and centralizing state. Since Suharto's fall, this policy has gone through radical transformations mostly due to the growth of "traditional communities" (*masiarakat adat*) defence movements, the passage of legislation supporting regional autonomy and the radical devolution of legislative authority from centre to district level government. Such dynamics are provoking an increase in demands for differential rights, and juridical and administrative autonomy.

In the Timorese case, the UN transition administration largely promoted the defence of local cultural diversity, but with little impact on public management. It is no coincidence that UN agencies such as UNDP have recently financed studies on customary law in East Timor aiming at integrating this system into the national juridical order. Nevertheless, the juridical model conceived for the country never contemplated forms of juridical pluralism. Common to all these practices, however – whether the domestication of cultural diversity or its promotion – is the limiting of alterity within a reified "locale" or "community" according to the dominant notions of "tradition" and "culture." We are then left with the question: what exactly is the content of "culture?" What are, after all, the "traditional" values and practices in Timor?

In this context, it is worth noting that local elites engaged in the process of nation-building classify the indigenous universe in East Timor via colonial categories of government, such as *usos e costumes* or *adat*. This phenomenon is not unique to East Timor but typical of processes of nation-building in many island countries in Oceania. Authors such as LiPuma (1995), Guidieri (quoted in Babadzan, 1988), and Keesing and Tonkinson (1982) have discussed the idea of *Kastom* as an important mediator in the modernization process of countries like Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and Fiji. In post-colonial contexts, *kastom* emerges as the basis for a national culture exhibited as primordial and common to all the peoples who live within the boundaries of a given country. Such a culture is then relayed via State ideological apparatuses such as schools, museums, and the like, thus promoting a new understanding of the past at the service of interests in the present of which cultural homogenization is an important objective.

In various Oceania countries, the *kastom* ideology has hardened along with the ideology of development and national unity. In all of them, the highlands and the hills figure in the national imagination as foundational places. With the articulation of these three value-ideas – *kastom*, development and national unity – it is then possible to consolidate political projects that encourage alternative modernities, that is, processes of modernization without westernization. However, given that the *kastom* ideology is an important political mover, it can also set up strategies of resilience, which for a long time have taken on multiple configurations in East Timor and elsewhere.

Therefore, in approaching marriage prestations in Dili and the process of nation-building in Timor, we are led to intensify a dialogue with fields of knowledge that are still little explored by the anthropologies practiced in Brazil, but are a central part of those practiced in Australia, such as the anthropology of colonialism and global forms of governance, the ethnology of Eastern Indonesia, and the history of state nation-building in Southeast Asia and Oceania.

### **Assumptions and eye training: a glance at anthropological thinking made in Brazil**

The analysis sketched above comes from the universe of issues that has guided our observations as Brazilian researchers working in East Timor. We would like to briefly comment on the specificity of this approach with regard to our training as anthropologists in Brazil. We have identified two aspects of this universe:

#### *A Concern with nation-building and the place of indigenous societies within it*

As pointed out by Mariza Peirano (1981), since the 1930s and the unique use of the culture concept by Gilberto Freyre, anthropological studies carried out in Brazil have been concerned with our national formation. For a long time, the search for a rhetoric of national integration that might account for Brazilian historical and regional diversity was present both in research objects and in the anthropological theoretical production. A new outlook emerged, specifically in indigenous studies that aspired to understand not only the social organization of Amerindian societies, but also the dynamics that oriented their relations with the state and national society. Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira's (1974) thoughts about social identity and interethnic relations in the late 1960s established a tradition of studies about conflicts that are part and parcel of the definition of a group's "culture" and its belonging to the Brazilian imagined community. Along these lines, as Alcida Ramos (1998) pointed out, anthropology made in Brazil considered the place of the Indians in the nation's imagination as well as the reckoning of local territories and cultural identities, as analyzed by João Pacheco de Oliveira (2004).

With this background, when we look at a situation such as that in East Timor, we cannot help but probe into the discourses that imprint cultural diversity upon the territory in a nation's image. Features such as geographical references (city versus hill, state versus tradition), as they appear in situated speeches about "culture" in Timorese national imagination, mark the way in which local identities are articulated. Such articulation is geographical rather than ethnic – for instance, we do not see a Timorese person say he or she is a *Tokodede*, *Kemak*, *Tetum* etc, as we see he or she saying "I'm from Liquiçá or, more specifically, of such and such a *suko* of Liquiçá" – a geography whose idiom is applied to conflicts of various sorts, such as the 2006 crisis apparently triggered by the opposition between east (*firaku*) and west (*kaladi*).

#### *Cultural diversity, citizenship, and public policies*

In Brazilian anthropology, the focus on interethnic relations created a corpus of studies that has interlocked the categories of rights, citizenship, and recognition. The recent strengthening of policies for the titling of *quilombola* territories and the rights of traditional populations has brought about a growing awareness of how difficult it is for the legal and juridical state system to incorporate the relational and contrasting character of local identities regarding differential rights to land and justice. The Brazilian Anthropological Association's own publications (Leite 2005) show how rich these discussions are and how urgent this debate is in the national academic scenario, particularly after the 1988 Federal Constitution.

In the Brazilian case, these studies are suffused with the strong tradition of works on social movements and the construction of citizenship which began in the 1980s with urban anthropology (led by Eunice Durham [2004] and Ruth Cardoso [1983]). This research line produced studies in political anthropology with new approaches about social values and practices in contexts traditionally handled by other social sciences, such as electoral processes, justice and conflict resolution, the dynamics and discourse of non-governmental organizations, development, global flows of people and values; in short, various spaces of articulation between the so-called "civil society" and the "state." These studies supply important tools for the analysis of sociability and the incorporation of wider symbolic and social representations in the dynamics of localized policies.

With this set of concerns in mind, it follows that our studies about East Timor were framed by questions over the articulation between discourses of institutional agents and of ordinary people about cultural practices and their connection to projects of political integration of state and nation. In the Timorese case, the absence of *indigeneity* status resulted in the inclusion of all Timorese in a single citizenship category ever since the nationally imagined community was constructed. Therefore, unlike the flavour the *adat* revivalist movements in Indonesia, for instance, where local identities were empowered by the discourse of international indigenist movements and their claims for the -self-determination of “traditional” people, the Timorese debate about state recognition of cultural traditions was rather generalist, as it figured in the proposed legislation about customary law that could be included in, but not overlapping the extant juridical system. This concern has also led us to look for different nation-building projects among the meanings attributed to the *barlake* in the discourses of various segments of East Timorese urban elite. These are outstanding features that are immediately detected by someone who has been trained in the Brazilian styles of doing anthropology of which the present analysis is a product.

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