

Marriage exchanges, colonial fantasies and the production of East Timor indigenous socialities in the 1970s Dili

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This paper addresses a colonial controversy about marriage exchanges in 1970s Dili. Retrospectively called “a guerra do barlake,” (the *barlake* war) this controversy has been considered a foundational event of East Timorese nationalism (Araújo 2012) as it brought to the fore opposing positions about local sociality and the ways such a sociality should be respected or managed for civilizational purposes. Not by chance, the acknowledgment of the marriage exchanges as the most iconic institution of the local sociality was at stake and their meanings and effects were considered condensed manifestations of the character of the East Timorese people. According to Abilio Araújo (personal communication), the public debate on the issue in the 1970s was the basis for the emergence of the *Maubere* as the political symbol of national pride and independence in East Timor because the controversy provoked people to develop, for the first time, a systematic and positive approach to local institutions. The fact that people like Abilio Araújo, Nicolau Lobato and Xavier do Amaral were protagonists in the controversy also gives these events a special flavor since they came to be leading figures in East Timorese nationalism.

Inspired by Michel Foucault (1980), Edward Said (1979) and Nicholas Thomas (1994), amongst others, I assume that colonial discourses were government devices whereby certain realities were produced in order to give legitimacy to government practices. Through repetition and claims of authority, the colonial discourses held the potential “[to] create a reality that it appeared merely to describe.” (Thomas 1994).

I argue that the attempts to inscribe the *barlake* in the market or in the gift regimes of exchange (Gregory 1982, Appadurai 1986) were a sort of epistemological project from which derived particular images of East Timorese peoples and their sociality in colonial Dili as these attempts appeared in “a guerra do *barlake*.” By comparison, the postcolonial debate about marriage exchanges lacks its novelty as it seems to be fostered by the same epistemological anxiety. In addition, I contend that these controversies were critical events by which the complexity of marriage exchanges in East Timor have been reduced to *barlake* or *hafolin* in public space in Dili.

This paper is divided into three main sections. In the first, I present the generative themes around which the controversies are focused. I also correlate what I propose to be called purifying and anti-purifying (Latour 1994) perspectives about the marriage exchanges with the production of various discourses about indigenous East Timorese peoples. In this process, the association of marriage exchanges to different regimes of exchanges seems to have a pivotal role in devising particular images of East Timorese indigenous peoples and their sociality. In the second section, the epistemological practices for legitimizing the opposing perspectives about marriage exchanges are discussed. The resorts to colonial ethnographies, etymological arguments and methodological procedures are pointed out as the tactics used by people in the debate to support their perspectives. In the concluding remarks the relations of continuity in the colonial and post-colonial debates about the *barlake* are highlighted, having as a backdrop my research about marriage exchanges in contemporary Dili.

The politics of knowledge in 1970s Dili

The *barlake* war was triggered by two literary works by Inácio de Moura: the poem *Mulher de Lipa, Feto Timor* and the short novel *Mau Curo e Bere Mau ou o Grande Amor de Cai Buti*, published in 1969 and 1973 respectively. The controversy was presented in three different publications: the colonial newspaper “A voz de Timor”, the military bulletin “A província de Timor” and at Seara, the Dili Diocese’s magazine.

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The 1970s controversy was structured in two main positions backed by social actors with distinct origins in colonial Dili. On one hand were Inácio de Moura and Jaime Neves, who published in the colonial newspaper "A Voz de Timor," and who supported the idea that customary marriage in East Timor, which they called *hafolin* or *barlake*, was a market operation by which women were sold. On the other hand were some educated and assimilated East Timorese interlocutors like Abilio Araújo, Nicolau Lobato and Xavier do Amaral, who claimed a broader approach to this institution and contended that it wasn't a commoditization device, but a complex and long term phenomenon by which the reproduction of the East Timorese societies came about.

At first glance, it would be tempting to portray the controversy as one framed by an opposition between colonizer and colonized actors. But, the scenario was much more complex. The fact that Luís Filipe Thomaz, a Portuguese militar and a close relative of Américo Deus Rodrigues Tomás, a former president of Portugal, was the editor of the military bulletin "A província de Timor" where all Abilio Araujo's criticisms of Jaime Neves and Inacio de Moura were published suggests how frontiers of the colonial past were quite blurred. In this context, it is important to note that in the 1973 debate it was Luís Filipe Thomaz who took a position against Moura's narratives about the *barlake*. Moreover, it is clear that Abilio Araujo, Nicolau Lobato and Xavier do Amaral were quite assimilated, sharing most of their classificatory system with their Portuguese interlocutors. Thus, the controversy cannot be reduced to an opposition between colonizers and colonized.

The challenges facing East Timorese women to get married for love was the primary political mover in the colonial criticism towards *hafolin* or *barlake* (De Moura 1969, 1973). The material exchanges that would allow a marriage to take place were understood as a market operation that rendered women as commodities or even as slaves. These exchanges would respond only to the material interests of the bride's family members with no respect for a woman's desires and expectations, eliminating a woman's free choice about whom to marry. In addition, it was contended that traditional marriages were one of the main causes of the submissive position assigns to women in the local societies. The customary marriage was thus seen as an affront to a woman's dignity because it would prevent them from acting as individuals, and make their own choices (De Moura 1969, 1973; Neves 1970; Neves 1970a; Neves 1970b; Neves 1970c; Neves 1970d; Neves 1970e; Neves 1970f).

Opposing this perspective, Abilio Araujo, at first, and later Nicolau Lobato, Xavier do Amaral and Luis Filipe Thomaz argued that the material exchanges that composed the *barlake* did not imply disrespect for a woman's feelings and choice for marriage. Therefore, there was no opposition between *barlake* and marriage for love. Concerns with the maintenance of status and ranking of lineage groups derived from their marriage tactics would be the main constraint on a woman's will in a marriage arrangement (Thomaz a 1973). In addition, the material exchanges which made up the *barlake* wouldn't *per se* undermine the condition of women in society. Conversely, the larger the material exchanges between wife-takers and wife-givers the greater the bride's sense of honor. In this perspective, the bride's sense of value and those of the families involved in the marriage would be directly related to the amount of goods exchanged (Araújo 1970; Araújo 1970a; Araújo 1970b; Araújo 1970c; Araújo 1970d; Araújo 1970e; Xavier 1970; Xavier 1970a).

Jaime Neves' and Inacio de Moura's accounts claimed an understanding of *barlake* by what it would consisted of at the time of the wedding, that is, an exchange of assets for taking a woman in marriage. Oriented by a sort of Western ontology in which things and persons are incommensurable or in which a person's value cannot be converted into material items or monetary amounts (Kopytoff 1986), Neves and Moura looked at customary marriage as a moral outrage. The exchange of goods between wife-takers and wife-givers at the wedding is the fact that feeds most of Neves' and Moura's perceptions about the customary marriage as a market exchange and supports their evaluation of it as an inappropriate and barbaric trade in people, disrespectful of their feelings and emotions.

There was a purification anxiety (Latour 1994) in Neve's and Moura's accounts who, by all means, wanted to identify what, after all, the *barlake* consisted of. They were searching for the essence, the core of the traditional marriage, attempting to make sense of it by itself, without considering other factors. The

barlake must be one thing or another; it was inconceivable that it could have various meanings and functions simultaneously (Neves 1970).

From this approach, particular images of East Timorese indigenous people emerge that were devised to underpin civilizational projects. The supposed animist character of the indigenous religious practices are presented as the reason why they would place so much value on material exchanges for marriage purposes. They are also portrayed (the men, especially) as materialistic and selfish people because they would place more value on the material dimension of a marriage than on people's feelings and desires. Local folk are also presented as the ones who trade people. These cultural features must be overcome by exposing people to the civilizational process that the colonial endeavor should promote.

Opposing this purification anxiety were the narratives presented by Abilio Araújo, Nicolau Lobato, Xavier do Amaral and Luis Filipe Thomaz. In general, they proposed a more holistic approach to customary marriage, trying to demonstrate its wider character as a central institution whereby various dimensions of the local sociality were negotiated. In fact they fostered a sort of anti-purification position in the debate. In their perspectives, the customary marriage was more of a matrix for negotiation of social life than a thing in itself. All these actors rejected an isolated understanding of the *barlake*. In this context, there would be no opposition between material goods and persons in the making of the marriage. Conversely, the making of the persons, individual or collective persons, would be derived from material exchanges (Araújo 1970a).

These perspectives produce other images of the East Timorese indigenous societies. First and foremost, they are depicted as complex and structured realities ruled by particular forms of organization that are not understandable from an exclusively rational or Western grasp. They also suggest that women held a high status in East Timorese society given the awareness that social and biological reproduction relied on them. Romantic love is also presented as a phenomenon of the local sociality to which people gave great attention for marriage purposes. The harmonizing effects of customary marriage are pointed out and its potential to include personal desires and interests. The offerings of goods involved in the marriage exchanges are presented as signs of deference to the woman and a source of pride for the families involved. It is asserted that the *barlake* is the most essential institution in the local sociality, and that from which all other social dynamics are derived. In this perspective, the East Timorese people are presented as virtuous, comparable to the more civilized people because of the values they held and celebrated.

Epistemological practices

Despite the various positions held by different actors in the debate, all those involved were mobilized by what we might call an anxiety of knowledge towards the East Timorese indigenous peoples (Neves 1970d). The local practices of social reproduction were often considered a mystery, secret or enigma that needed to be unveiled (Araújo 1970; Neves 1970b; Xavier 1970). In fact, Araújo recalled (personal communication) that "the *barlake* war" inspired a research endeavor for him and his colleagues. The misrepresentation of the *barlake* in De Moura's narratives led them to a journey of enlightenment and discovery about the local institutions that ultimately triggered a feeling of pre-nationalism.

Independent of the positions held by people involved in the controversy, to legitimate their positions they resorted to very similar epistemological practices. All of them resorted to etymology, colonial ethnographies (those conducted by missionaries and others), methodological arguments and to comparisons to support their respective point of view.

The word *barlake* came to be scrutinized by both parties in the debate. It was believed that its original meaning could unveil its current uses in East Timor. From this perspective, Abilio Araújo proposed that the word came from the Malai words *Ber* joined with *laki*, which signified "to get a husband." Since it signified the process of getting married from the woman's point of view, it was proposed that the *barlake* was not a market operation (Araújo 1970a). Jaime Neves, in turn, based on Osório de Castro's works, suggested that *barlake* would characterize both the processes of a woman getting a husband or that of a man getting a wife (Neves 1970).

The usages and meanings of words like *sosa* (to buy), *hola* (to acquire) and importantly, *folin* (value), were also explored in the debate. The everyday uses of the question “*folin hira?*” (how much) in order to learn the monetary value of a good to be bought in the market environment was explored by Jaime Neves to support his and De Moura’s perspectives that the *hafolin* was a market operation. The use of the same word – *folin* – for either the marriage negotiation and for the market environment to denote expectations related to the kind or amount of assets and money to be offered in exchange for a good or for a woman in marriage was seen as a sign that the same regime of exchange, the market regime, framed both phenomena. On the other hand, Nicolau Lobato argued that it was a mistake to translate *halofin* (to give a value) for *sosa* (to buy). He affirms there wouldn’t be dictionary offering this translation. He brought to the fore the fact that the Tetum language had two different words to differentiate distinct ways to get access to particular things. Instead of saying that someone would “*sosa feto*” (buy a woman) the only acceptable way to express to get a wife would be “*hola feto.*” The word *sosa* would be used only for assets acquired by means of a market operation. By opposing this perspective, Jaime Neves emphasized that the everyday usage of a word or language did not necessarily respond to its normative meaning or syntax (Neves 1970d).

Another very important resource used to support the contested perspectives on *barlake* were the colonial ethnographies. The citation of missionary ethnographies or of colonial administrators’ accounts is pervasive in the controversy. For instance, to oppose Abilio Araújo’s arguments that the literal translation for *berlaki* is “to get a husband,” Jaime Neves quoted Osório de Castro. In the same article, the works of Father Laranjeiras, Pinto Correia, Henry O. Forbes, and others, are also quoted to support Neves’ understanding of the marriage exchanges as an obvious market operation (Neves 1970). In response to this perspective and to mark a contrast with it, Araújo quoted Father Ezequial Paschoal’s book *A alma de Timor vista em sua fantasia* which points out the complexity of the marriage practices that could not be easily understood, given the local authorities reluctance to share their knowledge of marriage practices with foreign people (Araújo 1970a).

The fact that some missionary ethnographies attempted to make sense of marriage exchanges using words such as “*doação*” (donation) (used by Father Ezequiel) or “*dowry*” (used by Padre Artur Basílio de Sá) or even “*gift*” to contrast it with the hegemonic colonial interpretation about the *hafolin* as a market operation compelled Jaime Neves to speak out on the issue. According to Neves, certain missionary accounts would use such words or invest in these perspectives for benevolent reasons. To keep their moral commitments with East Timorese indigenous peoples the missionaries would lie about the meanings of *hafolin* as a non-market operation. In Neves’ view, anyone who considered the customary marriage as something other than a market operation was engaging in sentimental fantasies (Neves 1970d).

During the controversy, in different moments, it is suggested that Abilio Araujo, Xavier do Amaral, Nicolau Lobato or the missionaries fell into romanticism for not recognizing that the women were sold in the customary marriages (Neves 1970; Neves 1970d). This romantic approach would prevent people from striving to emancipate local indigenous people from their ignorant practices (Neves 1970e; Neves 1970f).

The alleged lack of accuracy of the missionary accounts about customary marriage asserted by Jaime Neves suggests that the controversy was shaped by a strategic reading of colonial knowledge. An affirmation was considered inaccurate the moment it challenged the effort at purification made by “*A Voz de Timor*” or threatened the metanarrative that affirmed that the marriage exchange was a market operation. The controversy was thus shaped by an ambiguous relationship with the colonial knowledge (Neves 1970a).

Methodological arguments also framed the controversy. Broadly speaking, on one hand Jaime Neves celebrated the alleged skills of “*A voz de Timor*” team in using what he considered the modern methods of anthropology and sociology. Authors like Durkheim, Murdock, Radcliff-Brown, Malinowski and even the Brazilian Tales de Azevedo are brought to the fore to show off how well oriented, erudite and up to date the *A voz de Timor* team was by engaging in the debate according to scientific criteria (Neves 1970e; Neves 1970f). The disagreements from their East Timorese interlocutors, in turn, are attributed to their lack of proper methodological training. This inexperience led them to surrender to sentimental and literary arguments that would lack any scientific approach. The East Timorese interlocutors are thus depicted as incipient folklorists (Neves 1970e).

On the other hand, Abilio Araújo and Xavier do Amaral claimed that more than literary or academic knowledge was needed to truly understand the local institutions. An emotional closeness to the local worlds was required to comprehend their institutions (Araújo 1970a; Xavier 1970a). The absence of this intimacy would misguide people in their attempts to rationally understand the local practices. It seems that this narrative was shaped by a sort of nativist ideology or claim that suggested that only people from East Timor could truly understand the local institutions or culture. It is not by chance, therefore, that this rational is similar to the one that fosters nationalism as a political project and that this controversy is considered today as a critical event in the emergence of an East Timorese national awareness. As Michel Foucault (1980) often pointed out, knowledge and power are simply two faces of the same coin.

Final remarks: My comparisons

It goes without saying that the *barlake*'s potential to trigger controversy is not exclusive to the past. Current marriage practices in Dili are strongly influenced by the contested character of this institution that continues to produce opposing perspectives about local sociality. As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Silva, 2010), the current debate among the Dili elite about the marriage prestations is also framed by attempts to inscribe the *barlake* to the market or that of gift regime of exchange, a phenomena that is directly connected with the people's different trajectories of migration and interaction with the colonial powers established in Timor. Broadly speaking, for those who consider the *hafolin* a market exchange, the local indigenous people are an uncivilized, irrational and materialistic group who have still not truly internalized that people and things pertain to different ontologies and cannot be exchanged one for another. On the other hand, those who see the *hafolin* as a form of gift exchange have a more respectful perspective of the local people and their sociality. The *barlake* is considered as a means for establishing rules for social reproduction and for demonstrating respect and consideration. In this view, the local indigenous people are seen as understanding how to foster dignity and an appropriate relation with ancestors and other supernatural agents. In addition, *hafolin* is also seen as a way to honor people's multiple ritual obligations (Silva, 2012).

Apparently, these distinct outlooks about the *hafolin* would give origin to very diverse forms of marriage practices. During my fieldwork, some of my interlocutors anxiously pointed out that the marriage practices of their families did not involve *barlake* because they have long been civilized people. However, as I have demonstrated in other occasions (Silva 2012a), their marriage practices are very similar to those in which people openly requested the *barlake* or *folin* as a particular gift-function. In fact, it is not rare that the amount of money or assets exchanged in marriages that are not supposed to involve the *folin* or *barlake* as a particular gift-function to be higher than in those in which a *barlake* explicitly occurs. Even so, people made a point of showing that they hadn't requested *barlake* or *folin* in their marriage arrangements.

I have risked that this situation is the product of two intertwined colonial events (Silva, 2012a). One of them is related with the remarkable role that the non-adherence to *barlake* and to other customs (“*usos e costumes*”) had as a condition for assigning people the status of *assimilado* [assimilated], the highest citizenship status available to local people in the Portuguese colonies until 1954. By denying their engagement in marriage practices mediated by *hafolin* or *barlake*, people emulate practices considered modern and civilized, in both the colonial past as well as in contemporary Dili. Another phenomenon that appears to be influencing this scenario is the colonial interpretations of the indigenous marriage practices in East Timor. Despite the various gift-functions related to marriages, they have been rhetorically reduced to *barlake* or *hafolin* in certain colonial and postcolonial narratives. In this process, “a guerra do *barlake*” seems to have had a leading role. The controversy plot appears to remain silent about the various moments of exchange and of distinct gift-functions that compose the marriage process as social technologies of negotiating rights in persons. So, it is not by chance that it is the presence or absence of *folin* or *barlake* that has marked the ways people have handled their marriage practices to produce identification effects in Dili today.

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