

Matak-malirin, Tempu Rai-diak and Halerik: Expressions of what Timorese longed for in life

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In this article, I will talk about three simple Timorese expressions, namely *matak-malirin* (the green and the cool), *tempu rai-diak* (the tranquil time) and *halerik* (the chanting of suffering). I am interested in exploring these expressions because Timorese use them to express what they are looking for in life. This article will discuss the meaning and the use of *matak-malirin* in life by the Timorese and its distribution among them. The article will then explore the idea of *tempu rai-diak* (the tranquil time), a time in the past where people lived in peace and tranquillity with no shortage of food. The article will further discuss about *halerik*, the singing or chanting of suffering.

Matak-malirin

Matak-malirin is derived from Tetun Terik language, *matak* = the green and *malirin* = cool. The term itself can be found in all language groups in Timor-Leste. Generally, people refer to it as *bua-malus* (betel leaves and areca nuts or betel nut). In Naueti language for example, people refer to *matak-malirin* as *wai-malu* (*wai*= water, the cool one, *malu* = betel leaves, the green one). In Idate language it is called *mama*.

Matak-malirin in this article refers to ‘the green and the cool’, which metaphorically represent the idea of peace, prosperity, good health and protection from bad luck and other misfortune or misery in life. In this case, the green (*matak*) represents the idea of good harvest where food is plentiful. Meanwhile ‘cool’ (*malirin*) represents the idea of peace in the society. In this context *malirin* (cool) has connection to the calmness or coolness of water in a pond. When there is *malirin*, this means that there is no *manas* (hot) or violence. Timorese used the term *malirin* to refer to a calm or peaceful situation while they use *manas* (hot) to refer to a violent situation.

According to Vroklage (1953) *matak-malirin* (*matak*= newly green or sprouting, *malirin*= cool), refers to good health and productive life energy or the life force of human beings, plants and animals. Water is the *matak inan malirin inan* (the mother of the greenness, the mother of coolness), that is, the mother of good health and productive life force or life energy (cited in Kehi and Palmer 2012, 447)

The ultimate goal of Timorese rituals is to receive *matak-malirin* which distributed at the end of the event in the forms of betel-nut (*bua-malus*), corn, rice and meat. For example, at the end of corn harvest ritual, each family who participated in the ceremony will receive betel-nut, corn and meat.



The above picture was taken during an *Uma Lulik* (sacred house) inauguration from *Naueti* language group in Uatolari, Viqueque district. There is rice, meat, betel nut and water. This is *matak-malirin* in its real form. The meat (beef and pork), rice, green betel leaves represent the idea of prosperity, while the water in the pot symbolizes peace and tranquillity in society. It is the values of peace and prosperity that *matak-malirin* emphasizes.

When people receive *matak-malirin*, they believe that they will have a better harvest in the coming season, better health, and that they will be protected from bad luck in their life. The distribution of *matak-malirin* follows the rules set by the *lulik*, where it is given out by a ritual power holder to a political power holder and it flows from the insider to the outsider.

The receiver of *matak-malirin* is ritually in an inferior position to the giver, but is politically superior to them (see Trindade 2012). For example, *matak-malirin* is always distributed by the wife-giver (*umane*) to the wife-taker (*fetosan*), not the other way around. It is because the woman who is married out from the wife-giver house represents the continuation of life to the receiving house. The wife-giver, therefore, is the source of life. This is the reason why they are ritually superior to the wife-taker and have the right to distribute *matak-malirin*.

Matak-malirin can only be distributed when the giver and the receiver are in a harmonious relationship. This can be seen as a conflict resolution mechanism, because the distribution of *matak-malirin* requires a peaceful relationship; therefore, any existing conflict must be resolved.

During the war against the Indonesians, Timorese resistance fighters kept *matak-malirin* in the form of betel nut and used them as ritual protection. Today, there remains a veteran organization called *Bua-malus* or betel nut.

Those who live a modern life in Dili have different expectations to those who live in rural areas when they receive *matak-malirin* during a ritual. They no longer hope to get a better harvest in their farm, but they are hoping to have nice job in an air-conditioned office, or a nice car to drive, a nice house, etc.

For the State of Timor-Leste, the example of the idea of *matak-malirin* for the nation and its people, is described in the 'Program for the fifth Constitutional Government 2012 – 2017 Legislature' as follows:

If and when each Timorese family is sheltered
in a decent home,
where water runs
and electricity powers,
in an urbanised rural community,
with kindergartens,
with schools and clinics,
surrounded by green and leisure spaces,
as well as the activities of commerce,
small industries
and workshops,
the people of the community will have
a deep sense of belonging
and responsibility
and men, women, elderly and children
guided by the noble values of solidarity,
will be able to live in an atmosphere of social harmony
that will consolidate for all time,
national identity
and unity.
And each child of this land
will be proud to be TIMORESE!

Tempu Rai-Diak (The Tranquil Time)

When people are blessed *matak-malirin*, they believe that they are living in *tempu rai-diak*. *Tempu rai-diak* refers to a time in the past when people lived in peace, agriculture was good and there was no shortage of food. It generally refers to the time of the ancestors prior to the European arrival.

Tempu rai-diak is also used to differentiate between the two colonial periods in Timor-Leste by the elderly. During the Indonesian occupation, people referred to the Portuguese colonial period as *tempu rai-diak* as opposed to the period of Indonesian occupation. This is because during the Portuguese colonial period, the Portuguese were ruling the country indirectly through local *Liurais*. Compare to Portuguese times, the Indonesia time was more catastrophic, where an estimated 200,000 people died during the short period of 24 years of occupation. Furthermore, during the Indonesian occupation, freedom of movement was limited compared to Portuguese times. When the Portuguese ruled Timor-Leste, people had greater freedom of movement and there were no check points as in Indonesian times.

One can imagine that those who lived during the Portuguese colonial period used *tempu rai-diak* to refer to the pre-European arrival times. The tranquil time was when there was peace, no shortage of food, war or violence. The elderly described that during the tranquil time, people were free to go to their farms without fear.

Tempu rai-diak is also known as *tempu beiala* (the time of the ancestors), Babo Soares (2003, 89) described that:

[...] life in the beiala period is portrayed as peaceful, calm and governed by the rules of ukun (lit., rule, regulate) and bandu (lit., forbidden) or customary law. Emphasis is placed on the point that in the time of the ancestors' life was peaceful, calm and bountiful. There was no shortage of food and the people lived a good life. This is the kind of life later interrupted by the invasion of outsiders. In public conversations, people refer back to the period of beiala as the time of *rai diak* (lit., earth/soil good) or peaceful times without making a reference to the opposite period, *raia at* (lit., earth/soil bad) or bad times. The colonial period is generally referred to as the time of war, famine and so on.

It makes sense why *beiala* period is referred to as *tempu rai-diak*. Back in *Beiala* time, the population of Timor was a lot less than what it is today. That means that competition for food, land and other natural resources was not as intense. Peace and tranquillity can be easily created and maintained when natural resources are abundant.

Tempu rai-diak does not mean there is 'zero violence' in the society, nor does it refer to a society where violence does not exist. Rather, it emphasises the certainty in a society in which a stable social order existed. As an example, during the Indonesian occupation, they referred to the Portuguese time as *tempu rai-diak*. The Portuguese times were not a time of zero violence- there were wars among language groups within Timor-Leste. People were traded as slaves in exchange for gun powder (ammunition) during this time. But why is it that Portuguese times are referred to as the time of tranquillity? The difference lies within the consequence of the war itself, where during the Indonesian occupation the catastrophe of the regime was more severe in comparison to during the Portuguese times.

According to the elderly, the *tempu rai-diak* was disrupted by the presence of the colonialists. Babo Soares (2003, 86) described that:

the past, *uluk*, or *beiala nia tempo* (lit., time of the ancestors) is distinguished from the time of struggle. For a much older generation, *beiala nia tempo* refers to the period before the arrival of the Europeans. Interpretation of the European period varies from one place to another in East Timor since the occupation and settlement began gradually through different periods in different places. The assumption among old generation Timorese is pointed at the 'presence' and influence of Europeans in the period where their forbears had lived. It was a time when the traditional social and political structure was intact and untouched by outside influences.

Tempu rai-diak is an imagination of a time that existed in the past. Recalling the past can also serve as a tool to revive memories and to remind people, not only of the life of the ancestors but also of the facts of social life in the past. Undeniably, perceptions reconstruct society's consciousness of the past and help to understand the past's relevance to the present (Fox 1979 cited in Babos Soares 2004, 87).

Perceptions of the past are used to reconstruct societies' histories, their social structures, and their relations with the past. While perceptions are the result of thought and reflection, they are also the result of an interpretation of both oral and written history. Both historiography and oral history present a moral validation to contemporary institutions or political interests and can serve as a basis for the creation of new values (Marr and Reid 1979 cited in Babo Sores 2003, 108).

One interesting thing I found is that the generation of today, especially those who born and grew up during 70s, cannot make reference to *tempu rai-diak* because they were born and raised during the conflict. For them, the tranquil time exists at present in the *tempu ukun-an* (Independence time).

Halerik

When the Timorese sense that they are not blessed with *matak-malirin* or are not living in *tempu rai-diak* they will do *halerik*. *Halerik* is the singing or the chanting of the suffering. It is used to seek external assistance and it represents the voice of the powerless (*ema kbi'it laek*) to the powerful (*ema bo'ot*). Normally, *halerik* is voiced out by women, children or elderly when they face difficulties in their life. *Halerik* speaks out the truth and describes the social, economic and political problems. If we watch local television news, it is common in Timor-Leste to hear people say "*rona netik ami nia halerik*" (please listen to our *halerik*).

This chanting of the suffering or *halerik* can be expressed as a song, poetry, crying (during a funeral), or *dahur*. It also sung in the church during mass. In song, for example, we can see the famous Timorese *halerik* in the "E *Foho Ramelau*" (E mount Ramelau) song where it said: '*tansa Timoroan atan ba bebeik, tansa Timoroan terus ba bebeik*' (why are Timorese still enslaved, why do Timorese still suffer). When people sing the song and repeat this expression over and over, it gives them strengths to fight for better future.

There are differences between *halerik* during Indonesian times and after independence. During the Indonesian occupation, *halerik* focused on the fight for freedom or self-determination (*ukun rasik an*), the end of violence (*terus*) caused by the Indonesians, and the economic burden (*susar*) caused by war and displacements.

After independence, the tone of *halerik* has changed. Today's *halerik* revolved around basic needs of the *ema kbi'it laek sira* (the powerless). Example of today's *halerik* can be found in newspaper headlines as follows:

- *Kondotor Sira Halerik Kona Ba Kondisaun Liuron Ba Parte Leste* (The drivers lament about the road condition to the eastern part of the country), (Tempo Semanal 06 May 2013)
- *Komunidade Manufahi Halerik Estrada Aitutu-Same* (Community in Manufahi lament about road conditions between Aitutu-Same), (Suara Timor Lorosae 05 February 2008)
- *Komunidade Palaban halerik ba bee moos* (Community in Palaban lament for drinkable water), (Dili Weekly 01 June 2012)

Conclusion

Matak-malirin represents the idea of peace and prosperity that Timorese looking for in their lives. When Timorese face difficulties in their lives, they are looking to achieve *matak-malirin* and to live in *tempu rai-diak*. *Matak-malirin* and *tempu rai-diak* are the utopian vision of the Timorese. When people feel that they are not blessed with *matak-malirin* and live in *tempu rai-diak*, they express their difficulties through *halerik*.

Bibliography

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