

Relational dimensions within Timor-Leste customary society

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Introduction

One of the key features of Timorese customary society are the complex relational dimensions that glue the society together. The relational dimensions that underpin East Timorese customary society have been critical to the reproduction and reconstitution of society, before during and after colonial occupation. In this paper, I explore these relational dimensions focusing on three areas of discussion. First, I describe the relationship between the people (the ‘real’ world) and the world of the spirits and divine entities. Second, the relationship between people and nature and the importance of natural resources such as land, water, forests, rivers, lakes and mountains for the survival of East Timorese communities. Finally, how relations between people are organized and managed within ‘traditional’ East Timorese society. For this purpose, I will specifically unravel the significance of brother-sister alliance (*feton-nan*), brother-brother alliance (*maun-alin* and *alin-maun*) and sister-sister alliance (*bin-alin*).

What are relational dimensions?

In Social Capital Theory, ‘relational dimensions’ are resources (such as trust and reciprocity) that define and affect the quality of a social network. Social capital is made up of ‘social obligations’ or ‘connections’, which can be converted into collective or individual economic benefits or other forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986). With this notion in mind, this paper sets out to understand how East Timorese traditional society has managed social relations without recourse to specialized institutions such as the armed forces, the police, or judiciary. Many other traditional societies are characterized by the same relational dimensions that underpin East Timorese society. The significance of different types of relationships have been debated within academia but they are often misunderstood or misinterpreted by the colonial powers who seek to weaken the social cohesion and solidarity of ‘traditional’ societies and indigenous peoples in order to divide and rule.

Totem poles and relational dimensions in Timor-Leste

In Timor-Leste, relational dimensions are symbolically represented in totem poles found across the island and common to all ethno-language groups. For example, in Tetun Terik the totem pole is called *Sarin*, in Mambae it is *Ai-Tidin la Gernora*, in Makasae *Ate Sika Porkili*, and *Kaibira* in Nauti. A totem pole is a pole upon which totems are hung or on which the image of totems are carved. A totem is a natural object or animal, which is believed to have spiritual meaning by a particular society and used by them as their emblem to represent them. Timorese totem poles are made out of wood or stones, some are beautifully carved and some are not. These totem poles either have three branches, five branches or seven branches. The branches of the poles represent a relational dimension. For example, the number of clans or the stages of afterlife journeys.

The *Ai-Tidin la Gernora*, (*ai-rin tara bandu* in Tetun), the pole ‘to hang the law’ of the Mambae people has three branches. Two branches pointing one to left and another to the right, and the third branch pointing upward towards the sky. The branches of this pole represent specific relational dimensions. The pole is planted into the earth, representing the relationship between people and nature or the environment. The earth, soil or land is believed to give life, has feminine characteristics that associate it with motherhood. This is the reason why Timorese refer to the land of Timor as *rain-inan* (motherland). Land or nature is perceived as a mother because land, earth or soil nourishes people like a mother nurturing her baby [Trindade 2012].

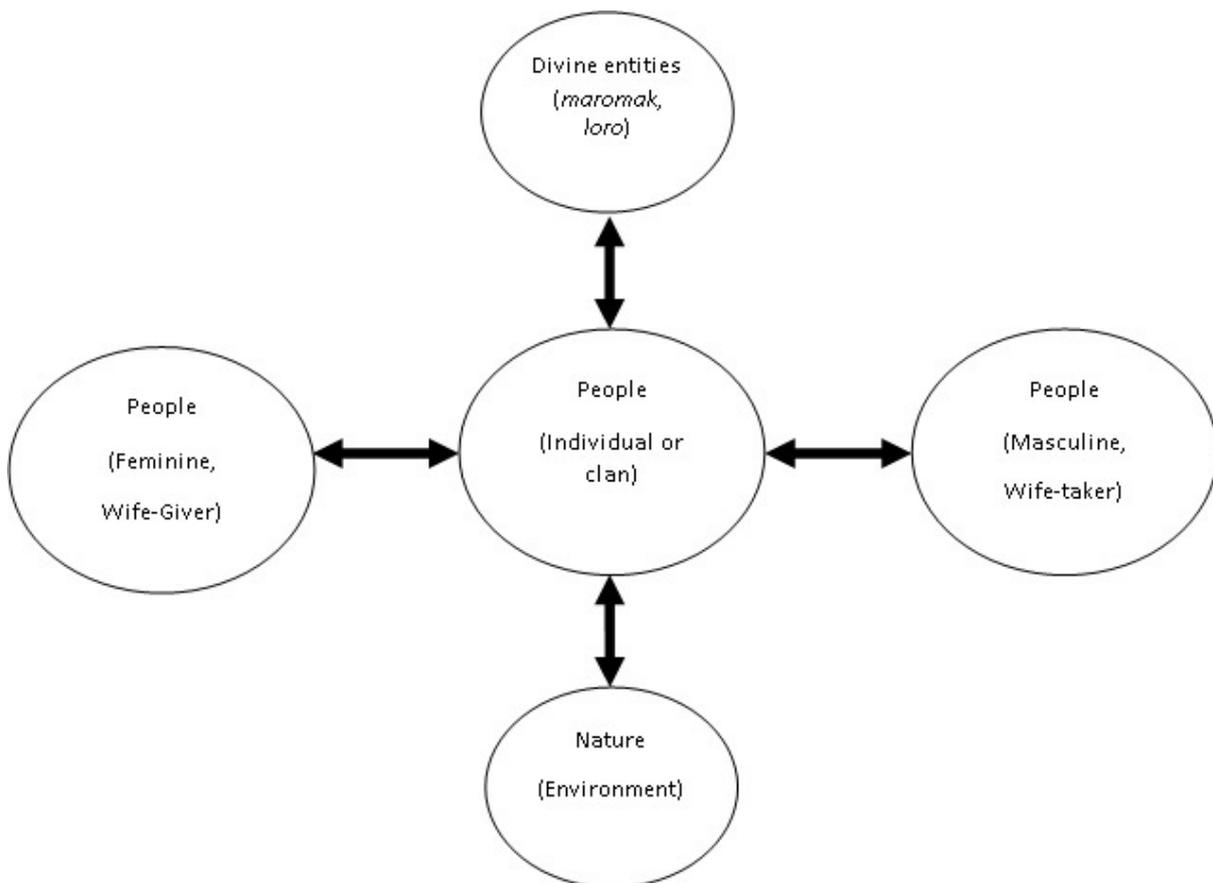
The branch pointed towards the sky represents the relationship between people and the divine entities. As a dualistic society, Timorese divinities have dual elements of the feminine-fertility goddess of

creation called *maromak* and the masculine-god of strength, security and protection called the *loro* [Trindade 2012]. This branch also represents the spiritual world, the world of the dead.

The two branches to the left and right represent the relationship between people and people. Timorese relationships are complex and multilayered but it can be simply categorized into the dualistic realm of the masculine and feminine. The branches of the totem pole to the left and right symbolize these masculine and feminine aspects. For example, when a woman from one clan marries out, the wife-giving clan is called ‘wife-givers’ (*umane*; Tetun). The clan into which the woman is married is called the ‘wife-takers’ (*fetosan*; Tetun). In other words, every individual or clan in Timorese society is simultaneously wife-giver in relation to clans into which women of the clan have married out and wife-taker in relation to clans from which women have married into their own clan.

It should be noted here that in relation to these dualistic dimensions, the masculine world is politically superior and ritually inferior to the feminine world. Consequently, the feminine world is ritually superior and politically inferior to the political world. These complex asymmetrical relationships and alliances bond society together to resist internal and external pressures in the time of war, conflict, life or death rites and other misfortunes. For example, between people, nature and divine entity, people are considered to carry masculine values while the divine entities and nature are considered to carry feminine values. In people to people relationships, it is more delicate to determine who carries feminine values or masculine values. Generally, the relational dimensions of East Timorese society can be summarized in the following diagram (from the ego of an individual or a clan).

Diagram 1 - Timor Leste relational dimensions



From diagram 1, we can see that each individual or clan is vertically connected to the nature or land below and the divine entities above, and horizontally to other people. To ensure peace and tranquility in the society, each individual must work to ensure balance between the nature/earth and the sky and between Wife-Givers (*Umane*) and Wife-Takers (*Fetosan*). Keeping the balance between masculine and feminine values continuously is not only important but essential for the survival of the entire community. Timorese resilience depends on this concept.

Unlike the three-branched totem of the Mambae people, the Tokodede of Liquica have a five-branched totem pole. The five branches of the pole represent the five clans that historically made up the local community in the area. The totem poles of the Naueti of Viqueque and Baikeno of Oecusse are comprised of seven branches. Representing seven clans or seven stages of the journeys afterlife. Timorese totem poles commonly stand near the sacred house (*uma lulik*) or in sacred places where rituals or blood oaths take place. The poles are normally used to hang offerings to spirits of the ancestors or the divine entities. Therefore, one will see that during *sau batar* (corn harvest) ritual, *hemuran* (blood oath) or *tara-bandu* ceremonies, the pole stands in a place considered sacred or important to place and hang offerings to the ancestors and the divine entities.

People and the divine entities

As described above, the dualistic nature of the divine is characteristic of East Timorese belief systems. Within Tetun Terik societies, *Maromak* is the fertility goddess responsible for peace, prosperity and tranquility, while *Loro*, the masculine god is the symbol of security, strength and protection. *Maromak* is superior to the *Loro* because it is viewed as the source of life, the creator. One should not confuse the feminine indigenous understanding of *Maromak* with the christianised masculine version of '*Aman Maromak* (god the father).

Etymologically the term *Maromak* is derived from the Tetun Terik of *mak naroman* (the enlighten one), which became *mak roman* and finally *maromak*. For the Tetun Terik speaking people, *maromak* refers to the mother of the *maromak oan* (the child of *maromak*) who resides in the underworld. The *marmak oan* is the highest ruler of Wehali, the ritual center of Timor Island, East and West (Therik 2004). The concept of dualistic divine entities of feminine *maromak* (Hicks 1984) and masculine *loro* is found in some form or other in all language groups in Timor-Leste. For example, the Naueti people refer to their divine entities as *wu'lara*, derived from *wula* (moon, the feminine) and '*lara* (the sun, the masculine). The same concept also exists among Makasae speakers where they refer to their divine entities as *uru-watu* (uru = moon, and watu = sun). Similarly, the Fataluku people of Lautem refer to their creator as *uru-watsu* (uru=moon, watsu=sun).

Second to the divine entities are the spirits of the ancestor. They are also important within Timorese belief systems and must be treated with respect. If neglected, ancestral spirits can bring misfortune to the living.

During Portuguese and Indonesian colonial periods, the colonial authorities considered Timorese customary beliefs as inferior to monotheistic religions such as Christianity and Islam. The 'natives' were viewed as godless or 'uncivilized' savages. During 450 years of Portuguese occupation, however, only managed to convert 30% of the Timorese population to Catholicism and it was the 24 years of brutal Indonesian occupation managed to convert more than 95%. In another words, 24 years Indonesian occupation converted more Timorese to Catholicism than the Portuguese did in 450 years (Garrison 2005, 5; Kohen 2000, 20-21).

People and nature relationship

Nature in this context refers to the environment and natural resources such as water, trees, forests, land, rivers, lagoons, mountain/hills that are important for the survival of the community.

The majority of the population of Timor Leste are near subsistence farmers and foragers. For many agricultural societies, infertility is feared and the concept of a fertility goddess (or other divine entity such as *maromak*) is a central part of everyday social and ritual life. Nature itself is considered to be a living entity and various natural resources are guarded by a spirit, such as *bee-nain* (water spirit), *rain-nain* (land spirit), *ai-nain* (tree-guardian), etc. Timorese believe that looking after the environment is important for the reproduction of society and future generations. Nature and its resources are not 'owned' but borrowed from the forefathers to be passed down to the unborn in the future. If you take care of nature, it will take good care of you in return. People are able to develop relations with nature through the mediation of nature 'spirits' or guardians.

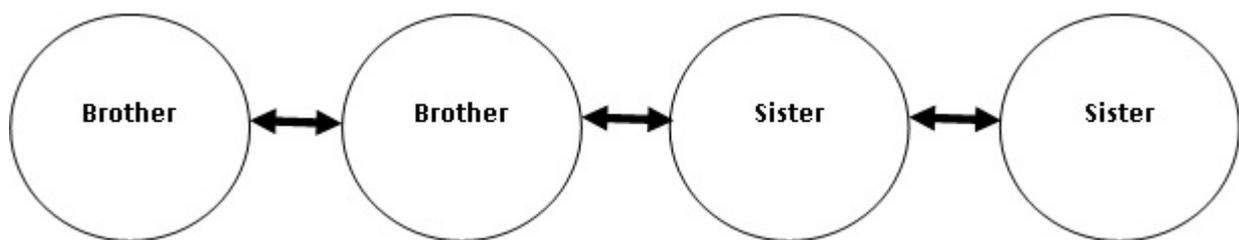
The relationship with nature is mediated through different rituals and ceremonies. For example, before planting seeds in a field, people carry out a small ceremony. They give an offering to the spirit of the land and to the fertility goddess in exchange for a good harvest. The *sau batar* (making the corn sweet) ceremony is conducted right before corn harvest to show gratitude to the spirits of the land, the

spirits of the ancestors and to the fertility goddess for the blessings received during the farming season. During the building of an *Uma Lulik* (sacred house) it is also important to show gratitude to the land and the trees/wood and other materials locally gathered for the building. The building of Uma Luliks involves cutting down trees and harvesting other materials. Before the materials are collected rituals are conducted to show respect to the land and the plants and to apologize to other forms of life that will be disrupted during this process. It is thought that a failure to follow this process will cause infertility to the clan or entire community in the form of disease and other misfortune.

People and people relationship

People to people relationships are the most delicate relationships within customary Timorese society. This relationship is not only important but also multilayered and it provides security to individuals or families within it. It also dictates social interactions between individuals and clans. The relationship can be categorized into masculine and feminine aspects in which it defines the position of superiority and inferiority over one another within the clans.

Diagram 2 - People to people relationships within Timor-Leste customary society



The essence of Timorese relationships can be simplified in three main categories of brother-sister relationship, brother-brother relationship and sister-sister relationship (see diagram 2 above). This categorization can be applied to all ethno-linguistic groups in Timor-Leste and can be found in both patrilineal and matrilineal societies.

The *Fetosa – Umame* (Brother – Sister) Relationship – is based on marriage and it can unite two families or clans. The *Fetosan* is the family or clan of the sister who married out or the Wife-Taker and the *Umame* is the family or clan of the brother who stays in the house of origin or the Wife-Giver. This relationship is crucial in patrilineal society; once this relationship is established, the two clans will constantly exchange goods to cement it and it will last for many generations. *Umame* is ritually superior and politically inferior to *Fetosan*.

During colonial periods, the relationship between Wife-Givers and Wife-Takers and the practice of gift exchange during marriage or *barlaki* has been misinterpreted and misunderstood. The colonizers, both Portugal and Indonesia interpreted Timorese *barlaki* practice as an act of selling and buying women in economic sense (Niner, 2012; Hicks 2012), an attempt to put Timorese cultural practices and values in inferior position in comparison to colonial cultures and values. This misinterpretation of Timorese marriage practice and *barlaki* is best summarized by Niner (2012, 138) as follows:

As early as the 1960s they [*barlaki*] have been blamed for the subjugation of women and more recently cited as central a cause of high levels of domestic violence. This condemnation fits into broad global feminist critiques of traditional marriage practices as mechanisms for the control and exploitation of women by men.

Unlike the colonial authorities and some contemporary gender activists who view *fetosan-umame* relationship and marriage gift exchange as an act of exploitation and subjugation of women and the cause of domestic violence (UNFPA 2005), for Hohe and Ospina (2001, 26):

The Wife Giver is often associated with the value of fertility. It is not perceived that the woman, as an individual person, is passed on to another family, but that the value of fertility is

supplied to one's Wife Taker. In the Wife Taker family, the new woman produces new life again in her children and this new life is then passed on to one's own Wife Taker. Thus, we speak of a 'flow of life' that flows from the Wife Givers to their various Wife Takers. As 'life' and therefore reproduction is one of the most important values to society, the maintenance of the system is incredibly important. In daily life the relationships of Wife Givers and Wife Takers are always remembered. Often in conversations, people do not call an absent person by name, but they use the term for Wife Giver (*uma mane*) or Wife Taker (*feto san*) according to their relationship towards the person. These relationships order a big part of the social cosmos, with the Wife Giver always seen as superior. The advantage of this system is that it can combine a large number of families and hence, contribute to the establishment of peaceful relationships in a wide territory.

The *Maun – Alin* (Brother to Brother) relationship – *Maun* is the older brother and *alin* is the younger one. This relationship is strong among patrilineal society, and it forms the basis for the clan. *Maun-alin* refers not only to the blood brothers, but it is also used to describe all male line in the clan. Blood brothers may be referred to as *maun-alin rasik* (direct brother), while cousins may be referred to as just *maun-alin*. In Tetun Terik society, a brother alliance which is created through a blood oath (*hemu ran*) is referred to as *alin-maun*. The *Bin – Alin* (Sister to Sister) relationship – Sister-to-Sister relationships are particularly important within matrilineal societies and make up about 12% of Timor-Leste population. The three matrilineal ethno-linguistic groups of Timor Leste are the Bunak, Tetun Terik Fehan and Galolen (Niner 2012, 144). Matrilineal groups do not have the same complex marriage exchanges found among patrilineal groups. The goods exchanged between out-marrying and in-marrying son clans are called *aituka-bemanas* and are more symbolic than material in nature.

Conclusion

The relational dimensions that characterise interactions between people and divine entities, people and nature and people to people relations are critical to Timorese society past and present. These relationships also facilitated Timorese resistance networks to fight against foreign occupations. In contemporary settings, these relational dimensions are still alive and valid among the Timorese people. Across the country communities are involved in conducting rituals and ceremonies such as rebuilding scared houses (*uma lulik*) and death and life rites (*lia mate-lia moris*) with the objective of reconnecting with the divine entities, the land (nature) and with each other. This is particularly important in the context of independence as conflict and violence during previous colonial periods undermined certain relational dimensions.

This local understanding should be included in school curriculum so that local concepts and knowledge can be passed down to the younger generation in Timor-Leste. It is also essential for the academics and the Government of Timor-Leste to research this issue further. Given the importance of these relationships, policy makers should take into account and consider the local context in building a better Timor-Leste because it is important for the Timorese to continue to value their culture as their heritage and identity.

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