

Managing persons, things and rituals: nation building as purification in Timor-Leste

Kelly Silva

This article explores some of the modes by which the Timor-Leste state has appropriated the *tara bandu*, since 2009. In Silva (2014), I argue that it has done so to promote pacification, integration, reconfiguration and monopolization of power. In this paper I go further. Based on an analysis of the *tara bandu* carried out in Ermera in 2012, I suggest that the contemporary uses of *tara bandu* make it a device for purification, as proposed by Latour. Through *tara bandu*, certain governance institutions engender a specific project of subjectivization – in which words, objects and rituals lose a space of agency over the world and in the making of the person, and the human being emerges as the sole source of agency on the world. I argue that the governance cluster involved in the *tara bandu* of Ermera is working to separate the making of individual and collective persons (such as the house) from how much they donate for purposes of alliance or sacrifice, proposing that work, schooling and retention of goods (as opposed to donation), in monetary form or not, are the privileged sources and modes of production of value and distinction. Based on these data, I also argue that *tara bandu* is a device of *economic pedagogy*, that is, a means to erradicate and inculcate certain dispositions about how organizing and managing resources for social reproduction.

My starting point in this paper is the recognition of the multitude of institutions involved in dynamics of governance in post-colonial Timor-Leste. Boege et al (2009), Cummins (2011) and Brown (2012), among others, have qualified this phenomenon as hybrid governance, which is characterized by the coexistence of institutions and mechanisms of power that originated from both secular and religious colonial and national state structures and from indigenous dynamics and institutions of social organization. These institutions simultaneously cooperate and dispute political space between each other, and are subject to the discourses and power apparatuses of transnational governance institutions.

Another premise of my reflections is based on the recognition of the plurality of phenomena with power of agency over the world in different contexts of sociability in Timor-Leste. In addition to people – both living and dead – words and things are imbued with strong power of agency.

Inspired by Elias (1993), Mandani (1998), Dumont (1977, 1983), and other references of political sociology, I recently proposed (Silva 2014) that state formation in Timor-Leste can be interpreted as the processes by which the state appropriates and subverts elements from local governance clusters – institutions that establish the arrangement of the local modes of social organization; ritual knowledge and its techniques; and positions of authority – to transform them into conduits for pacification, integration, reconfiguration and monopolization of power. These phenomena of appropriation and subversion also allow the state to mobilize elements of the local governance clusters to transpose and internalize modern practices and projects of social organization and subjectivization.

My main source of inspiration for this analysis are the works of Webb Keane (2007) who, inspired by Latour (1994), demonstrates how people adhesion to Christianity in Sumba implies a process of purification related to the monopolization of agency. In that context, it were considered Christian and civilized only those who attributed power of agency to men and the Christian god, exclusively. Such a fact was turned into a moral narrative, which distinguishes the civilized and non-civilized. The non-civilized came to be deemed those who improperly attribute agency to phenomena that do not have agency (from a certain perspective), such as words and things.

Bruno Latour (1994), in turn, understands purification to involve processes of separation and imposition of exclusive ontological frontiers and limits of power among the various experiences, beings and domains that compose social life. By means of these processes of separation, these agencies are inscribed to certain typical-ideal places for their existence or configurations considered to be legitimate are projected onto them. In this context, one highlights that purification processes are political instruments that produce multiple power effects. Oppositions such as nature and culture, traditional and modern, politics and science, justice and power, human and non-human, civilized and non-civilized are examples of this separation process.

From this analytical framework, the hybrid configuration of governance in Timor-Leste and elsewhere, in which ritual practices and the institutions and cosmologies that inform them have an important role, appears to be transitory (as a project and from the perspective of central government), configuring itself as a step or tactic by which the modern state and other governance agents gradually negotiate and expand their power and the moral configuration that sustains them. This fact is far from being unprecedented, having a long social history in the trajectory of expansion of colonial and national states.

My argument is organized in three sections. In the first I present a brief description of the *tara bandu* and its uses since 1999. I then analyze the content of the *tara bandu* of Emera, carried out in 2012. In the third section, I discuss the impacts of such a *tara bandu* in order to identify the objectives of the institutions involved with it. In the final remarks, I propose that the purification project implied in the *tara bandu* of Emera and in other Timor-Leste government practices promote an economic pedagogy that suggests two important movements: 1. The first is the subtraction or weakening of the agency of goods and valuables and of their exchange or sacrifice in ritual contexts. 2. The second is the affirmation that only people have agency in the world and that they should cultivate themselves exclusively through their relationship with modern institutions for the production of difference, such as schooling and retention/accumulation of goods (as opposed to the accumulation of valuables for exchange in order to foster relations with people – which Kyrtoff called “wealth in people”).

Contemporary uses of *tara bandu*

In a synthetic manner, the *tara bandu* (– to place prohibition) can be described as a local governance mechanism that imposes rules, prohibitions and punishments through a ritual process. Local and national authorities as well as spiritual entities to whom are attributed agency in the processes of social reproduction may take part in the ceremonies that introduce the *tara bandu*. Upon these occasions, ritual sacrifices and statements are made. The objective of these procedures is to establish channels of communication between the authorities (living and dead) present, and to publicly validate the prohibitions prescribed, which are read out loud to the community (Yoder 2007, 47) and inscribed in symbols, which are then posted in the regions where the *tara bandu* apply. In addition to imposing prohibitions related to the relationships between human beings and the environment, human beings and public institutions and human beings and human beings, the *tara bandu* may also defines punishments for those who disobey the prescribed orders. Despite its colonial origin, as Roque (2012) demonstrates, the *tara bandu* has been considered as eminently local by various actors involved in its configuration and contemporary administration.

The recognition and stimulus to the *tara bandu* practices in Timor-Leste after the Indonesian occupation at first derived from concerns related to environmental management (Yoder 2007, De Carvalho and Correia 2011). Nevertheless, the incentive to resume the *tara bandu* has gained momentum since 2006. The *tara bandu* has been considered by the state to be an effective local technology for governance that reestablishes order in issues that go beyond relationships with the environment. Since 2006, the Timor-Leste state and some international cooperation institutions have provided resources to undertake *tara bandu* in Díli and other districts of the country. In order to coordinate such efforts, the state even created a new administrative institution, The Secretariat of Social Cohesion in the Ministry of Social Solidarity (UNDP 2013, 34-35, 62). The *tara bandu* then came to be considered a device for pacification between conflicting groups (youth gangs and other political associations for instance) and, later, a technology for construction and maintenance of order, in the context of the institutional crisis within the state security forces. Thus, to overcome the crisis of governance produced in 2006, the state stimulated the passage of local “laws” (with jurisdiction in the domain of the *sucos* or a group of *sucos*) made and agreed to by the community representatives and other local authorities, based on popular consultations and in conjunction with state agencies (Belun & The Asia Foundation, 2013).

The *tara bandu* of Emera

To promote economic development, food security and environmental protection (Akta, 2012), local authorities linked to different institutions in the district of Emera – including the Catholic Church, non-

governmental organizations and the State – worked together to develop general principles for a district wide *tara bandu*, which it was hoped would be regulated in greater detail in each one of its sub districts. According to Pascoela Aida da Costa Exposto, the director of the organization *Feto Kiik Servisu Hamutuk* (FKSH, Young Women Working Together), this initiative was undertaken due to the high rates of poverty among the Ermera population, despite the great potential for the production of wealth in the region from coffee growing. According to Pascoela, the situation is caused by the high investments made by the population in ritual practices, for which reason some form of outside control is needed that would allow material accumulation so that people can improve their living conditions, have food security, provide school education to their children, care for their health etc. In this sense, in addition to the recurring themes found in the *tara bandu carried out elsewhere* aforementioned, one of the most important dimensions of the *tara bandu* of Ermera is its use to control ritual investments.

Pascoela's discourse is not isolated. Since at least 1999, the configuration and ritual agenda of the different Timor-Leste populations have been used by different state institutions and international cooperation agencies, as well as the church (for quite some time) as an explanation for what is perceived as poverty, the country's deficient development, violence against women (due to the marriage exchanges), and other problems¹. These discourses commonly affirm that excessive material spending for ritual purposes should be controlled by government measures.

The *tara bandu* in Ermera broadly regulates three types of distinct relations: relations of people with nature; relations of people with animals and relations between people themselves. Thus it prohibits the picking of unripe fruits (*Akta* 2012, Parte 1 Ab), the destruction of public property (*Akta* 2012, Parte I Ae), hunting of wild animals on dry land or wetlands protected by the community (*Akta* 2012, Parte II Ac), sexual relations with children between 5 and 15 years old (*Akta* 2012, Parte III Aa) and human trafficking (*Akta* 2012, Parte III Ae). One dimension of the prohibitions aimed at relationships between people stands out, that is the prohibition of conducting rituals at the conclusion of mourning (*kore metan*) and other forms of *istilo* (rituals), for eight years following the enactment of the *tara bandu* (*Akta* 2012, Parte III Bd), or until 2020. The *tara bandu* also limits the number of animals that can be sacrificed or donated at ritual funerals, when the parties involved (usually wife-givers and wife-takers from different generations) negotiate the gifts to be offered for this purpose. It explicitly determines that the number of animals to be sacrificed or donated depends on the economic conditions of the direct descendants of the family of the deceased person (*Akta* 2012, Parte III Be).

The enactment of the *tara bandu* of Ermera was marked by a large ceremony, attended by the Bishop of Dili, Dom Alberto Ricardo, as well as the president of the republic at the time, José Ramos Horta. Since then, this event appears to have been closely observed by authorities of Dili and the region of Ermera, and has been evaluated and commented upon in various parts of the country. At the six-month anniversary of the *tara bandu* a meeting was held in Ermera to evaluate its impacts. The meeting minutes are a good expression of the objectives sought by the different agencies (Church, state, non governmental organizations) involved in its conception, indicating the ways by which it supports the transposition of modern projects for social organization and subjectivization. I now turn to the analysis of the evaluations of this *tara bandu* conducted by the different parties involved in its conception and execution.

Evaluating the *tara bandu* in Ermera

In general, a celebratory tone is present in all the evaluations presented in the meeting minutes. From the perspective of ecclesiastic authorities, the indicators highlighted as positive effects of the *tara bandu* in Ermera were: 1. The general population's increased time of work in drying coffee; 2. Reduction of *bad spending* made by the people on rituals during the coffee harvest period, which leads to so-called *cultural corruption*; 3. Increased discipline in relation to work among the population. In this context, the so-called bad spending refers to ritual investments considered excessive, manifest in the sacrifice or offering of a large number of animals or in the donation of lots of money (though the gift-giving regime) to construct or reproduce alliances between wife-givers and wife-takers, as well as other

¹ That is the rationale supported by some government agents, which is not mine. As I have argued in other places (Silva 2016), for example, gender inequality and domestic violence in Timor-Leste are complex phenomena which cannot be reduced to exclusive causalities.

purposes. The increased number of animals sacrificed or the increased circulation of money for dynamics of local social reproduction are considered to be what is called cultural corruption (*Revisaum* 2012, 1-2)².

In addition to mentioning, once again, the impacts of the *tara bandu* on the increased coffee production in the region, the administrator of the district of Ermera affirmed that the ritual is helping to consolidate the district frontiers. As indicated previously, the implementation of the *tara bandu* implies the public exhibition (the posting) of symbols that evoke the prohibitions it imposes in the territorial limits in which it operates. Thus, the distribution of the symbols of the *tara bandu* of Ermera at the territorial limits of the district would be contributing to an increased awareness of the territorial limits of the district. Nevertheless, the administrator also highlights the fact that some people see this *tara bandu* as a dictatorial measure that is illegitimate in times of democracy (*ibidem*, 2). This evaluation was also reported by the representative of the non governmental organization *Hametim democracia no igualdade* (Consolidate democracy and equality), present at the meeting.

According to the administrator of the subdistrict of Hatualia, the more challenging dimension in the implementation of the *tara bandu* is that which concerns relations between people (*ibidem*, 3). For this reason he required that the authorities and community representatives present new regulations, aimed explicitly at marriage payments and the first phases of the funeral rituals. Finally, another representative of non-governmental organizations highlighted the pacification effects of the *tara bandu*. According to him, the number of cases of conflict sent to the chief of the suco for resolution decreased. He also suggested that the decreased number of conflicts is indirectly contributing to improving the population's economic conditions, because by making ceremonies unnecessary for conflict resolution it was not necessary to provide animals or other types of resources for payments of fines or reconciliation ceremonies (*ibidem*, 3-4).

Based on these evaluations, it can be concluded that the *tara bandu in Ermera* is aimed at and to some degree involves the domestication and control of individual and collective conduct to produce bodies and other types of resources aimed at production for and by work. This fact appears to be cultivated and stimulated by the control of ritual practices, above all by controlling the quantity of resources invested in them. In parallel, they celebrate the effects of pacification produced by the *tara bandu*, which facilitate local governance. These effects of pacification also work in favor of accumulation of other resources that allow people to escape conditions of vulnerability and to participate in other civilizing institutions, such as school, for example. It thus seems, that the implementation of the *tara bandu* involves some ambiguous practices. On one hand, investments in ritual practices of social reproduction are seen as impediments to the engagement of people in the development process. At the same time, however, the state and other agents of governance resort to *tara bandu* – which is established through ritual techniques – to promote development, whatever is meant by that.

Given the evaluations and demands presented in the meeting held six months after implementation of the *tara bandu* in Ermera, the various government agents present decided to insert two new prohibitions in the measures. The prohibition of matrimonial payments above US\$2,500; disrespect of this limit would require payment of a fine of double the amount spent. The undertaking of ritual practices at the conclusion of mourning and others would also be prohibited for 16 years. A limit was also imposed on animal sacrifices for funeral ceremonies from the wake until what in tétum, is called *ai-funan midar*. Thereby, a maximum of two buffalos, two pigs and two goats could be sacrificed. Disrespect for these limits would lead to fines, so that if three buffalos were sacrificed the fine would consist in two buffalos, plus US\$1,000. If four buffalos were sacrificed, four buffalos must also be paid as a fine, plus US\$ 2,000. In both cases, violators would also be prohibited from performing rituals for 16 years (*Revisaum* 2012, 4-5).

At the first anniversary of this *tara bandu*, a special report was published on the semi-official website of the president of the republic in Timor-Leste, which registered the evaluations of authorities involved in its application. Among other things, the administrator in Ermera highlighted the positive effects of the ritual for decreasing violence and conflicts among people as well as the percentage of people in high-risk situations (such as hunger or homelessness). This is because a consequence of the

² Once again, it should be noted that these are the point of views of some interlocutors. I do not see things in the same perspective.

tara bandu was increased time invested by people in the production of food and coffee. He also emphasized the increased number of children in school and improved health conditions of the population in general.

In Silva (2014), I sustain that the *tara bandu* has been mobilized by the Timor-Lesteese State to spread values and modern sociability precepts, such as gender equality and environmental preservation. In this article I argue that *tara bandu*, which is carried out in ceremonies involving ritual sacrifices have been mobilized to control other modalities of ritual sacrifices, considered to be harmful to engagement of people in modern forms of subjectivization and social reproduction. By means of the analysis of the *tara bandu* carried out in the district of Ermera, I propose that the governance cluster involved in their implementation worked to separate the making of individual and collective persons (such as the house) from how much they are able to donate for purposes of alliance or sacrifice, proposing that work, schooling and retention of goods are the most appropriate modes of production of status and prestige.

It appears, in this case, that the implementation of the *tara bandu* involves a purification process manifest in an economic pedagogy made up of the articulation of two inter-related projects with interdependent effects. 1. The first is the subtraction or weakening of the agency of things and of their exchange or sacrifice in ritual contexts for the production and reproduction of the world; 2. The second proposal is that only people have agency in the world and that their place in this world should be derived from their relations with modern institutions for difference making, such as schooling and the retention/accumulation of goods (as opposed to the accumulation of relations and goods from and for exchange, in order to attain wealth in people.). In this sense, some of the uses of the *tara bandu* appear to weaken the role of ceremonial exchanges and rituals, in general, in the making of the person. By weakening the rituals, certain contemporary uses of the *tara bandu* can be serving - at the limit and in a long term perspective - to decrease the agency of ancestors and the material construction of subjectivity. From a long term perspective, the domestication of ritual practices by the state and other agents of governance, by means of a particular economic pedagogy, can contribute to the monopolization of sources for difference and prestige making by the part of the state and other modern institutions.

Bibliography

- Belun & The Asia Foundation, 2013, *Tara Bandu: Its Role and Use in Community Conflict Prevention in Timor-Leste*. Dili. Available at: <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/TaraBanduPolicyBriefENG.pdf>
- Boege et al. 2009, 'Hybrid political orders, not fragile states', *Peace Review* 21(1): 13-21.
- Brown, M. Anne 2012, 'Entangled worlds: village and political community in Timor-Leste', *Local Global: Identity, Security, Community*, 11: 54-71.
- Cummins, Deborah 2010, *Local governance in Timor-Leste: the politics of mutual recognition*, Ph.D. Thesis, School of Social Sciences and International Studies. University of New South Wales, Australia.
- De Carvalho, Demetrio Amaral and Correia, Jose 2011, 'Tara bandu as traditional ecological knowledge', in de Carvalho, D. (ed), *Local knowledge of Timor*, UNESCO, Jakarta.
- Dumont, Louis 1977, *From Mandeville to Marx (Homo Aequalis I)*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- 1983, *Essais sur l'individualisme. Une perspective anthropologique sur l'idéologie moderne*, Seuil, Paris.
- Elias, Norbert 1993, *O processo civilizador*. Jorge Zahar Ed, Rio de Janeiro.
- Keane, Webb 2007, *Christian moderns: freedom and fetish in the mission encounter*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Latour, Bruno 1994, *Jamais fomos modernos*, Ed. 34., Rio de Janeiro.
- Mamdani, Mahmood 1998, *Ciudadano y súbdito. África contemporánea y el legado del colonialismo tardío*, Siglo XXI Editores, Madrid.
- Roque, Ricardo 2012, 'A voz dos bandos: coletivos de justiça e ritos da palavra portuguesa em Timor-Leste Colonial', *Mana*, 18(3): 563-594.
- Silva, Kelly 2014, O governo da e pela kultura. Complexos locais de governança na formação do Estado em Timor-Leste, *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais* 104: 2014.
- 2016 [forthcoming], 'Women, gender and power among indigenous people from Portuguese Timor: a literature review'. *Anuário Antropológico*.
- Yoder, Laura S. Meitzner 2007, 'Hybridising justice: state-customary interactions over forest crime and punishment in Oecusse, Timor-Leste', *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 8(2): 43-57.
- UNDP 2013, *Breaking the cycle of domestic violence in Timor-Leste. Access to justice options, barriers and decision making processes in the context of legal pluralism*. UNDP, Dili.

Primary Sources

Akta no regulamentu *Tara bandu* Distrito Ermera 2012, Mimeo.

Revisaun Regulamentu Tara-Bandu (Rezultado Evaluasaun Fulan ne'en) 2012, Mimeo.