

Denying peripheral status, claiming a role in the nation: sacred words and ritual practices as legitimating identity of a local community in the context of the new nation

Lúcio Sousa¹⁴⁴

The purpose of this article is to discuss the role of *adat* –an Indonesian term, developed during Dutch colonization, and that is used widely in East Timor after the Indonesian occupation period- and its contribution to nation building in local communities of East Timor from their point of view (*emic* perspective). In this context *adat* refers to the recurrent term used by Timorese people to designate the belief and practice of religious cult concerning their ancestors, their sacred houses and rituals, as well as people who perform or have a task in this system.

In certain contexts *adat* is equated to *tradisaun* or *costume*, tradition and custom; the old Portuguese term *estilu* or *cultura* is also used as others say that their practices are “*ita nia cultura, ita nia tradisaun*” – our culture, our tradition. The dimensions of *adat* selected to work in this article concern community ritual practices and oral narratives.

¹⁴⁴ Research funded by Fundação Oriente (small and PhD grant) and Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian (small grant). The participation in EuroSeas 2007 Panel 28: Timor-Leste: How to Build a New Nation in Southeast Asia in the 21st Century? in Naples, was possible with the funding of Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian. Thanks to Claudine Friedberg for comments and suggestions and Ângela Lopes and Manuela Pinto for reviewing the English text.

EAST-TIMOR

Community ritual practices are an exceptional opportunity to analyse how ideology and practice of identity are worked out by local actors, namely through narratives of origin which stand as an example of identity and denial of peripheral position as often depicted from a hegemonic centre that seems to devaluate the historical process of local entities.

Community ritual practices are important as cultural heritage but also as social and ritual markers of distinction and identity. It seems that their value as “national building” tools are relegated to the sphere of folklore and used in specific times of State or Church agenda, legitimating, above all, these two entities. Nevertheless, for local communities ritual practices are seen as resources not only in local contexts but also for the nation.

1 - The renewal of ritual practice in East Timor: periphery or core of the nation?

According to statistics in 1970, at the brink of Independence and Indonesia Invasion, the population of East Timor was only 26.5% Catholic¹⁴⁵. The major part of its population still maintains its traditional beliefs. Torn by war and occupation, obliged by the new Indonesian authorities to choose a monotheist religion, and supported in their suffering by many priests, the country has become predominantly Catholic as statistics presented in 1998, reported that 84.1% of the population as Catholic, and after independence, 93.4% in 2001¹⁴⁶. It seems that the country was no longer *gentiu...* I experienced that in my first year in East Timor when some of my Timorese colleagues reported to me that *gentius* were “savages from the past and no longer existed”. Interestingly, in the second year some of these same colleagues led me to their sacred spaces and to meet *adat* leaders.

¹⁴⁵Cheney David, 2007, “Diocese of Dili” in: <http://catholic-hierarchy.org/diocese/ddili/html>.

¹⁴⁶Op. Cit. Cheney David, 2007.

In 1999, the country became free from Indonesia and began a process of regaining its independence through a UN lead operation. In the mountains of East Timor, rituals were held to favor the independence movement and encourage their members. After the referendum, in the wake of the rampage destruction carried out by militias backed by the Indonesians, certain villages in the mountains performed once again more rituals of war for their ancient *Falintil* fighters, restructured along traditional lines of social organization, and prepared themselves to defend their villages with traditional weapons.

Since 2000, there have been sightings reported in many districts of the reactivation of major collective rituals in the villages and the reconstruction of sacred houses¹⁴⁷. This is not to say that during the Indonesian “time” there were no rituals or sacred house rebuilding - McWilliam (2005) comments the fact that during the occupation, Indonesia “(...) sought to promote the image of East Timorese house forms as a part of its ideological integration of the territory within Indonesia”¹⁴⁸. Many communities held certain local rituals, in the Bobonaro area *sau batar* or *an tia*, and even regional rituals like *be malai* continued to attract many visitors, namely Indonesian officials, just as in Portuguese times. The Be Malae ceremony at the lagoon located near Atabae area took place again in 2002. Once more, major local and national government officials attended the ceremony, a little like the photos depicted in Album Fontoura (2002) in the thirties and the description that Rui Cinatty writes in 1964 with his article “A Pescaria da Bé-Malai”. The sacred houses never ceased to exist; however, due to the conditions of war, many were rebuilt with new materials and different shapes from the traditional ones. Today the effort to reconstruct them along the traditional materials and structure is in order again¹⁴⁹.

¹⁴⁷ McWilliam Andrew, 2005, “Houses of Resistance in East Timor: Structuring Sociality in the New Nation”; Molnar Andrea. 2005. “East Timor: An Introduction to the History, Politics and Culture of Southeast Asia’s Youngest Nation”.

¹⁴⁸ Op. Cit. McWilliam Andrew, 2005, p.3.

¹⁴⁹ I had the opportunity to visit two sacred houses rebuilt during the eighties in Bobonaro and Lolotoe sub-districts, one Kemak and the other Bunak. I also attended a ceremony in Ainaro district at another house rebuilt along traditional lines in 1998/1999 and which escaped the destruction of 1999.

The May 20, 2002 marked the transference of political power from the UN to the Timorese. A main ceremony was held in Dili, where traditional myths were reproduced, dancers and singers from all the districts acted and traditional spokespersons from all the districts, known mainly as *lia nain*, the Tetum word for the *Lord of the Words*. Although the ceremony was transmitted by television to the main districts and sub districts, local arrangements were made including traditional dancers, singers and *adat* oratory to welcome the new flag, the symbol of the nation.

Nevertheless, the restarting of major community rituals, the marriage practices concerning bride wealth and sacred houses are being faced with either with praises or criticisms, both from the State and the Church. That discussion is linked to the dichotomy centre-periphery.¹⁵⁰ In the independent East Timor there is the distinction between the centre, associated with the ongoing process of change in major cities, the sea (particularly in the Northern coast), and the periphery, associated mostly with the mountains and small towns and villages where culture is mostly traditional. The main characteristic of this dichotomy are depicted below:

Centre – Periphery

Centre = sea = urban areas (30%)	Periphery = mountain = rural areas (70%)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dili as the centre of the political realm - economical enterprise - educational opportunities - civilized / innovative - culture as "process"² 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - mountains as the distant, backward, (self) depicted as ignorant and brute - economically deprived - lack of educational facilities - politically absent from major decisions concerning nation/ region (only "represented" in the suku council³) - culture as "tradition"⁴

² Op. Cit. Soares Dionisio. 2001; ³ Op. Cit. Hicks David. 2007; ⁴ Op. Cit. Soares Dionisio. 2001.

¹⁵⁰ Soares Dionisio. 2001. “East Timor: Perceptions of Culture and Environment”; Seixas Paulo. 2006. “De Maubere a Kafir e Mais Além: o Meio-da-Terra em Movimento”; Hicks, David. 2007. “Community and nation-state in East Timor - A view from the periphery”.

The centre is associated with the sea, seen as a boarder but also a point of contact or origin of outsiders, power and authority that is still continued until today as the seating of the central government and its political power and the spiritual (catholic) source of authority. The periphery is in this context mostly reserved for secondary powers, namely local power and administrations and culture is tradition; this is passiveness and immobility via the action and mobility of the “process” vision.

How is *adat* seen from the State's perspective and the Church's perspective? At an idyllic level, the mountains, their inhabitants, and the ancestors are considered the souls of the country. *Adat* is praised as the “soul” of the nation/used in reconciliation processes/ecological benefits (*tara bandu*) and used as national “folklore”, namely in the reception of foreign dignitaries. Concerning the 2006 political-military crisis these are two examples, one from the Church and another from the State concerning how traditions/*adat* are thought: a) “Concerning the difficult situation in which we live and the search for a solution, I heard the bishop of Baucau, D. Basílio do Nascimento, suggest in a local radio interview, that the old ones, the elders and the villages` chiefs should be heard. Timor has traditions. It has a history. It has a culture. If the most pragmatic, but also less internalised western ways fail, why don` t we try to profit from what we have in the search for peace for our country?” 151; b) “President Gusmão further said he has launched a commission to gather all the traditional elders (*lia nain*) of the 13 sacred houses to follow with the tradition, which he said has not been observed following the end of the invasion. He said he has been criticized for this but [he] would like to follow the ancestral traditions. It is believed that the recent crisis is partly the result of not following in the tradition of putting back the swords to rest, which were taken and used as protection during the war.”¹⁵²

Nevertheless, there is a critique of economical, ecological and social aspects (slaughter of livestock, burning of grasses, and money in bride wealth). At the political level, traditional power structures are not

¹⁵¹ Ângela Carrascalão Friday, June 2, 2006 [free translation from Portuguese] in: <http://timor2006.blogspot.com/>

¹⁵² UNMIT Daily Media Review, 07 September 2006.

recognized as equal partners, although many of the politicians rely on their local bases to raise legitimacy.

What is the vision of the Catholic Church concerning these issues? It seems that the church is at a crossroad of enculturation, perceived as inevitable but frightened by the possibility of syncretism¹⁵³. An estimated 1.7% of East-Timorese declare themselves as animists¹⁵⁴ and a greater number of Catholics still practice their traditional beliefs -In 2002, a young priest working in a remote village told me with some bitterness that his Timorese parish members go to church but as soon as they turn their backs they go back to their traditional rituals. The existence of a cosmological vision that incorporates masculine and feminine is well known by the original Catholic entrepreneurs, leading them to stimulate the worship of Mary, the mother of Christ, in a way to integrate local practices (feminine) with Catholic “masculine” ones¹⁵⁵. At one level there is the incorporation of certain traditional practices and clothing in liturgy. Receptions of Bishops are welcomed with traditional *lia nains* recites, and even certain priests are eager to visit their sacred houses when they become priests, as I witnessed in a ceremony in the Ainaro area in 2002 when two priests went to pay homage to their fathers` village and had a special lunch at their sacred houses while wearing traditional outfits and eating with traditional tools and food.

But, on the other hand, at the national level it seems that there is a will to integrate local culture with the Catholic faith and not to let it be used “to serve as justification to devotion towards local “gods”¹⁵⁶. At the local level some examples can depict what seems to be a will to portray old beliefs in the worst way and occupy their space. Two examples of this can be seen in Bobonaro area. In the old place of Malilait sacred houses there is now a giant cross and a virgin Mary cave, near some stones with a comment “*diabo*” – devil, addressing old practices. In Marobo, studied by Clamagirand (1982), the place where a

¹⁵³ Carmo António. 2002. “Religiões de Timor”, p.9.

¹⁵⁴ Durand Frédéric. 2004. *Catholicisme et protestantisme dans l`île de Timor: 1556-2003*, p.150.

¹⁵⁵ Op. Cit. Durand Frédéric. 2004. p.151.

¹⁵⁶ Op. Cit. Durand Frédéric. 2004. p.151.

major ritual “*tui*” used to take place is now occupied by a church constructed during the Indonesian time.

On arriving in Dili in September 2005 to start my fieldwork, I heard a radio interview in which a priest claimed “*uma lisan* yes, *uma lulik* no; *uma lulik* is the church”, this is hard to translate as “*lisan*” in Mambae is kin to the term “*lulik*” in Tetum and so there seems to be an incongruity. However, the explanation claims that there could be no sacred house, that the sacred house is the Church and that the house could only be a house of tradition and costume, like a “*museu*” – museum, as mentioned afterwards.

It is difficult to know if this is the official position of the Catholic Church concerning the issue. The practices of some priests favor certain ritual practices, namely the ones concerning the cult of ancestors, but others do not. At the end of my year of field research, the local parish was proposing to some local communities, both in the Quemak and Bunak area, to “*tau krus ida iha lulik makas imi fiar liu*” - “to put a cross in the most sacred place you worship more”... What was under scrutiny was not unperceived by local *adat* leaders who said: “*sira hakarak koa ita nia abut*” “they want to cut our roots”.

2 - The role of local communities and traditional rulers in the context of the nation (*emic vision*)

The suggestion of roots being cut is extremely important if we want to understand local perspectives of life and nation. In the botanic terminology of the *lal gomo*, the roots of the people linked them to a territory and its people: their ancestors, their kinsmen and allies “*desde uluk kedas*” – since the beginning of time. Roots in this sense are territorial markers but also metaphors of life and life vitality (of the individual, the House and the community). Maintaining the roots of people is much more than the mere vision of *adat* as a tradition to use in public State/Church displays. *Adat* as roots is essential for relating land

and people, their history and present, to maintain land and life, and from the local insight to sustain the nation.

The main idea I get from traditional power leaders is that they are not considered in the process of nation building and some claim that the present situation of disorder and conflict in East Timor is due to this fact “*ema la fiar ba ita nia cultura*” – these people (the leaders) do not trust our culture, the one in which: “*katuas adora cultura bei ala sira*” – the old ones love the culture of the ancestors.

According to them, East Timor is composed of State, Church and *adat* and they all have a role to play, none are excluded from the nation endeavour, but: “*Estadu, greja no adat hanesan, ida la bele liu*” - “State, church and *adat* are at the same level, one cannot go ahead of the others”. According to my interlocutors, the fact that the State or the Church dispute prominence is not good for the development of the nation, especially when they both mistrust *adat*. There is resentment because they are not considered as equals: the State does not consult them (power) and the Church denies them the role as life keepers in the traditional religious system (*authority*)¹⁵⁷.

Their notion of citizenship evolves around the possibility of being Timorese, Catholic and *adat* believers. A sense of loss prevails concerning the risks of forgetfulness: “*Ita la bele soe ita nia cultura, ita nia avo*” – we cannot throw away our culture, our ancestors. Culture and ancestors are indistinguishable and this is identity and memory as practised in daily lives: *Adat mai husi lalehan* – *adat* comes from the sky.

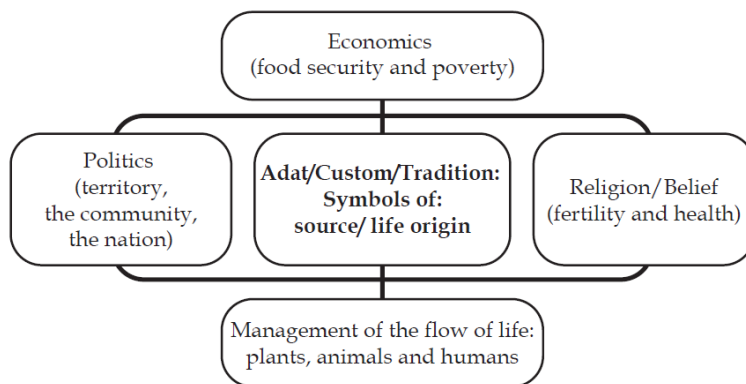
If there is no controversy around the place of *adat* and Catholicism, the problems arise concerning the limitations of each other. In some rituals the blessing of food or to make the sign of the cross is discussible by some. The *adat* are connected to the fact that formally they were “*gentiu*” - “*gentiu uluk, sarani ikus.*” – Firstly we were pagan, only after we became Catholic.

¹⁵⁷ An angry *adat* elder told me that Xanana should come and talk with him. Maybe he could help, but it was not up to him to go and look for Xanana but the other way round. This is like the Mambae parabola of the rock and tree who stand and wait (Traube Elisabeth, 1982, *Cosmology and Social Life – Ritual Exchange among the Mambai of East Timor*).

3 - Tradition - adat manifold dimensions

Time and space are important features of this discussion as they are often forgotten by those who are at the political centre: daily life results from a continuous interaction with the land and with the ancestors. Culture as tradition is not the absence of process. On the contrary: vitality, procreation and reproduction are paramount themes for these societies¹⁵⁸. But, these are only attained if there is “*unidade*” – unity, among the community, expressed as “*liafuan ida dei*” – only one word¹⁵⁹ or in Bunak as “*daga ni kere diol ni uen*” - one speech one word.

Mambae depicted by Traube (1986) were seen as passive onlookers, they depicted themselves as the *rock and tree* keepers. But this passive role occults a major notion of centrality by those who ensure that the land and the world continue. The *adat* works with the main symbols of the source or origin of life but also with politics concerning territory and community, economics – namely food security and poverty – and religion/belief on the fertility and health, all concerning the management of the flow of life of plants, animals and humans and, by extension, the country.



¹⁵⁸ Fox James (ed.), 1980, *The Flow of Life: Essays on Eastern Indonesia*.

¹⁵⁹ There should be noted that *lia* is joined with *fuan* – word for heart, interior.

As Barraud and Friedberg (1996) comment concerning the Kei and Bunak societies:

“*Performing rituals is part of everyday work and necessary in order to be a human social being, to maintain the society through the continuity of the relationships with other beings (human and non-human) and, particularly in the case of these two societies, (but maybe also of other Indonesian societies) with the territory.*”¹⁶⁰

4 - Claiming centrality to the interior: the case of a Bunak domain

The Bunak are a non-Austronesian speaking people who inhabit the centre of Timor divided along the border of East Timor, West Timor and Indonesia. The Bunak of Lamakneen in West Timor were extensively studied by Berthe (1971¹⁶¹) and Friedberg (1978, 1980¹⁶²). These have an oral tradition recounting the migrations and encounters they had along the way to their present location and the constitution of their Houses.

The Bunak of East Timor, and particularly the ones I work with in Bobonaro sub-district have a different world vision of the notion of centre and periphery. The distinctiveness of these people, considered among the oldest ones to come to East Timor, is the fact that their journey is described in an extensive oral poetry collected by Berthe (1971). But, the particularity of the domain under study - *Tapo (sacred axe)* - is already recognised by Friedberg (1972, p.47) who mentions the unique “*recentralisation du monde connu autour de Taqqoq*”.

¹⁶⁰ Barraud Cécile and Friedberg Claudine, 1996, “Life-Giving Relationships in Bunaq and Kei Societies”, pp. 395-396.

¹⁶¹ Berthe Louis, 1971, *Bei Gua – Itinéraire des Ancêtres*.

¹⁶² Friedberg Claudine, 1978, *Comment fut Tranchée la Liane Céleste et autres textes de littérature orale bunaq*; and Friedberg Claudine, 1980, *Boiled Woman and Broiled Man: Myths and Agricultural Rituals of the Bunaq of Central Timor*.

According to local concepts the centre is the interior and the periphery is the exterior. The interior is hidden from the outside because of its task of safekeeping the mother heart. The interior is feminine and the exterior is masculine, the interior is night and black, the outside exterior is day and white. This reverse analysis is only discussed in close circles and it is not openly displayed. According to local history, the presence and subordination to the exterior in which Bobonaro and Ai Asa are at the first level (a second level would be the colonial powers) is explained as a subjugation to hide the interior because the real power is in the hands of the mountaineers. This fact is described by the walk of the flag: the national flag follows the same way as the old symbols of foreign dominance, and it is stored in a sacred House, the masculine House which gives the exterior extended power relations (a feminine House also exists concerning the interior).

In local oral recitations the proper name of the *tas*¹⁶³ is *pan po` mug po`* - sacred sky sacred land, or also *pan gibis mug ilin* – the sky navel the middle land. The origins of the land and the people are nearby the Lakus Mountain. The point of contact amid sky and earth is linked by a stair or a *liana*. This is the place where the first house, the first *hima* and the first humans evolved. Local perceptions of places of origin are highly disputed and some *lal gomo* – the Lord of the Words - recognized that there is more than one point of contact between the sky and the earth. Nevertheless, in local politics of power concerning the possession of words and performance of rituals the most important thing is to know the exact location of these places. Just to mention a cosmogonist concept similar to that mentioned, the Kemak of Atsabe, recently studied by Molnar (2005) also have an ideology of origin based on the mountain.

The new nation, the exterior and coming from the periphery, is incorporated by the ritual of the flag in the interior, the centre: the origin of earth and life. Thus, the nation becomes part of the interior, along with the ancestors who are the forefathers of the actual Houses in the domain. As such, the ritual acts they perform are not only for the domain but also for East Timor and the world. Hence, there is the need

¹⁶³ A *tas* is the main village of the *suku* the equivalent to the Tetum *knua*.

to keep the oral traditions (source of individual, House and community prestige) in order to fulfill by words the acts accomplished in ritual process` and by the social organization that is ritual organization. There is a conscientious effort to maintain all the Houses as they all perform ritual duties.

Contrary to concepts of origin claimed by Wehali¹⁶⁴ the *lal gomo* proclaim Likosaen (Likosaen Raidol as Friedberg (1971¹⁶⁵) mentions as being in nearby Ai Asa as the entity associated with the centre and eastern part of the island and configuring the actual State of East Timor. Another entity associated with East Timor is “*Biba oa luaben*” the place where according to the myth the elder and the younger brother – the Portuguese – separated (there are other ways associated with different nationalities), leaving an older brother behind with the tools to care for mother land, the younger leaves taking the pen and the paper. At the end of ritual, while taking wine, the words are: “*Biba Timor-Leste, Biba Luaben*”.

These ways are described in the *lal hurug* – cool words. In the *lal tino* – hot words, we have descriptions of the wars. It is difficult to analyse if these are previous to the Portuguese presence or concomitant. The fact is that the places where war is reported are very similar to current borders between East Timor and West Timor/Indonesia.

As far as the House is concerned, ritual practices of unity include the *iel gie `on* – to make it grow- a prayer performed by the *hima gomo* of the house with a woman, *hima pana* or an ally of the house attending the ceremony. In this prayer, all allies of the House, either donors or givers of women, are mentioned. It is considered as a main knowledge of every *hima gomo*. Those who do not know this do not take their forefathers seriously - “*la kaer metin ita nia avo*”.

Rituals of the domain are mostly important as *an tia* and *il po ho`*. The first one takes place every year (Interrupted during the war period

¹⁶⁴ Therik Tom, 2005, *Wehali: The Female Land: Traditions of a Timorese Ritual Centre*.

¹⁶⁵ Friedberg, Claudine, 1971, *Mission Ethnologique chez les Bunaq de Timor Portugais*.

following the Indonesian invasion, the ritual restarted in the eighties, after the remaining and dispersed, members of the community resume the reoccupation of the village destroyed during the war) and concerns the chase of wild pigs which are, in fact, seeds. The second one took place in 2005 which was more than thirty years after the first ritual occurred. In these rituals, along the axis of walk that always lead the members to come to the interior of the *tas*, a major distribution of food takes place among all the Houses of the domain but also among functions, namely the ones that represent the State: village chief and the *suku* chief. These are told as *dato ebi* and are portrayed as representatives of the nation. From this point of view, the distribution of food includes the interior and the exterior, the local and the national¹⁶⁶.

Conclusion: disputed centres of East Timor – roots of a nation?

If the two fundamental axis of life in East Timor¹⁶⁷ are “house of common origin, linking individuals with ancestors, and the second axis being alliance”, the Bunak from Bobonaro also seem to invest in the vision of a common territory as a base for life to spread. Namely the fundamental idea that individuals, their families and their communities are linked by a common history and memory that unite them and that is not only based on alliance, but also a community of territory and history.

As in the ritual to call the soul back to the body of a person, it seems that a ritual is needed to be performed in order to call back the soul of the country. But, this is only possible if authority and respect are recognised by the State and the Church to those who perform it. Is it possible to share the power and authority turning it in a major actor in

¹⁶⁶ A *bai lika* can last for hours. It includes all the Houses of the domain as well the functions that are assigned to them in the community. The distribution of food is made to the Houses, and a personal distribution only occurs to those who have a role not heritage within a house, like the *Chefe de Suku* or the *Chefe de Aldeia* (the head of *Suku* and the head of a village), or occasional outsiders.

¹⁶⁷ Op. Cit. Mcwillian Andrew, 2005, p.33.

the political arena and belief? Being Timorese is mostly for mountaineers to be a member of a community, a tangible and practical agenda for daily life survival. But, being a member of a community is essential for recognizing the membership of the nation as long as the nation is also willing to fully accept its heritage.

The notion of roots seems to be pertinent in the current situation of East Timor. Roots allow a tree to maintain its trunk, and they are basic elements for memory to prevail and East Timor needs a memory. But, memory only works if respect, a role, is attributed to those who keep these roots in the context of the new nation. Is there a place for them in the nation lead State/Church couple? As the former Bishop of Díli once said, while discussing the “soul” of the Timorese and the persistence of syncretism: “*there is more hidden beneath the Ramelau than what we know*”¹⁶⁸. In this sense, major studies are still in order, by foreigners and above all by the Timorese.

¹⁶⁸ Statement made at a Seminar “*Nation and Identity*”, attended by the author, held in Díli in March 2002.



matas Paulo Mota (deceased August 2006) renowned *lal gomo* (lord of the words) and *hima gomo* of the House *Namau Deu Masak* at the *opi op* (the mount, the mountain) in 2004. He led a local team of *lian nain* as the district representatives during the ceremonies of May 20 in Dili in 2002. © Lucio Sousa



tei at the *mot* of *Tapo`* during *il po` ho* 2005: dance involving the female and male officers of the ritual in the square of dance of the village during the ceremony to fetch the sacred water) . © Lucio Sousa