

# State Appropriation of Traditional Actors and Oral Narratives in Timor-Leste

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In Timor-Leste, the *lia na`in* (lian = word; na`in = lord, master) – leaders of customary practice – are becoming key to tradition, to “*kultura*” (culture), an emerging area of public cultural policies. Traditionally associated with the local communities and the mountains, they are the ones that know and pronounce the words that uncover the origin of the world, and the relationship between mankind, nature, and ancestors. Since 20 May 2002, when political power was handed from the United Nations to the Timorese authorities, several episodes have illustrated that the involvement of the *lia na`in* has shifted from their traditional local contexts to national ones. From small-scale sociopolitical agents, the *lia na`in* became a resource as buffers of conflict or of reconciliation, as council members of the *suco*, the smallest administrative division, and as actors in national state ceremonies, taking part in the process of (re)creating the nation’s cultural identity. The purpose of this article is to discuss the role assigned to *lia na`in* in state affairs and the nation, particularly the role concerning conflict resolution. The argument, I propose, is that the participation of the *lia na`in*, as a ritual authority, in state-sponsored ceremonies has become a major resource of credibility to the new national authorities.

**Keywords:** Nation Building; Oral Tradition; Peacebuilding; Political Legitimacy, Timor-Leste



## INTRODUCTION: SCALE OF IDEOLOGIES

The *lia na`in* of Timor-Leste is traditionally associated with the local community, the small-scale locality framed by parochial sociopolitical traditional power structures in which they have a particular ritual role. They are the ones that know and pronounce through words the mythical stories that uncover the origin of the world, and the relationship between mankind, nature, and ancestors. In this sense, they play a major role in the flow of life, of people, animals, and plants (Fox, 1980). They deal with the *lulik* (sacred or forbidden), a major potency rooted in the local beliefs. They do this through words that are part of ritual knowledge and also a power, with the ability to either foster or manage violent threats and promote peace. Towards outsiders, the *lia na`in* usually have depicted themselves as a voice in the silence, in the shadow (Traube, 1986), the peripheral interior realm versus the exterior, the center, the government, the secular power (Sousa, 2009; Traube, 1986).

The realm of these men is the small-scale traditional locality in the mountains, where most of the *uma lulik*, the sacred houses, a major cultural and identity reference for East Timorese, are located. Its opposite pole is the big scale

theater of the capital city, Dili, in the littoral plains. As the first is associated with traditional powers, the city is associated with modernity, the government, and the state (Hicks, 2007; Sousa, 2009). These different scales are bound by contrasting ideologies of precedence as both poles have centripetal imaginary forces in the relationship. The mutual intelligibility between the mountains and the cities, the local communities and the state, is not just part of imagined constructions of “community”, or “nation” (Anderson, 2003), they are essential in the social and political negotiation process of framing the new state (Silva, 2014). They are part of the production of the “ideologies of scale” (Tsing, 2000), from two different perspectives, one seen from the mountains, the other from the capital.

The emergence of the *lia na`in* from its highland locality into the Timor-Leste national political arena cannot be separated from the process of (re)creating the nation’s cultural identity as a political means to foster the identity and union of the young state (Sousa, 2016), particularly in the process of reconciliation and in the context of political and military crisis. They are deemed as leaders of customary practice, associated with “ritual power”, the “traditional values” (Trindade, 2008, p. 28), and as such, “most importantly, attention should be given to traditional East Timorese leaders and customary practice [sic]. Ways of integrating local traditions into the nation’s political and legal/practice system should be explored” (Soares, 2003, p. 275). This resurgence is part of an ongoing adaptation and dynamism. As stated by Palmer (2007), “The resurgence of customary laws and traditions is not about ‘going back’ ... but is about recognizing the ongoing adaption and dynamism which informs the customary law-making processes at work in people’s everyday lives” (p. 36). This is what Viegas and Feijó’s (2018) have referred to as “cohabitation”, a process to overcome what Trindade (2008) considered as paradigms in conflict.

The question is, then, whether *lia na`in*’s participation in state ceremonies is a form of Timor-Leste’s “domestication of ceremonies” as referred to by Pemberton (1994) concerning the way in which the Suharto regime incorporated traditional art (*kesenian*) in Indonesia. Or, as stated by Hohe (2002) about Timor-Leste, are *lia na`in* merely a “ceremonial colour, ‘folklore’ or an obstacle to liberal values” (p. 570)? Although the participation of the *lia na`in* in state ceremonies reveals a degree of integration of small-scale agents in the larger scale of the nation, it has, above all, a legitimizing purpose for the state and its agents. Nevertheless, I argue that the participation of the *lia na`in* and their ritual performance provide a significant role in national contexts. This can be compared to the situation discussed by May (2004) in the case of Papua New Guinea<sup>1</sup>, where in the mid-1990s, traditional authority was “(re)discovered” and political discourse on “chiefs” emerged, aiming at restricting local level government. The appropriation and incorporation of the *lia na`in* can be understood as part of what I would call, adapting Silva’s (2016) idea of “economic pedagogy”, a “political pedagogy”, in which through mimicry the state appropriates the action of local practitioners for its advantage.

This paper is based on extensive ethnographic field research in Timor-Leste between 2002 and 2014, in which I had also the opportunity to live one year in a

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1 I do not discuss here the fact that, in a local context, the *lia na`in* do not consider themselves to have a higher status because of their participation at national level events.

mountainous village. The next section delivers a brief and simplified historical overview of the four centuries of conflict which took place in Timor-Leste. The third section discusses the related Timor-Leste literatures on *lia na`in*, followed by the fourth section in which I provide three examples where the *lia na`in* play roles in different scales in reconciliation ceremonies. My research focus was the maintenance of ritual practices and its social actors and social structures amidst the changes that have overcome the country. Although the bulk of my research was conducted in a local community, I also included Bobonaro, Maliana, and Dili as parts of my research field areas. This work delivers an anthropological perspective that considers the ideological scale, this is, the conception of the difference between the two perspectives (the mountains and the capital), as a unit of analysis and a heuristic tool.

### ENDURING VIOLENCE IN TIMOR-LESTE

Timor-Leste is a small, young country located in Southeast Asia. For around 400 years it was a Portuguese colony, but the occupation of the territory began effectively after 1912, following the defeat of the last great native revolt, the Manufahi Rebellion led by Dom Boaventura da Costa (Pelissier, 2007; Sousa, 2016). Portuguese rule was based on a fragile relationship with the kingdoms of Timor, which shifted between a volatile and ambivalent alliance. The rebellions united several kingdoms, that could, over time, change their alliance to the Portuguese authorities, or among themselves (Durand, 2011; Pelissier, 2007; Roque, 2010).

Despite Portuguese neutrality in World War II, Portuguese Timor was occupied by the Japanese in 1945, making the island into a battleground between the Australian forces, who used guerrilla tactics and were supported by some Portuguese and Timorese, and Japanese forces employing “black columns” battalions composed of Dutch West Timor natives. Such involvement of the natives in global events shows the extent to which the war was indigenized (Tsuchiya, 2018). It is estimated that 40,000 Timorese died during this period (Figueiredo, 2011).

The last rebellion during Portuguese rule, the Viqueque Rebellion, took place in 1959 and was violently repressed, despite taking place in a remote location (Gunter, 2008). However, unlike other Portuguese colonies, there was no armed struggle for liberation in Portuguese Timor. The decolonization of Timor-Leste only began after the Carnation Revolution in Portugal took place on 25 April 1974, and political parties emerged in East Timor. In this transition process, civil war broke out in August 1975 between the then-conservative Timorese Democratic Union (UDT), which supported further presence of the then Portuguese government, and the leftist Revolutionary Front for an Independent Timor-Leste (FRETILIN), which demanded total independence. The civil war resulted in the withdrawal of the Portuguese authorities to the nearby island of Ataúro. They soon returned to Portugal, while the UDT members fled to nearby Indonesian Timor. The situation gave FRETILIN the upper hand leading to the country’s declaration of independence on 28 November 1975.

During this time, the Indonesian military saw the absence of power and transition process as an opportunity to occupy Timor-Leste and already had invaded the western border. The Indonesian military eventually besieged the capital city of Dili on 7 December 1975. During the following 20 years of occupation, Indonesia faced fierce

resistance from East Timorese led by the Armed Forces for the National Liberation of Timor-Leste (Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste/FALINTIL). The war against the Indonesian invasion marks the “militarization of Timorese society” (Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in East Timor [CVAR] 2013, p. 362). Timor-Leste became one of the world’s rare cases where violence truly was endemic, and most of the society was involved in the war. CVAR (2013, p. 502) estimates that war and starvation claimed at least 183,000 lives. The violent tensions attracted massive global attention when the footage of British journalist Max Stahl documented the 1991 military attack on the peaceful civil protest in the Santa Cruz cemetery in Dili, during which 200 people were killed (Gunn, 1999). From-below, however, the peacebuilding effort was ceaseless with Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, the Bishop of Dili, and Ramos Horta initiating various dialogue forums to end Indonesian military oppression and structural violence. Their efforts were internationally recognized with the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996.

In 1999, after the United Nations-mediated negotiations between the Indonesian and Portuguese governments, a referendum was set to decide Timor-Leste’s future. There were two options: either make the entity an autonomous province or an independent state. Preceding the referendum, again, Timor-Leste plunged into severe violence because of agitation from pro-Indonesian militias and Indonesian soldiers (Durand, 2011). Following the referendum, which resulted in a majority vote (78.5%) for an independent state, the Indonesian military and militia retaliations murdered over 2,000 Timorese – the victims being mostly those who supported independence. More than 550,000 people were forced to flee, including 250,000 people who were relocated to the Indonesian province of West Timor. Seventy percent of the country’s major infrastructure was destroyed and villages raided (CVAR, 2013, pp. 299-300). Peace could only be restored after the intervention of the International Force East Timor (INTERFET) – an international joint military intervention force organized by the UN and led by Australia.

On 20 May 2002, two years after the transition government United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) had been installed, power was eventually transferred to the Timorese authorities. Xanana Gusmão, the historic leader of the FALINTIL, captured by Indonesian authorities in 1992 and released in 1999, became president, and, Mário Alkatiri, the leader of FRETILIN, who had been abroad in exile, became the appointed prime minister.

### THE EMERGENCE OF THE *LIA NA`IN*

During the Portuguese colonial period, the *liurais*, or the local kings, were the main focus of local political partners within the Portuguese administration, particularly after the 1912 rebellion when many of these kings were replaced with those loyal to the colonial administration. The figure of the *lia na`in* is rather absent from the 19th century literature (Castro, 1867; França, 1890). However, there are references to the existence of the “*dato luli*”, the noble lord of the sacred, or “*railuli*”, the caregiver of the sacred land, the caretakers of the “*uma lulik*”, and the one who speaks with the “*luli*”, the sacred or forbidden (Castro, 1867, p. 317). Forbes (1885, pp. 446-447) also mentions the “*Dato-luli*”, who, according to him, were of paramount relevance in

local ritual processes, both in peace and in war times, giving a description of such a performance: “The *Dato-luli*, then in front of the great stone, invokes the Spirits of their dead, Maromak of the heavens, and Him of the earth” (p. 467).

One of the first references to the term can be found in Rafael das Dores’ (1907) dictionary of Tetum-Portuguese, which defines *lia na`in* succinctly as “orator” (p. 156). It is not until half a century later, in the 1950s and 1960s, that the *lia na`in* comes to the fore, emerging in several ethnographic works that started to emerge as anthologies of oral traditions (e.g., Pascoal, 1967; Sá, 1961). Sá (1961) mentions, briefly, that “they are the masters of the word, the classics of their oral literature” (p. XXV). A more detail description of *lia na`in*’s role in society can be found in Pascoal’s (1967) work:

[The *lia na`in* are those who] ... know how to tell myths and how to challenge genealogies – myths and genealogies which, for them and the rest of the people, constitute history, however implausible and however mixed-up or non-existent their sense of time might be.

Holders of the voice of the past, on the one hand, the *lia na`in* cannot allow it to be silenced, while on the other, to uphold their function, they strive to prevent it from becoming commonplace. This cautious protection has done much to contribute towards the mystery in which it is shrouded. The *lia na`in* is a kind of living, precious book, which makes them a focus of attention for the entire population. For the pagan mob, when it comes to their beliefs, they are the supreme source of credibility. Their testimony is immutable truth. They have a separate place in the clan’s hierarchy. (p.15)

To note, Pascoal’s work contains biographies of the narrators and the *lia na`in*. The distinction between narrators and *lia na`in* is pertinent as it identifies the difference between the types of narratives concerned, myths, legends, and ‘mestizo’ stories, as well as the ability to tell them. According to Pascoal (1967, pp. 367-370), the *lia na`in* are those who have the knowledge and right to express those most revered words, but they can also be guardians of the *lulik*, or they can also be *suco*<sup>2</sup> leaders. This echoes the description provided by Forbes (1885) which draws attention to the complexity of the role of *lia na`in* as *lulik na`in* (lord of the sacred), as someone who deals with the sacred, and, in modern context, act as *suco* leader, and as such form part of the state administrative structure. Such relations between the *lia na`in* and local state power structures was not, however, further pursued by other authors.

In fact, the common image of the *lia na`in* in the 20th century would, above all, continued as a representative of Timorese culture, embellished in photos as an old man with a quiet posture, like in Cinatti’s (1964) description:

In each group of villages, united by kinship and equal political leadership, there is an individual whose functions give him the right to speak in public, on occasions of social relevance. Known by the term “lord of the word,” he renews the great Timorese traditions, recounting the deeds of the ancestors and reciting the poetic allegories in which the worlds of the living and the dead are structured. (p. 8)

2 Administrative unit. There are currently 442 *sucos* in Timor-Leste (Timor-Leste Ministry of Finance, 2019).

Anthropological works in the 1960s and 1970s describe these men as ritual authorities, but do not discuss their practical role in mundane worldly affairs, including politics (Clamagirand, 1982; Hicks, 1976/2004; Traube, 1986). Such descriptions contrast with my findings that reveal the diversity of the roles these authorities fulfill, which to some degree echoes Pascoal's (1967) insights about the roles of *lia na`in* and the overlapping of their functions in society. Understanding the complexity of the duties of *lia na`in* is significant because this provides insights into the relevance of the presence of these men in small scale communities, where relationships and social transactions, particularly kinship, have a profound effect on peacebuilding and the current political situation in Timor-Leste.

I conducted my research in a small Bunak-speaking community in the Bobonaro area (see also, Sousa, 2010a). The *lia na`in*, or *lal gomo* in Bunak, can have official or non-official status. The official status exists when some men hold a particular office in the local social-political structure and can perform the recitation of the oral history and sacred words. Such status, however, becomes problematic when the holders of office do not know how to perform their roles. In such cases, they can delegate the task to someone who knows, usually a member of one of the sacred houses (*deu po`*), to do the recitations. In the village of Tapo, for example, each one of the 18 sacred houses has a *matas*, the head of the sacred house, who could conduct the recitation. But, the *matas* can also be an *okul gomo*, a lord of the ritual, performing in his sacred house or at community rituals. In the local traditional structure of authority, there are offices that also need to be prepared to speak the words, namely the three *matas gonion*, an office associated with inner power and attributed to the three main sacred houses, represented each by their respective *matas*, or the office of *bei*, the leaders of the external power, held by four houses (Sousa, 2010a).

Once chosen, the delegated novice *matas* is expected to go to 'school' to learn the sacred words that will be essential in exercising his authority in a ritual and social context. A similar procedure is followed with the offices of *bei gonion* and with their use of the word in community rituals. When a *matas* does not know the words, he may delegate his capacity to another person, thus revealing a *lal gomo* who, even without the office, performs the event.

Thus, in such a case, *lia na`in* is not a minor reproducer of legends and myths, a voice of the past, who recalls the ancestors. The "stories" mastered by the *lia na`in*, either from the sacred house or from the community, and from the world, are essential as they are narratives that legitimate the (re)production of social and ritual precedence and hierarchy within the framework of social mechanisms, such as kinship, the sacred houses, and community power structures and those responsible for them. Turning again to the performances of *lia na`in*, in the village of Tapo, the example of the *magalia*, the narrative of the path of the House, illustrates the argument. The *magalia* recalls the history of the sacred house, performed at the time of its reconstruction (I participated in two in 2003). This recitation recounts the journey and arrival of the ancestors, and the relations that they established with others (Berthe, 1972). This "topogeny" (Fox, 1997) justifies the institution of precedence among the sacred houses and the offices that each has in the community traditional structure. This can lead to disagreement, as sometimes there are conflicting perspectives. In another recitation in 2006, during the construction of a sacred house in

Oeleu, another *suco* close to Tapo, I witnessed such conflict. All seemed well until the moment one of the *matas* recounted a different path to the ancestor of the house, which led to an interruption of the recitation and discussion. Immediately, they demanded me to stop recording the recitation ritual.

Let us now turn to the national scale. The *lia na`in* emerged in the national context mainly after 1999, or right after the independence referendum. Their presence was symbolically acknowledged through their participation in the 20 May 2002 ceremonies held at Tasi Tolo, in Dili, when governmental power was passed from the United Nations to the Timorese authorities. In the ceremonies, representatives of the 13 districts performed the recitation of the oral narratives about the origins and greeting of the nation in the allocated two minutes presentation for each. During the selection and first meeting of the representatives of Bobonaro district, I noted that one of the main concerns of those men was who would do the translation and how accurate it would be. The presentation in Dili eventually did not have any translator.

At the same time, in Bobonaro, an assemblage of *lia na`in* also addressed the new nation represented by the new flag (Sousa, 2010b). The walk of the flag, already described by Traube (1980) as the way in which the Portuguese flag arrived, depicted in oral narrative, was now performed for the Timorese flag. After these ceremonies, all the *sucos* would receive their flags. However, in Tapo, as also in some other cases, the national flag is not kept in the *suco* office, the official administration of the state, but in one of the sacred houses. Accordingly, when taken to official state ceremonies, the flag is taken by a traditional leader from another sacred house that executes this function. Such location denotes that the traditional central institution of the village, the sacred houses and their caretakers, are given the symbol of the nation to place in their care.

The framework for the new state and the acknowledgement of the role of “norms and customs” in its order is the 2002 national constitution: “The state shall recognize and value the norms and customs of Timor-Leste that are not contrary to the Constitution and any legislation dealing specifically with customary law” (The Constituent Assembly of the Democratic Republic of East Timor, 2002, Section 2, Point 4). The *lia na`in* are formally recognized in the Law of *Sucos* (Democratic Republic of East Timor, 2016), where the role of the *lia na`in* in the local context is acknowledged through three different articles. Article 10 positions the *lia na`in* as part of the structure of the *suco* council, in which they participate jointly with the head of the *suco*, the village chiefs, the delegate of each *suco* village, and a women’s and youth representative. Historically, this new administrative position for the *lia na`in* is significant since Article 5, Point 1.d explains that the *suco* now has specific duties regarding tradition, that is, “defend, ensure and promote the traditional customs and practices of the community”. Such duties are followed by the expected competencies of the *suco*:

- a) Promote the resolution of conflicts that arise between community members or between Aldeias [sub-villages], in accordance with the traditions and practices of the community and the respect for the principle of equality; b) To promote and defend the *Knuu*<sup>3</sup> as fundamental elements of cultural identity of

the Timorese People; c) Preserve the existence of the *uma-lulik* or *uma-lysan* in the community; d) Collaborate in the organization of festivities, ceremonies, rituals and other activities for the affirmation of the traditions, practices and customs that form the identity of the community's customs, without prejudice to the demands that are proper of the social and economic development of the community; e) Promote the holding of activities for the inter-generational transmission of practices, traditions and customs of the local community (Democratic Republic of East Timor, 2016, Article 6, Paragraph 1).

With the formalization of the *suco* and its council as recognized authorities, the “centrality” of the *suco* in the construction of the political community in Timor-Leste becomes paramount. After a long period of militarization of Timor-Leste, as previously described, the law marks the importance of civil society in from-below state building, no longer simply being accorded a role as passive citizen who becomes the object of political change (Brown, 2015).

### THE *LIA NA`IN* AND THE NATION: CONFLICT AND RECONCILIATION

The recognition of *lia na`in*'s role through the *Suco* Law is not an abrupt development. Over the course of fifteen years after the independence of Timor-Leste in 1999, their capacity to mediate conflicting sides has become increasingly essential in post-conflict society and in the general reconciliation process. They became actors that emerged as bridges in reconciliation processes in the country where local and national scales intersect. In the following section, I discuss three examples for this.

#### Customary Rule of Law in the Mountains

The events of 1999 were critical to the existence of Timor-Leste. After the announcement of the referendum's results, deadly violence and destruction spread around the country. Around 250,000 people fled, many of whom were former Indonesian civil servants and their families, but also many others whom the militias randomly collected and deported to West Timor, Indonesia (CVAR, 2013; Molnar, 2010). In the late months of 1999 to 2000, about 200,000 of these refugees returned to Timor-Leste. Dealing with the reconciliation process, namely between those affiliated with the autonomy movement – in particular former militias – and Indonesia, the *lia na`in* had a major role in the process of conflict resolution and local reconciliation (CVAR, 2013). According to my interlocutors, their narrative was viewed by Timorese as more credible than that of the state because they were representatives of an order associated with the ancestors, and because they are the ones who traditionally solve disputes in the communities. In 2000, a mountain sub-district leader told me that he usually called the *lia na`in* to resolve disputes, not only related to the process of reconciliation, but related to other issues like stealing or *suco* borders quarrels, claiming that sanctioning of a supernatural nature commanded greater respect than the state. This was the best way to solve small problems that presumably could become more problematic on a larger scale.

The articulation between tradition and the new state structure, however, is not always easy. In 2003, I attended a ritual at Oeleu concerning a case of cow theft by

a young man in a neighboring *suco*. To amend the sin of the crime the sacred house of the perpetrator declared that not only should money of the amount of the stolen cattle be paid to the claimant, but that the perpetrator should also provide a buffalo for sacrifice. A public ritual was staged at the sacred village site, involving the representatives of both *sucos*. This was seen as a traditional way to solve the problem and establish peace between the two villages. The new district administrator and the police chief also attended the ceremony. They were invited to publicly affirm that the dispute was solved. They stood apart during the entire ceremony, but when the major ritual acts were completed in the afternoon, they called the young man into a house and questioned him. This sparked a turmoil because, to the traditional leaders, the problem, or the criminal case, should have been closed when the ritual was completed. For the new authorities, however, there was also the need to mark their presence and register the fact because they were representing the state.

### Customary Power in the Reconciliation Process

Tradition, or customary power (*lisan*), and its representatives, the *lia na`in*, acquired a national relevance as they conducted ritual acts during the local hearings that were part of the reconciliation process carried out by the CVAR. The CVAR was established in 2001 to inquire into the human rights violations that took place between April 1974 and October 1999. These acts, performances that involved the sharing of areca and betel, and other goods as well as words, in concrete settings, are local-scale events, but affected the national scale and have prevented further violence, both locally and nationally. Nevertheless, if the *lia na`in* and their ritual knowledge were instrumental, there were still difficulties when the scale of relations was shattered by different groups from different localities and different *lisan* practices: “*Lisan* played a significant part in about three-quarters of CRP [Community Reconciliation Process] hearings. One of the reasons for the absence of *lisan* in the remaining cases was that the CRP sometimes involved parties belonging to different *lisan* groups” (CVAR, 2013, p. 2455).

In 2006, another event would bring violence to Timor-Leste on a scale that few had anticipated. In May 2006, 600 soldiers who had protested regional discrimination in promotions were sacked from the Timor-Leste Forces of Defense (FDTL), mainly those from the West Zone, or the origin area of the Kaladis group. During this conflict, there was a strong social perception of two distinctive regional groups of citizens in Timor-Leste, namely the *Firakus* (Easterners, or those who dwell in the east part of the island) and *Kaladis* (the Westerners). As I witnessed the chaos, forced migrants also fled following this pattern of polarization. Fighting broke out in Dili, resulting in 60 deaths and 180,000 internally displaced people (Lusa, 2006). The conflict grew as distrust between political factions mounted and political elites started to blame each other for the social unrest. As the nation was facing political crisis, riots also erupted across the country. The situation once again led to the intervention of an Australian military force, which remained in the country for about two years (Seixas, 2010).

This first post-colonial war in Timor-Leste (Seixas, 2010) led to Mari Alkatiri’s resignation as prime minister in June 2006. In 2007, following the parliamentary and presidential elections, Ramos Horta became president, and Xanana Gusmão, the

head of a new party, the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (Congresso Nacional de Reconstrução de Timor, CNRT), became the appointed prime minister. The new government nevertheless could not end the conflict. In 2008, President Ramos Horta was shot by rebels. Following the attack, President Gusmão declared a 48-hour state of emergency, including a curfew. The attack led to a military counter-operation resulting in the death of the rebel leader, Alfredo Reinaldo (Kingsbury, 2009, p. 190).

During my stay at that time, many people in Dili and the mountain area told me that the war would not be over unless the authorities assembled the *lia na`in* from each one of the 13 districts to resolve the national unrest by bridging the differences among political parties, party leaders, and their supporters. This assembly eventually took place in Dili in December 2006. Nevertheless, Braithwaite, Charlesworth, and Soares (2012) reported that while the ceremonial discussion was “attended by the political elite, there appeared very little public engagement and no sense of an outcome, let alone any kind of binding compact between parties” (p. 228). My informants explained that such a state of affairs came about because the youth and politicians no longer respect the “old ways and beliefs”.

The president of Timor-Leste, Ramos Horta, was seriously wounded in the attack but recovered. After this period of crisis, the state promoted a unity program of peacebuilding and development, namely “*ita uma deit*” (only one house) – one house being synonymous with one country. During my visit in 2010, the walls of Dili were already covered with paintings made by different groups of young artists sponsored by state institutions, which depicted symbolic images of the union and inseparability of all the Timorese, like the Portuguese word *unidade* (unity) or, more elaborately expressed in a traditional couplet, characteristic of oral narratives: “*hun ida, abut ida hamutuk mai ita halao desenvolve domin dame no paz*” (one origin, one root, together we will develop love and peace). In this peace building program, the *lia na`in* were called upon to bless – thus legitimizing – the new national economic and political undertakings. In 2008, for example, an “association of *lia na`in*”, on the behalf of the united East Timorese people, granted Xanana Gusmão the authority to negotiate the country’s minerals (La`o Hamutuk, 2013). Unlike the *suco* council, which emerged from a traditional institution, this “association of *lia na`in*”, however, is not a traditional one. As matter of fact, La`o Hamutuk (2013), the Timor-Leste Institute for Development Monitoring and Analysis, explains that the association was founded by the state’s Secretariat for Natural Resources. Although the association is relatively unknown until today, it marks how the state views the importance of such traditional leadership in political conduct. Their blessing symbolizes people’s legitimation, which represents unity between the people and the politicians as the personification of the state in the post-conflict nation.

Aside from a scale of space, there is also a temporal scale that emerged in Timor-Leste’s efforts to reconcile what are considered to be unresolved conflicts. In fact, a structural time of memory that persists around the violence of the past and the divisions of the Timorese were addressed in 2012, the year that marked the 100th anniversary of the 1912 Manufahi Rebellion.<sup>4</sup> In the anniversary, a statue dedicated

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4 I did not participate in this ceremony, but in 2013, I had the opportunity to interview the local repre-

to the *liurai* Dom Boaventura da Costa was inaugurated in Same. The ceremony was considered a moment of national reconciliation. The close relationship between old conflicts (the 1912 Manufahi Rebellion) and the present (the 2006 Timor-Leste crisis) is relevant as it allows the reasons for the division to be left behind while giving the current actors a role to play in resolving them.

For the ceremony, once again, the *lia na`in* from every district in the country were invited. They were not only to fulfill their traditional role of paying tribute to and appeasing the ancestors, but also to talk about cementing national unity in the present. As one participant explained to me in Maliana in 2013, going to the site had allowed peace to come and the conflicts to reach closure. He explained that the 1912 rebellion had not only caused a lot of deaths, but also many women had been brought and incorporated into the sacred houses of those who won. These facts needed to be mutually acknowledged between all parties, in this case all districts of Timor-Leste, so that they could be forgiven by sharing these memories. The formal organizers of the event said:

The commemoration of 100 years of the Manufahi Rebellion, which is being celebrated in Same, shall begin with a traditional ceremony, “*Nahe Biti Boot*”, performed by the traditional leaders of the 13 districts. The ceremony aims to cleanse all the sins the ancients left at the time of the Manufahi Rebellion. The deputy prime-minister, Fernando La Sama de Araújo, representing the government, introduced this traditional ceremony, saying that, in the past, our grandparents had harbored old hatreds which this ritual ceremony now aimed to redeem, uniting all Timorese in the promotion and development of Timor-Leste. (CJITL/Benny, 2012)

The ceremony connecting two periods in Timorese history was an enactment of unity among people and ancestors, claiming a common identity.

### Customary on Demand

The last example involves, again, the 2006 conflict, and it recalls the power of words in Timor-Leste. After the general elections on 22 June 2017, the newly elected prime minister, Mari Alkatiri, held a ceremony in Dili outside the Government Palace on 27 September 2017. The purpose of this ceremony was to withdraw his own words, pronounced on 26 June 2006, when, after his resignation, he swore never to take up the post again. The event illustrates the relations that are being woven between individuals who represent the state and tradition, particularly *lia na`in*.

The ceremony, once again involving representatives from the various districts (but not all), was named ‘*Dada Ikas*’ (withdrawing the oath) and ‘*Loke Dalan*’ (opening the way) and was extensively covered by the media. The result of the final divination process of the livers of three sacrificed roosters as declared by the *lia na`in* in the ceremony was that “the road will be long, but straight” (Manu-Teen Lulik Loke, 2017). Mari Alkatiri acknowledged that “they were unanimous in saying that the

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representatives from Maliana and Bobonaro districts about their experience in participating in the ceremony and how it has become meaningful for them.

road is open, but also that I have to walk carefully because there are always obstacles ahead” (“PM Timorese Regressa 11 Anos”, 2017). Nevertheless, the obstacles were paramount, and after turbulent months with Mari Alkatiri’s government program rejected and him being unable to implement his budget proposal, the President of Timor-Leste, Francisco Guterres, dissolved the parliament in January 2018, followed by new elections (European Union, 2018, pp. 6-7).

## CONCLUSION

The Timorese state is coming to terms with tradition while struggling to find new ways for nation and peace building in a post ‘militarized’ society. The *lia na`in* have played a significant role in this post-conflict society. They are helping to restore order and promote peace, especially in places where state institutions and law enforcement have been weak, and there has been huge distrust between various segments of society which previously had been polarized, even militarized, in political conflicts.

It recognizes the important role of tradition in local contexts, namely in the resolution of local disputes. In the process, the state formally acknowledges the figure of the *lia na`in* in the administrative structure of the *suco*, with a consultative position. However, their role is attached to mainly ceremonies and rituals to be performed in a local context and within local politics. The relevance of local customary law in general is confirmed by recent studies (Graça & Menezes, 2017) and is manifest in the ongoing process of local consultation with traditional authorities, namely *lia na`in*, undertaken by the government in several districts of the country.

On the national scale, *lia na`in* are obviously involved in the discourse of conflict resolution. However, it should be further questioned whether the state’s legal formal recognition of their presence is also part of a process of the state’s incorporation of traditional actors as part of a top-down peace building. The *lia na`in* and their narration capability and oratory skills reflect a ‘local wisdom’ of creative peace building in a young nation as it plays a role on local and temporal scales. But once it is appropriated by the state – through the law, state invitations, associations – it may lose its meaning.

Similar to the local context, the ceremonies performed at state events strive to deliver the idea of a symbolic whole: The *lia na`in* are from the 13 districts, or at least the material and symbolic supplies, like the baskets for the areca and betel, would be used in this number, symbolizing the presence of all regions. In Dili, the capital, there are currently two main *lia na`in* who have performed on behalf of the entire country. These performances are, according to Silva (2019), being “spectacularized” (Silva, 2019), very much like Acciaioli (1985) claims concerning the appropriation of *adat* (customs) in Indonesia. The presence manifests the symbolic links of the mountain and the capital, encompassing the scales of the local and the national. Another scale that is being addressed is the temporal scale; tying the past and the present denotes that a particular event has historical importance and is an arena of contestation. The temporal scale underlies the need to link common purposes and overcome contemporary divisions.

I can say that the state recognizes the need for the idea of the whole, the assemblage of these small scale “localized territorialities” (Santos, 2001) in the scale of

national undertakings, namely the resolution of conflict (I do not discuss here the outcome of the events). But this is also a way to integrate these actors, recognizing the existence of such diversity but also showing the capacity of the state to assign them a role, even if this seems mainly aesthetic. It concedes the small-scale intervention at *suco* level in the resolution of local disputes and in the process of local reconciliation. The need for the presence of *lia na`in* at national events reveals the fabric of a state, which indicates that, in scales of space and time, synchronically and diachronically, the state needs its symbolic local agents to, as Pascoal (1967) asserts, establish their “credibility”.



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