

Bargaining Kultura

Tensions Between Principles of Power Acquisition in Contemporary Timor-Leste

By *Enrique Alonso-Población**, *Alberto Fidalgo-Castro***,
and *María Jesús Pena-Castro****

Abstract

In this paper, we analyse a discourse around the notions of *kultura* (from the Portuguese “cultura”), *adat* (from the Indonesian “custom” or “tradition”) or *lisan* (in Tetun) in contemporary Timor-Leste and explore its contemporary strengthening. On the basis of ethnographic evidence, we suggest that beyond hypotheses explaining the revitalization of traditions as primary or secondary effects of changes in political or religious regimes, economic conditions, or power disputes between different socioeconomic groups, the contemporary dynamics of revitalization and devitalization of traditions in contemporary Timor-Leste can best be interpreted as a tension between different modes of social differentiation and the very definition of the operation of power.

Keywords: Precedence, social change, double objectivity, revival of tradition, Timor-Leste

1. Introduction

Maun¹ Sindo is a private sports trainer originally from a mountainous area of the westernmost part of the northern district of Timor-Leste. When recounting his story, Sindo points out that his older sister should be the one to inherit the largest part of his father's coffee plantations. After getting married, Sindo's sister went to live to the capital,

* *Anthropology Lab*. Research Fellow. enrique.alonso@anthropologylab.org.

** *Department of Anthropology (DAN)*, *University of Brasília (UnB)*. Postdoctoral Research Fellow (PNPD – CAPES). fidalgua@gmail.com.

*** *Department of Social Psychology and Anthropology, University of Salamanca*. Professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology. mpena@usal.es.

¹ *Maun* literally means “brother”. It is used to refer to equals.

Dili, and supported her two younger brothers in attending the university. In the words of Sindo, she acted as a *maun-boot* (older male brother). Some years after initiating his studies, Sindo received a scholarship to continue studying in Australia, where he lived for one year. When he came back to Timor-Leste, he decided to continue living in the capital, Dili, where he expected to develop a career as a sports trainer, earning a salary that could lead to an “independent life”. After several years living and working in the capital “independently”, he decided to marry to a woman from his home village. In his own words, he did not want to lose his connection to his “origins” so they got married in accordance with what he himself conceptualized as the “traditional system”.

One day in 2012, his father called to tell him that the authorities of the origin house (*uma-lisan*)² had decided to carry out a mortuary ritual (*kore-metan*) for the souls of the *apá-boot* and *amá-boot*³. His *amá-boot* had died in the 1980's and his *apá-boot* died during the conflicts in 1999, when the Indonesian militia attacked the civil Timorese population after the referendum. As they both were non-baptized (*jentiu*), the family considered they should be strict with the ritual prescriptions associated with their death. They thought that the non-observation of the ritual process could bring misfortune, illness and death to the members of the origin house. The ritual authorities of the origin house (*uma-lisan*) decided that the married male members of the kin group⁴ should bring one large pig to be sacrificed and consumed during the ritual, along with a water buffalo (*karau*) to be given to the wife-givers (*umane* of *apá-boot*, i.e. the origin house of his spouse – *amá-boot*). Along with the animals, other goods included beer and beverages, rice, money for additional foodstuffs and other items. In total, Sindo's father calculated that “each [married] man of the family has to spend a total of 2,500 US\$”.

Although his earnings are above the minimum wage⁵, the disbursement of such a large amount of money was not possible for him. When he received the news of the upcoming ritual, he and his wife were waiting for the birth of their first son. Taking advantage of living in the capital city, she was studying and Sindo had been saving money since they got married (after covering the expenditures of the wedding) al-

² Molnar (2006) argues that the concept of *uma-lisan* cannot be equated to anthropological categories such as clan or lineage. For clarity purposes, we will use the concept origin house.

³ Literally this refers to his grandparents, but refers as well to their collaterals. In this specific case, it refers to the brother of his grandfather and his wife.

⁴ Ritual obligations are minimal until a person gets married.

⁵ The national minimum wage in East Timor was set at US\$ 115 per month in June 2012 (East Timor Law and Justice Bulletin 2012).

most one year ago. Until now, Sindo used his bicycle to move around the city, but now he is not alone; both use the bicycle to go to market, school and his job, so they thought that a motorbike would be a priority item to acquire, in order to make life easier. When he received the instructions from the ritual authorities of the origin house (*uma-lisan*), he had almost managed to save the money to buy the motorbike, but now the money (approximately 1,000 US\$) had to be spent on the ceremony. Furthermore, it would not even cover half of the cost.

After telling this story, Sindo came to a conclusion: “culture is too expensive”. He knew that not meeting the requirements of the origin house (*uma-lisan*) leaders would lead to a potential loss of his position in the kin group, as well as the network of mutual solidarity and assistance. If they ask, he says, “we have to comply with their requests” (*ita tenki*), he explained. However, he continues, “[this] is what makes us different [...]. In the future, everyone will have received an education and will not have any interest in *kultura*. Nevertheless, I don’t want to lose it. Because if they [referring to all Timorese] don’t recognize their background, they will be like the rest of the people. What would be the difference between the Timorese and the rest?”. “However [continued], there should be priorities, like the education of the children. If I cannot pay for my son’s education and have to pay for the mortuary ritual (*rate*), how can I do it?”

This contradictory assertion, which recognizes the central role of ritual in identity formation, while conceptualizing ritual exchange as an economic burden, is not only deployed by Sindo. In a study based on qualitative fieldwork conducted across the whole country, with a total participation of 225 individuals (57 interviewees and 168 participants in FGD’s), the authors identified a strong presence of this discourse around *kultura*. In their own words:

“the adverse socio-economic impact of ceremonial costs borne by families, which are mostly spent on purchasing consumable goods such as food and alcohol rather than on funding children’s education or investing in the start-up of a family business, has been identified as a source of tension and cause of conflict [...] In other words there may already be a consensus in many communities that cultural practices should not deprive individuals and families of opportunities for a better future.” (Brandao et al. 2011:26).

2. Revival of Traditions and Epistemological Positions in its Analysis

Since its independence in 2002, an increase in ritual activity and a parallel revival and intensification of ritual exchanges has been report-

edly witnessed in Timor-Leste (Bovensiepen 2014b, McWilliam 2011, Palmer and Carvalho 2008). This dynamic revitalization of gift exchanges linked to ritual practice, locally framed as *kultura* (from the Portuguese “cultura” [culture]), *adat* (from the Indonesian “custom” or “tradition”) or *lisan* (in Tetun)⁶, harks back to the Pidgin notion of *kas-tom* in the Pacific (Jolly and Thomas 1992, see the special issues by Keesing and Tonkinson 1982, Lindstrom and White 1993) or the more recent revival of *adat* in Indonesia (e.g. the volume edited by Davidson and Henley 2007).

In a theoretically grounded analysis of the different epistemological positions around the study of the revival of traditions at the beginning of the 1990's, Jocelyn Linnekin (1991) identified two major approaches: the objectivists, and the subjectivists or constructionists. Among the objectivists, she distinguished between “conservative” and “critical”. The former claimed authority to identify what is “authentic” (defining the “genuine” vs. “spurious” culture), while the latter analyse contemporary cultural representations as the result of colonial or class oppression and domination (Linnekin 1991). In contrast, subjectivists recognize scholars' narrative authority and regard all traditions as cultural representations. The author further identifies a third approach, which attempts to bridge the gap between both perspectives by recognising both the construed and the objective nature of traditions⁷.

These three perspectives can be identified in contemporary scholarly work, with a predominance of the “critical objectivism”. From this latter approach, scholars have attributed the revitalization of ritual practice to a wide array of context-specific causes. Yet, despite the geographical, historical and political disparities between ethnographic settings, hypotheses can be broadly grouped into three major blocs.

On the one hand, some authors explained the rekindling of traditions as a “consequence of” or as “a response to” specific political or religious regimes (see Lindstrom 1982, Keesing 1982, or Jolly 1982 in the context of postcolonial Melanesia, the review article by Henley and Davidson 2008 for the case of *adat* revival). In contrast, other authors have emphasized the changing economic conditions as the causal link accounting for the revival of traditions (Boissevain 1992, Foster 1992, Li 2007, Warren 2007). Complementarily, and as a cross-cutting theme in many of the works on the topic, authors have emphasized the dynamics

⁶ To avoid repetition, we use *kultura* throughout the text to refer to the three terms, which are used interchangeably at the local level.

⁷ The study of cultural revitalization brought along political controversies, both when approached from objectivism (Linnekin 1991) as well as from constructionism (see Keesing 1993, or the more recent discussion by Babadzan 2000).

of power and counter-power as the rationale accounting for the revitalization of traditions (see e.g. Gefou-Madianou 1999 for the case of Greece). These three hypotheses can be found in the works of scholars working in contemporary Timor-Leste.

In this article⁸, while acknowledging the value and contributions of authors approaching the issue from both subjectivist and critical objectivist approaches, we explore an interpretation of the dynamics of revitalization and devitalization of traditions from the standpoint of a double objectivist approach, by which, according to Bourdieu and Wacquant (Bourdieu 1991, Bourdieu and Wacquant 2013 [1978]):

Social groups, and especially social classes, exist twice, so to speak, and they do so prior to the intervention of the scientific gaze itself: they exist in the objectivity of the first order, that which is recorded by distributions of material properties; and they exist in the objectivity of the second order, that of the contrasted classifications and representations produced by agents on the basis of a practical knowledge of these distributions such as they are expressed in lifestyles (2013 [1978]: 296).

From this standpoint, we suggest that in addition to economic, religious and political causes, contemporary negotiations concerning the scope of ritual practices embedded in revitalizing and devitalizing discourses around *kultura* (*lisan* or *adat*) in Timor-Leste reveal not only a struggle for those resources that provide power. They ultimately embed a tension between contrasting definitions of how power should operate; which resources or capitals should lead to power acquisition and which should not. In other words, we contend that contemporary negotiations around the notion of *kultura* and the scope of the gift regime reveal a tension between two contrasting fields or frameworks of power acquisition.

⁸ Based on fieldwork carried out in the city of Dili and the urban area of Liquiçá (Timor-Leste) in 2009, and complemented with field visits in 2010, 2011 and 2012 by the corresponding author. The second author mainly conducted fieldwork in Dili during the summer months of 2007, 2008 and 2009, with short visits in 2010. The third author conducted a total of more than 42 months of fieldwork between 2007 and 2013, in several rural areas of the district of Liquiçá, Liquiçá's urban center and the capital, Dili. While the ethnographic descriptions in this paper arise from ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the corresponding author, the discussion benefited from comparing the fieldwork experiences of the three authors.

3. Augusto: "Elders Want to Exploit us". Ideologies of Redistribution and Their Questioning

Augusto lives in a coastal hamlet of the district of Liquiçá. The lead author met him for the first time, thanks to a friend of his with whom he was living. That friend told Augusto that said author was looking for a house to stay in the coastal area. When they talked about staying in his house, Augusto told him that one of the main reasons why he agreed to host him was because he could speak Portuguese to their siblings. Since the country's independence, Portuguese has been the new official language in formal education, and he thought that by practicing at home, the younger members of the household could acquire a comparative advantage in their studies. In contrast to the majority of his neighbours, Augusto's livelihood is not dependent on fishing. He works in a local NGO that operates as a counterpart of an international organization, dedicated to social and child protection. Augusto is not a member of the original house of the hamlet, or *rai-na'in*⁹. Instead, he explains, he pertains to two different origin houses. His house group is originally from Maubara, where the origin narrative says that his male ancestor (*avó-mane*) comes from. However, he lives in a hamlet within the urban centre of Liquiçá, where one of his female ancestors (*avó-feto*) was from. Contrary to the norm, she brought her spouse there to reside in the area. As such, Augusto maintains some tenure rights in both locales, but while in Maubara he would be deemed as *rai-na'in*, in Liquiçá he is regarded as a newcomer (*la'o-rai*) and is part of the group of wife-takers (*fetosaa* or *mane-foun*)¹⁰ of the original house group in the hamlet. Celestino, the Chief of the hamlet (*Chefe de aldeia*), is the eldest brother of the original house group (*rai-na'in*), and the one who holds greatest authority over the house group and land tenure affairs. As both political leader as well as *rai-na'in*, he has the right to summon his neighbouring wife-takers (*mane-foun*) for them to contribute to issues related to his origin house rituals. In the summer of 2009, Celestino and his brothers decided to summon all of their wife-takers to do some work at the "grandparents" [referring to ancestors] tomb. They wanted to remove the old stone-made sepulchre to build a modern one, made of cement and tiles. Augusto explained to the lead author that it was the right

⁹ The *rai-na'in* house group is the one that holds preferential access to the land and spiritual domain on the basis of an origin narrative.

¹⁰ Wife-takers are deemed subordinated to wife-givers, who are considered "life givers" (see the volume edited by Fox 1980). The delayed settlement of the alliance provisions is one of the main features of the process. However, even after the *barlake* [bride price] has been settled, wife-givers have the right to summon their wife-takers for assistance; in no few cases, on the basis of previous unsettled *barlake* or other debts by ancestors.

time to do this work, since after some time of political stability they had been able to accumulate some savings. As usual, he checked a book where he kept records of all the money and resources he received and gave for house group affairs. As explained by one of his nephews, not everyone has the same obligations in the ritual exchange cycle. In his own house, for example, the sacred house (*uma-lulik*) was being reconstructed. As he was not married, he had to contribute 50 US\$, but all households (*uma-kain*) headed by married couples had to contribute 100 US\$ each. Nevertheless, as revealed by the data ledger of Augusto, the amount contributed was not as uniform. The underlying ideology of redistribution determines that the economic position of the household heads (see also Silva 2013), as well as the previous history of exchanges, should be taken into account. However, in the words of Augusto, beyond that lie the interests of the ritual leaders and the recipient families, to take advantage of the ritual activity. Paradoxically, they are in their own right: “He [the wife-giver] also wants to acquire a small profit [...] The wife-giver (*umane*) cannot invest more than what he spends on the wife-taker (*mane-foun*)”, he explained.

Less than one month after this occurrence, another wife giver (*umane*) summoned them to contribute in matters of death. Someone from the family of his wife had passed away. While in this case they were planning to carry out a Catholic ceremony, they were asked to contribute with beverages and food, as were the other guests. However, as his wife was the godmother [*madrinha* in Portuguese] of the deceased, they were also asked to contribute with a *tais*; a handmade Timorese woven cloth, which would be used to decorate the cross over the tomb. Augusto and his wife discussed the matter and after the conversation, he openly expressed his discontent to the lead author. During the last two months he had already contributed to a number of rituals and there was a wedding planned in the next two weeks, where they would also have to contribute. Despite this, their refusal to bring the *tais* to the ceremony would put them at odds with the recipient house groups and the ancestors, so they decided to bring a *lipa*¹¹ instead.

Augusto was not part of the original house group (*rai-na'in*), but he had a good economic situation. He earned a good salary in comparison with many of his neighbours. With the wealth he was able to accumulate, he helped many of his origin house members from the mountains of Maubara (where there was no access to school facilities) with their children's education. He also built a “good” house made of brick, cov-

¹¹ *Lipa* is a type of sarong, made in industrial centers at Indonesia or Malaysia, whose cost is significantly cheaper than a *tais*. While the latter can cost around 30 to 35 US\$, a *lipa* costs less than 5 US\$.

ered with a sheet-metal ceiling and floor tiles, where he expected to open up a guesthouse to complement the family income. After some years, he also invested his savings in purchasing a small van (*mikrolet*) to transport people and goods to the capital, Dili. In short, Augusto was an entrepreneur who was able to improve his status, but he observed that his capacity to accumulate capital was hindered by his ritual obligations. In his own words, some limits have to be set, because “elders [referring to ritual authorities] want to exploit us”; *kultura* is “respect” and “assistance” but “cannot hinder development”. Augusto’s regular complaints about the high price of *kultura* and his actions were symptomatic of a process of social negotiation and practical contestation. But Augusto’s household was not the only one involved in this bargaining process with the ideological foundations of the ritual exchange scheme. Both in urban and rural settings, the ritual exchange regime¹² is under negotiation in many of its dimensions¹³.

4. Armando: the Politics of Ritual

Armando had just come from Atambua, the nearest city on the other side of the Timorese border (in Indonesia). He was an Indonesian supporter who had to leave his hometown in the district of Liquiçá during the 1999 war after the referendum, in which the 80% of the population voted for the Independence of the small half-island. Despite his widely recognized support for Indonesian integration, he did not seem to have committed any known violent crime. Contrary to many of the other Indonesian supporters, he was fortunate, and after ten years was able to travel to his hamlet to visit family, neighbours and old friends. He and his family wished to assess the possibilities of starting a new life in their place of origin. His father, Manuel, and his mother, as well as oth-

¹² As explained by Traube among the Mambai, “ritual is an obligatory service which secures the order of society and cosmos” (Traube 1980: 91, 1986). Numerous ethnographies have reported the features and exchanges of mortuary and marriage provisions since the colonial period (or for further works by Duarte 1979: 380; see e.g. Forbes 1884: 414 for a classic description; or Hicks 1984, nearly one century later).

¹³ For example, the preferred cross-cousin marriage is giving way in the urban context to individual choice (Corcoran-Nantes 2009), although progenitors may exert strong pressure on the selection of the spouse. Even in cases where individual preference exists, the payment of bride price and the cycle of exchanges is a common practice in both rural (McWilliam 2011) and urban settings (see e.g. the works of Silva 2013 on the topic). The exchange of animals is still of capital importance (Alonso Población 2013); however, money, which was deemed as being of residual importance in ethnographies of the 70’s and 80’s (Duarte 1979), is of paramount concern today, mostly when at least one of the parts involved has a remunerated job (see Silva 2013).

er family members, had previously returned several years ago and were living in the hamlet, but he had remained in Atambua; a place which he openly disliked. When he arrived, the tension that his presence created among his relatives was noticeable, like any liminal being in a transient state. However, his liminality was based not only on his being pro-Indonesian, but also on his position as a ritual authority from the original house group (*rai-na'in*), who continued performing this role in specific rituals on the other side of the border.

During the conflict, some members of Armando's origin house left the country, while others remained. His uncle Pedro and his household members remained in the coastal area of Liquiçá after the referendum. They did not seem to be involved in politics and may have even supported independence during the occupation, but at least they were not seen as supporters of the Indonesians.

For obvious political reasons, the relationship between Armando's father and his uncle was tense. Once they had left the country, Pedro and his sons occupied Manuel's lands, where the household members lived and complemented their household economy by raising cattle and growing some vegetables for home consumption and for the market. Since Manuel returned, they had been openly disputing that piece of land. Pedro argued that Manuel had lost his right to their common ancestors' land as soon as he left the country, while Manuel claimed his traditional right of access and use, despite his past political ideas or his family's forced escape in the onset of the conflict.

During Armando's short visit, his uncle Pedro's youngest daughter died. She was the goddaughter of Augusto's wife. The Cuban doctors had diagnosed her with TBC several months before and everyone knew that this was a dangerous disease, as Pedro's wife and his eldest son had also died of the same condition in 2008. The first speculations in the town claimed that they had been the victims of witchcraft, but on the same day as the death, other reasons emerged that provided a holistic explanation for the set of concatenated occurrences. Using his position of being endowed with ritual authority, Armando argued that witchcraft was an insufficient reason to account for that series of misfortunes, and the other ritual authorities agreed; the reason lay in the powerful ancestors, who were punishing Pedro. With these deaths, the ancestors would be making explicit their disagreement with Pedro's behaviour, as well as agreeing with Manuel's claim for his rights to the land.

On the same day as the death, the ritual authorities of the origin house (*uma-lisan*) agreed on the urgent need to resolve the problem. The funeral was held the following day. Tears, prayers and the burial were

combined in a ceremony whose main events are performed throughout nearly all Catholic societies, with the difference that this one was celebrated by one of the house group authorities rather than a priest.

The main argument used by the ritual authority to legitimize the schema of causes that he had proposed as being truthful was that the previous year, one of the elderly men involved in the controversial conflict made an oath (*juramento*, in Portuguese) in the middle of a heated dispute. By doing this, it was left up to the ancestors to decide who was right; the one who was wrong would receive punishment for his behaviour¹⁴ by the so-called *rai-na'in* spirit (a spirit-like entity that is deemed the "guardian of the place") and by the ancestors (*avó sira*), through misfortune, suffering or the death of himself or members of his family. *Post hoc ergo propter hoc* (Lisón Tolosana 1979:284), the promise fulfilled its own prediction. The final end of the chain of causation seemed to find social acceptance, given its cultural logic and cosmological sense: either the spirit of the *rai-na'in* or the ancestors (*avó sira*) did not accept Pedro's behaviour, and his brother Manuel had a legitimate right to access and use the land.

The identification and agreement about the causes governed the remedies. Just as the burial was completed, the ceremony of restoration was accomplished. Armando, the representative dealing with the rituals linked to the spiritual realm or the sphere of the sacred (*lulik-na'in*), along with two other origin house authorities, directed the discussions about the land, giving the family members the chance to express their arguments and gave their accounts of the dispute. An agreement was reached and after several hours of discussion, apologies from both sides were heard. Pedro returned the land he had taken from his brother and apologized for the offences made. The authorities of the origin house then asked the *rai-na'in* spirit first, followed by the ancestors (*avó sira*), for their acceptance of the agreement. The metaphoric language of the ancestors was used and some roosters were slaughtered. The signals, located in the intestines of the animals, were interpreted in a ceremony that lasted for at least six hours. Whereas the *rai-na'in* spirit clearly seemed to be in agreement with the arrangement, the ancestors appeared more ambiguous with regard to forgiving the person who was judged as the offender, as well as to accepting the agreement reached among the parties involved.¹⁵ After several days, during an interview

¹⁴ These kinds of oaths, through which the ancestors or spirits are openly invoked to decide on human affairs, are common during disputes, but they are said to be very dangerous.

¹⁵ Curiously, several days after the ritual was held, Pedro had a small accident with his motorbike. Within the hamlet, everyone seemed to agree that the cause of the accident was a new punishment by the ancestors, since they had expressed

held to discuss the event and the traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution, Armando used the opportunity to emphasize the importance of the *kultura* in regulating the relationships between people, as well as the authority and legitimacy of the ritual leaders to set up punishments and to mediate in the internal and external affairs of the origin house. The case of Armando reveals the point up to which ritual authorities have the capacity to manipulate events for their own benefit, or the benefit of those who are closest to them. Underlying the chain of causation of the death lie Armando's interest in creating favourable conditions for himself and his direct household group¹⁶. By regaining that piece of land for his father, he would re-assert his legitimate right of access and use, and this would help him to regain the status he had lost for political reasons; through the very act of re-establishing order and granting the continuity of life and health to his opponents. The day the lead author held the interview with Armando, Augusto accompanied him and witnessed the conversation. Despite his complaints when he was asked to bring foodstuff and the *tais* to the funeral, that day he echoed Armando's emphasis on *kultura's* benefits, contradicting the regular emphasis on its drawbacks that he used to express in their private conversations.

5. Discussion

From a critical objectivist approach, social scientists working on the issue of the revival of tradition have mainly defended a set of different, yet complementary hypotheses. One of them explained the revival of traditions as a result of changes in the political or religious regimes, while a second one links the rekindling of traditions with changes in the economic realm, and a third, which shows up as a cross-cutting theme in many of the works, brings issues of power and counter-power to the forefront.

These three approaches have been echoed among Timor-Leste scholars. In keeping with the first set of arguments, Silva (2011) and Silva & Simião (2012) contend that the politics of custom that re-emerged in post-independence Timor-Leste are the result of contemporary dialectics of modernization, which are strongly connected to the specific gov-

some ambiguity regarding the arrangement over the land via animal viscera. At least, this is what the *lulik-na'in* stated when he interpreted the rooster's viscera.

¹⁶ The power of the ritual authorities is, however, far from unlimited. In 2012, Armando had still not been able to return to live in Timor-Leste. On the politics of ritual, see the recent papers by Bovensiepen (Bovensiepen 2014a, 2014b) and Alonso Población & Fidalgo Castro (2014).

ernment practices of the Portuguese colonizers in Timor (Silva 2011). Lúcio Sousa (2009) reports on the direct claims expressed by ritual authorities regarding their role in nation building, while Palmer and Carvalho (2008) contend that the resurgence of rituals related to nature governance is a strategy established by local communities to claim a new status in state formation. In a more recent paper, Judith Boven-siepen (2014a) contends that the revitalization of mortuary ceremonies in Funar has to be understood in light of the opportunities provided by death rituals to deal with the consequences of the Indonesian occupation and conflict. By contrast, and in line with the economics-oriented approach, Andrew McWilliam (2011) argues that the reactivation of the ritual gift economy among Fataluku-speaking communities, after the collapse of the market economy that accompanied the withdrawal of Indonesia from East Timor (1999), constituted a strategy of mitigation of economic uncertainties and human security.

These set of complementary hypotheses successfully account for the initial process of revival of the ritual exchange regime and point to what we consider to be the necessary conditions for the current dynamics of *kultura*. Yet, the “*kultura* as a burden” discourse points to a subsequent process of weakening or devitalization of *kultura*, or at least reveals some resistance to a continuing revitalization by some collectives.

In order to develop a proper interpretation, some considerations should be made on the basis of the ethnographic cases presented above. First, the context-specific nature of the different emphasis regarding *kultura*, as shown by the statement of Armando in a personal interview with the lead author after witnessing the entire ritual process that he promoted and performed – with obvious political underlying reasons, or the changing emphasis placed by Augusto in different situations. In the case of Augusto, the “*kultura* as burden” discourse was regularly displayed in the context of informal conversations held in the private realm – with a foreigner (*malae*) who lived in his house and showed unusual interest in ritual matters (author 1) – during a period in which he had been asked to fulfil several ritual obligations at the same time. In contrast, his emphasis on the importance of *kultura*, emerged in front of Armando – a member of the original house of the place or *rai-na’in* – who despite being displaced for political reasons, the day before, had performed a ritual that served to settle family disputes. A second issue to consider is the fact that even in times when this discourse is deployed, it is usually embedded in a contradicting flow of arguments, where benefits and drawbacks are weighed, as shown by Sindo’s statements. These contradicting arguments, displayed by the same individuals, deserve further exploration. One of the main arguments that sup-

ports the metaphor “*kultura* as a burden” is that the fulfilment of ritual obligations hinders the capacity to meet other needs that the interlocutors consider to be priorities. Both Sindo and Augusto place emphasis on access to formal education for the younger generations. In interpreting this discourse, it is necessary to point that both Sindo and Augusto are immigrants. As such, within the locales they live in, their status is that of a newcomer (*la’o-rai*). In Timor-Leste, and in many other locations throughout the region, origin narratives indicate which of the house groups is the original kin group at a specific locale (*rai-na’in*), thus marking an order of precedence¹⁷ in social issues and tenure rights between individuals as per their belonging to different origin houses (*uma-lisan*). In this context, in which origin narratives are crucial to establishing social order, and where the capacity of newcomers to access narrative capital is limited (Alonso Población and Fidalgo Castro 2014), a new aspiration emerges to access power: through formal education and entrepreneurship. The promises of social mobility through accumulating institutional, cultural and economic capital reveal that the order of precedence – as theorized from earlier approaches (Fox 1995), does not live in isolation, but is hybridized with other frameworks of power. In a recent paper, Alonso Población and Fidalgo Castro (2014) regarded the principle of precedence as a field in Bourdieu’s terms: as a social space of forces and struggles (Bourdieu 1991, 2002) within which the accumulation of narrative capital appears as the main resource for the acquisition of power. The “*kultura* as burden” discourse reveal that specific collectives aspire to consolidate new forms of social mobility. This process cannot be disentangled from the rapid social and economic changes that Timor-Leste has been undergoing since independence, along with the consolidation of neoliberal ideals around individual merit and achievement. Yet, this process of detachment is not a new one. As reported by Silva, during the Portuguese colonization, many Timorese tried to be recognized as *assimilado* (assimilated) by the colonial authorities as a way to improve their social position (Silva 2013:460). To do so, Timorese *assimilado* would adopt

¹⁷ In the last decade, the notion of precedence gained prominence among scholars working in Asia and Oceania (Acciaioli 2009, Fox 1995, 2009, Smedal 2009). The concept has served for the comparative analysis and has provided a common ground for the understanding of societies organized on the basis of origin. However, as an ideal type informed by a functional-structuralist approach, its use may have initially obscured the complex nuances of the operation of the social dynamics. Recent ethnographic accounts have called attention to the local diversity of the model’s operation (see e.g. Bovensiepen 2014b); the linkages with other principles of social differentiation (see Lewis 2009); the various ways in which its principles are socially contested (Alonso Población and Fidalgo Castro 2014, Bovensiepen 2014c, Butterworth 2009, Vischer 2009), and its current transformations under new conditions (D’Andrea, Silva and Yoder 2003, Molnar 2006).

elements of the Portuguese style of life, convert to Catholicism and even burn their own sacred houses or destroy heirlooms (Fidalgo Castro 2012, Hicks 2008: 175). Contemporary practical dynamics of attachment and detachment have been identified as well by Niner (2012) and Silva (2013, 2014) when analyzing the moral justifications of marriage prestations between wife-givers and wife-takers.

Coming back to the cases at hand, and considering that discourses and practices concerning *kultura* are not new, we may conclude that Augusto and Sindo live immersed in two contending frameworks of power: one that establishes origin and alliance (and ultimately narratives) as the basis of social differentiation and status, and a second one governed by the accumulation of economic, institutional and cultural capital. Their discourse reveals an aspiration that the latter should dominate the former. Both case studies reveal how this tension operates, how both fields co-exist and how each dominate in different practical contexts.

In an interesting analysis of marriage negotiations among urban elites, Silva (2013) reports on the strategies established by representatives of the origin houses (*lia-na'in*) to keep their authority and legitimacy in contemporary Dili, by mastering two “knowledge systems” simultaneously: the “traditional” (gained in the *foho*) and the “modern” (through formal education, by practicing Christianity or accessing good professional positions). Somehow, by doing so, they are trying to keep their authority in two different frames of power governed by divergent rules. We contend that the constant negotiation around the meanings and scope of *kultura*, in which both Augusto and Sindo live immersed, must be interpreted as a result of the struggle between these contending forms of social differentiation.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we have attempted to account for the emergence of a recurrent discourse around the notion of *kultura* in Timor-Leste. This discourse represents *kultura* as “a burden”. In analysing this phenomena, we have argued that beyond political, religious, ideological and economic changes, the discourse around the meaning and scope of *kultura* is the consequence of a tension between what Bourdieu defines as fields (Bourdieu 1991). Babadzan argues that modern “de-naturalization” of “culture” is the result of a specific relationship with it (Babadzan 2000: 49). In this paper, we contend that the relationship between individuals or groups and *kultura* reveals a relationship between fields of power. In other words, beyond signalling a power struggle between so-

cial groups, negotiations concerning the scope and meaning of ritual exchange bring with them a negotiation between aspirations concerning the very rules governing access to power; so, in addition to tensions between social groups, they are the result of a tension between power regimes.

Acknowledgements

Funds for the fieldwork upon which this paper is based were kindly provided by the University of A Coruña through the Office of Cooperation and Volunteering, ALGA [Luso-Galician Association for Applied Anthropology] and the Xunta de Galicia. This article is also part of a research grant awarded to Alberto Fidalgo by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation – Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (MAEC – AECID) from 2010–2012. Special thanks are given to Professor Luis Gárate for his comments on the first drafts. Previous versions of this paper were presented at the University of A Coruña and at the international Congress Anthropology in the World organized by the Royal Anthropological Institute-British Museum Centre for Anthropology in June 2012. Contributions from the participants in the panel on intangible heritage are acknowledged. Special thanks are also given to Professor Sharon R. Roseman and Professor Kelly Silva, who provided valuable comments to an advanced version of the paper. Acknowledgement is also given to two anonymous reviewers of Sociologus, who provided useful comments to this article.

References

- Acciaoli, G. 2009. Distinguishing Hierarchy and Precedence: Comparing Status Distinctions in South Asia and the Austronesian World, with Special Reference to South Sulawesi. In M. P. Vischer (ed.), *Precedence. Social Differentiation in the Austronesian World* (pp. 51–90). Canberra: ANU E Press.
- Alonso Población, E. 2013. Fisheries and food security in Timor-Leste: the effects of ritual meat exchanges and market chains on fishing. *Food Security*, 5 (6), pp. 807–816.
- Alonso Población, E. and Fidalgo Castro, A. 2014. Webs of Legitimacy and Discredit: Narrative Capital and Politics of Ritual in a Timor-Leste Community. *Anthropological Forum*, 24 (3), pp. 245–66.
- Babadzan, A. 2000. Anthropology, Nationalism and “the Invention of Tradition”. *Anthropological Forum*, 10 (2), pp. 131–55.
- Boissevain, J. 1992. *Revitalizing European Rituals*. London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. 1991. *El sentido práctico*. Madrid: Taurus.

- 2002. *Campo de poder, campo intelectual*. Buenos Aires: Montessor.
- Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. 2013. Symbolic Capital and Social Classes. *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 13 (2), pp. 292–302.
- Bovensiepen, J. M. 2014a. Installing the Insider “outside”: House Reconstruction and the Transformation of Binary Ideologies in Independent Timor-Leste. *American Ethnologist*, 41 (2), pp. 290–304.
- 2014b. Paying for the Dead: On the Politics of Death in Independent Timor-Leste. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 15 (2), pp. 103–22.
- 2014c. Words of the Ancestors: Disembodied Knowledge and Secrecy in East Timor. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 20 (1), pp. 56–73.
- Brandao, C., Choi, E. Da Costa, M., Dewhurst, S. E., and Ximenes, L. 2011. *Culture and Its Impact on Social and Community Life: A Case Study Of Timor Leste*. New York. Available at: <<http://128.199.253.240:8088/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Policy-Brief-5-Culture-and-its-Impact-on-Social-and-Community-Life.pdf>> (Accessed 17 Jun. 2017).
- Butterworth, D. J. 2009. Precedence, Contestation, and the Deployment of Sacred Authority in a Florenese Village. In M. P. Vischer (ed.), *Precedence. Social Differentiation in the Austronesian World* (pp. 167–90). Canberra: ANU E Press.
- Corcoran-Nantes, Y. 2009. The Politics of Culture and the Culture of Politics – a Case Study of Gender and Politics in Lospalos, Timor-Leste. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 9(2), pp. 165–87.
- D’Andrea, C., Da Silva, O., and Yoder, L. S. M. 2003. *The Customary Use of Natural Resources in Timor Leste*. Dili: OXFAM.
- Davidson, J. S. and Henley, D. 2007. *The Revival of Tradition in Indonesian Politics. The Deployment of Adat from Colonialism to Indigenism*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Duarte, J. B. 1979. Barlaque: Casamento gentílico Timorense. *Arquivos Do Centro Cultural Português* Vol. XIV, pp. 377–418.
- East Timor Law and Justice Bulletin. 2012. National Minimum Wage for Private Sector in East Timor Set at US. 115. Available at: <<http://www.easttimorlawandjusticebulletin.com/2012/06/national-minimum-wage-for-private.html>> (Accessed 7 Jul. 2016).
- Fidalgo Castro, A. 2012. A religião em Timor-Leste a partir de uma perspectiva histórico-antropológica. In A. Fidalgo Castro & E. Legaspi Bouza (eds.), *Léxico Fataluco-Português* (pp. 79–118). Dili: Salesianos de Dom Bosco Timor-Leste.
- Forbes, H. O. 1884. On Some of the Tribes of the Island of Timor. *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 13, pp. 402–30.
- Foster, R. J. 1992. Commoditization and the Emergence of “Kastom” as a Cultural Category. *Oceania*, 62 (4), pp. 284–294.
- Fox, J. J. 1980. *The Flow of Life: Essays on Eastern Indonesia*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press.

- 1995. Origin Structures and Systems of Precedence in the Comparative Study of Austronesian Societies. In: P. J. K. Li, C. Tsang, Y. Huang, D. Ho and C. Tseng (eds.), *Austronesian Studies Relating to Taiwan* (pp. 27–57). Taipei: Academia Sinica.
- 2009. The Discourse and Practice of Precedence. In M. P. Vischer (ed.), *Precedence. Social Differentiation in the Austronesian World* (pp. 91–109). Canberra: ANU E Press.
- Gefou-Madianou, D. 1999. Cultural Polyphony and Identity Formation: Negotiating Tradition in Attica. *American Ethnologist*, 26 (2), pp. 412–39.
- Henley, D. and Davidson, J. S. 2008. In the Name of Adat: Regional Perspectives on Reform, Tradition, and Democracy in Indonesia. *Modern Asian Studies*, 42 (4), pp. 815–52.
- Hicks, D. 1984. *A Maternal Religion: The Role of Women in Tetum Myth and Ritual*. Illinois: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University.
- 2008. Afterword. Glimpses of Alternatives – the Uma Lulik of East Timor. *Social Analysis* 52 (1), pp. 166–80.
- Jolly, M. 1982. Birds and Kastom Banyans of South Pentecost: Kastom in Anti Colonial Struggle. *Mankind*, 13 (4), pp. 338–56.
- Jolly, M. and Thomas, N. (eds.). 1992. Politics of Tradition in the Pacific, *Oceania* 62 (4), Special Issue.
- Keesing, R. M. 1982. Kastom and Anticolonialism on Malaita: “Culture” as Political Symbol. *Mankind*, 13 (4), pp. 357–73.
- 1993. Kastom Re-Examined. *Anthropological Forum*, 6 (4), pp. 587–96.
- Keesing, R. M. and Tonkinson, R. (eds.). 1982. The Politics of Kastom in Island Melanesia. *Mankind* 13 (4), Special Issue.
- Lewis, E. D. 2009. Precedence in the Formation of the Domain of Wai Brama and the Rajadom of Sikka. In: M. P. Vischer (ed.), *Precedence. Social Differentiation in the Austronesian World* (pp. 133–165). Canberra: ANU E Press.
- Li, T. M. 2007. Adat in Central Sulawesi. Contemporary Deployments. In: D. Henley and J. S. Davidson, S. Jamie (eds.), *The Revival of Tradition in Indonesian Politics. The deployment of adat from colonialism to indigenism* (pp. 337–370). Oxon: Routledge.
- Lindstrom, L. 1982. Leftamap Kastom: The Political History of Tradition on Tanna, Vanuatu. *Mankind* 13 (4), pp. 316–329.
- Lindstrom, L. and White, G. M. 1993. Custom Today. *Anthropological Forum*, 6 (4), Special Issue.
- Linnekin, J. 1991. Cultural Invention and the Dilemma of Authenticity. *American Anthropologist*, 93 (2), pp. 446–449.
- Lisón Tolosana, C. 1979. *Brujería, estructura social y simbolismo en Galicia*. Madrid: Akal.
- McWilliam, A. 2011. Exchange and Resilience in Timor-Leste. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 17 (4), pp. 745–63.

- Molnar, A. K. 2006. "Died in the Service of Portugal": Legitimacy of Authority and Dynamics of Group Identity among the Atsabe Kemak in East Timor. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 37 (2), pp. 335–355.
- Niner, S. 2012. Barlake: An Exploration of Marriage Practices and Issues of Women's Status in Timor-Leste. *LOCAL-GLOBAL. Identity, Security, Community. Traversing Customary Community and Modern Nation-Formation in Timor-Leste*, 11, pp. 138–53.
- Palmer, L. R. and De Carvalho, D. do A. 2008. Nation Building and Resource Management: The Politics of "nature" in Timor Leste. *Geoforum*, 39, pp. 1321–1332.
- Silva, K. C. da. 2011. Foho versus Dili: The Political Role of Place in East Timor National Imagination. *REALIS- Revista de Estudos AntiUtilitaristas E Pos-Coloniais*, 1 (2), pp. 144–165. Available at: <<http://www.nucleodecidadania.org/revista/index.php/realis/article/view/28>> (Accessed 26 Jun. 2012).
- 2013. Negotiating Tradition and Nation: Mediations and Mediators in the Making of Urban Timor-Leste. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 14 (5), pp. 455–470.
- 2014. Marriage Exchanges, Colonial Fantasies and the Production of East Timor Indigenous Socialities in the 1970s Dili. In: H. Loney, A. B. da Silva, N. C. Mendes, A. da C. Ximenes, A. da C. & C. Fernandes (eds.), *Buka hatene / Compreender / Mengerti / Understanding Timor-Leste 2013. Volume II* (pp. 228–233). Melbourne: Timor-Leste Studies Association.
- Silva, K. C. da and Simião, D. S. 2012. Coping with "Traditions": The Analysis of East-Timorese Nation Building from the Perspective of a Certain Anthropology Made in Brazil. *Vibrant*, 9 (1), pp. 360–81. Available at: <http://www.vibrant.org.br/downloads/v9n1_silva_simiao.pdf> (Accessed 29 Aug. 2012).
- Smedal, O. H. 2009. 'Hierarchy, Precedence and Values: Scopes for Social Action in Ngadhaland, Central Flores'. In Michael P. Vischer (ed.), *Precedence. Social Differentiation in the Austronesian World* (pp. 209–227). Canberra: ANU E Press.
- Sousa, L. 2009. Denying Peripheral Status, Claiming a Role in the Nation: Sacred Words and Ritual Practices as Legitimizing Identity of a Local Community in the Context of the New Nation. In: C. Cabasset-Semmedo and F. Durand (eds.), *East-Timor. How to Build a New Nation in Southeast Asia in the 21st Century* (pp. 105–120). Bangkok: Irasec.
- Traube, E. G. 1980. Affines and the Dead: Mambai Rituals of Alliance. In: *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde*, 136 (1), pp. 90–115.
- 1986. *Cosmology and Social Life: Ritual Exchange among the Mambai of East Timor*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Vischer, M. P. 2009. *Precedence. Social Differentiation in the Austronesian World*. Canberra: ANU E Press.
- Warren, C. 2007. Adat in Balinese Discourse and Practice. Locating Citizenship and the Commonweal. In: D. Henley and J. S. Davidson (eds.), *The Revival of Tradition in Indonesian Politics. The deployment of adat from colonialism to indigenism* (pp. 170–202). Oxon: Routledge.