

FOHO VERSUS DILI: The political role of place in East Timor national imagination¹

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Resumo: Este artigo discute aspectos dos *processos de topogênese* envolvidos na construção da nação em Timor Leste. *Foho* (montanhas) e Dili são assim apresentados como lugares específicos, forjados como produtos de práticas de governo de longa duração. Com base nas controvérsias que envolvem as configurações das prestações matrimoniais na Dili contemporânea exploram-se representações projetadas sobre as montanhas (*foho*). Sugiro que as montanhas são caracterizadas, entre outras coisas, como *loci* dos "usos e costumes" (*lisan*), de terras e objetos sagrados, das casas de origem, do direito consuetudinário e dos antepassados, aos quais a maioria das pessoas de Timor Leste está relacionada e onde vários de rituais são realizados para manter o fluxo normal da vida. Como em muitos outros territórios que foram colonizados tardiamente, vemos em Timor Leste as oposições entre urbano/rural e cidade/interior, produzidas por um Estado colonial bifurcado, estruturando a vida social e a construção da nação. A comparação com dinâmicas sociais correlatas em países da Oceania e do Sudeste Asiático evidencia que tais oposições são base para a reemergência de políticas de governo em torno de práticas indígenas costumeiras no Timor-Leste pós-colonial.

Palavras-chave: Timor-Leste. Práticas costumeiras. Construção da nação. Dili. Montanhas.

Abstract: This article discusses aspects of the *topogenic processes* involved in the East Timor nation building. *Foho* (*mountains*) and *Dili* are so presented as particular places, devised as products of long-lasting government practices in Timor. Based on the controversies surrounding marriage prestations in the contemporary Dili, the representations projected onto the *foho* are explored. I argue that the mountains are characterized, among others things, as the *loci* of "usos e costumes" (customs), of sacred lands and objects, of origin houses, of customary law, and of the ancestors to whom most East Timor people are related and where a series of required rituals are performed to maintain the normal flow of life. As in many other territories that were colonized belatedly, we see in East Timor the urban/rural, town/hinterland oppositions at work which resulted from colonial bifurcate State. While placing such oppositions on a comparative perspective with Oceanic and South Eastern Asian countries, I also claim that they are the base for the *politics of custom* that have been re-emerged in the post-colonial East Timor.

Key-words: East-Timor. Custom. Nation-building. Dili. Mountains.

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Introduction

Among the many scenarios that emerged from European colonial expansion, it is worth mentioning the creation and/or growth of urban centers in imperial overseas territories where, in some cases, they did not exist before. As a result of the agreements between colonial powers at the Berlin Conference in late nineteenth century, pressures for the actual occupation of their colonies forced them to adopt a new dynamic of government projects. In the case of Portugal, this fact, added to that country's relative political stabilization, gave rise to several administrative reforms. Consequently, its colonial enterprise gained a new breath³.

On the socio-political frontier known today as East Timor, these events led to a number of pacification wars under the leadership of Governor Celestino da Silva. Through these wars both the dominion and the recognition of the territory under Portuguese jurisdiction were negotiated at one and the same time, as the colonial administrative and military structures on the island's eastern portion expanded. As time went by, through these processes, and as a strategy of the Metropolitan government (FOUCAULT, 2008), two different places were produced, namely, hills (*foho* in Tétum) and towns.⁴ I thus assume that colonial expansion was responsible for a variety of topogenic processes. Following Edward Said (1995), it generated "overlapping territories and intertwined histories." By inserting new spatial and moral references, a novel historical consciousness was forged among the wide and diversified range of actors we synthetically have called "the colonized" and the "colonizers." As the colonial enterprise became established overseas, this historical consciousness played an important role in defining new geographical

3 For a discussion of the reconfiguration of the Portuguese colonial enterprise in late nineteenth century and its relation to wider metropolitan political disputes, see Alexandre (2000).

4 According to Foucault, government is a particular form of exercising power, typically by the State, imposed upon populations (rather than territories). The State is legitimized and reproduced by means of specialized technologies and know how. In Foucault's vision, government emerges out of means of control over complex social formations, such as towns and empires, thus qualifying as manager and organizer of diversity. According to him, the link between the State and capitalist production (a feature of the colonial enterprise) was fundamental to lift up the aspect of population management to a principle of government. Hence, it was necessary to know the population which, in turn, originated new fields of knowledge.

frontiers, which often became the basis for structuring governance and for imagining post-colonial States.⁵

This text examines some contemporary representations that are projected onto *one* of the places that emerged as a product of Portuguese colonial expansion on what we now call East Timor, namely, *the hills*. The hills are defined in opposition to towns, which in East Timor are reduced to Dili and Baucau. I discuss their contents in the light of the predicaments Dili local elites face regarding marriage negotiations, as to whether, how, and why they request bridewealth, known locally as *barlake* or *hafolin*. I point out that the hills are characterized, among others things, by the notion that they are the loci of “usos e costumes” (uses and customs) as opposed to the towns, regarded, in turn, as the space of multiple modernities. I suggest that the opposition between hill (*foho*) and town is constitutive of the East Timor national and colonial imagination.⁶ At its root there seem to be at least two distinct factors. One are the ways in which the local elites internalize the Portuguese legacy, among which, the invention of East Timor “usos e costumes;” the other are the ways in which those elites appropriated and subverted values, discourses, and practices related to ideas about “modernity” and “development,” either in past exile experience or due to their present-day occupational niche.

In this article, I use the category *place* as a morally meaningful space to which certain actors and agencies are associated. As such, it is the product of lengthy social processes. I adopt Durkheim’s (2000) and Fox’s (1997) approach that considers places to be parts of a cognitive system that guides people and allows them to identify with each other. I assume the discursive and administrative technologies that were forged during Portuguese colonization have had a fundamental role in the invention of town and hills as specific places in the moral landscape of East Timor.

I divide the article into four sections. I first present some dimensions of the town of Dili, where my interlocutors voiced their interpretations of *the hills*. We must thus bear in mind that

5 In this context, it is interesting to note that the administrative division of East Timor territory into districts and subdistricts roughly corresponds to the administrative division extant in the last years of the island’s Portuguese colonization. According to Faculdade de Arquitetura da Universidade Técnica de Lisboa & GERTIL (2002: 72), “the present 13 districts of East Timor maintain the contours of the 13 councils that existed in the last years of Portuguese regime.”

6 In a future publication, I intend to confront this opposition to another, between coast and hinterland of the Brazilian national imagination.

the discussion below refers to situated perspectives about the production of places. As I contextualize Dili, I also give some historical information about the process of inventing East Timor. I then explore certain predicaments my interlocutors face when negotiating bridewealth in town, which, in turn, will convey their representations of *the hills*. Images associated with towns are marginal to my analysis, but I take for granted that my interlocutors, for historical reasons spelled out below, implicitly refer to them. In the final considerations, I connect the discourses about the hills to the reinvention of “usos e costumes” in the nation-building process in East Timor and elsewhere.

1. Situating Dili

The meaning of the practices and discourses associated with *barlake* described below is heavily influenced by the context in which they were stated. For this reason it must be described, albeit briefly. I refer to Dili, the country’s capital town that was deeply marked by a turbulent history of destruction and reconstruction, which resulted from the long-lasting disputes involving East Timor and based on which the country was constituted.

Dili is located in north Timor, the former home of the Mambai people when the Portuguese arrived in 1769 to build a new administrative center after Lifau (in Oecussi) was destroyed. Dili was founded with the intention of centralizing the administration of the fragile colonial State on Timor Island, and later, of Portuguese Timor (after the Island’s western portion was ceded to Holland). Dili came into existence as a colonial frontier, as a project of colonial town. As such, through its history, it was allegedly occupied, in its central parts, by a majority of mestizos, the assimilated, the Portuguese, and other foreigners. It became a place associated with civilization – whether in the Portuguese or Indonesian way – and Western modernity as opposed to the hills (*foho*).

In the making of the colonial, and later, national East Timor imagination, the hills have been conceived as a place to foster indigenous “usos e costumes” (uses and customs).⁷ They are

⁷ Originally, the expression “usos e costumes” was a colonial government category. In part, it conveys the opposition to civilization. In the imperial context, “uses and customs” refers to social representations and practices attributed to indigenous populations. Since long ago, marriage prestations have been regarded as a fundamental part

the site of the lands, houses, sacred objects, customary law, and the ancestors to whom most East Timor people are related and where a series of required rituals are performed to maintain the normal flow of life. As in many other territories that were colonized belatedly, we see in East Timor an urban/rural, town/hinterland opposition, as a consequence of what Mamdani (1998) calls a bifurcate State.⁸ The bifurcate State was constructed throughout European colonial administrations at different latitudes in Africa and Asia, and continued in post-colonial times. It made urban space the locus of direct rule, positive law, religion, language, the whites, and the individual (as the institutions' normative subject), as opposed to rural, wilderness, or, as in the East Timor case, the hills; they would be the spaces of indirect rule, tradition, customary law, paganism, dialects,⁹ etc.

However, historical facts of Timor decolonization turned Dili into a much more complex scenario than Mamdani proposed, although the town/hill opposition continues to be important for part of its dwellers to make sense of their present-day urban experience. It is true that, in the twentieth century, Dili became a colonial town, with its central zones occupied by mestizos, "the assimilated," and whites where, ideally, no one practiced "usos e costumes", such as *barlake*. Nevertheless, the 1975 Indonesian occupation and the 2002 restoration of independence brought about another configuration for that space and the social practices performed in it. Using the colonial classification system, we might say that Dili, as of 1975, was the object of an indigenization process.

The civil war between the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT) and the Revolutionary Front for Independent East Timor (FRETILIN), the abandonment of Dili by the Portuguese State, and the Indonesian military occupation in 1975 caused most of the population of mestizos, whites,

of the "uses and customs" pertaining to the natives of Timor, and incorporated into the nineteenth and twentieth-century colonial knowledge. Although these native "uses and customs" of Timor were never codified (as they were in Goa, Macau, and Mozambique, for instance), they were acknowledged and reconstructed in various documents of the colonial administration.

⁸ Mamdani (1998) classifies colonial States as bifurcate due to the fact that they have distinct and exclusive bureaucratic apparatuses, in the one hand, for managing native populations (also called indigenous) in the countryside, and, on the other, for managing white and expatriate populations.

⁹ Seixas (2006) discusses the categories of unitary and regional imagination according to which East Timor populations have been classified in different historical records, all the way from myths to colonial documents of the Portuguese administration. He identifies various forms to express the opposition between *foho* and town. It is suggested that, when Timor was under the Belo hegemony, there was an opposition between hill people and plains people, then, in the centuries of Portuguese rule, reconfigured as hill people (*ema foho*) and Dili people.

and “the assimilated” to flee the town to the hills, to Atambua (Indonesia), and to Australia. Hence, from 1975 onward, a partially destroyed Dili was occupied anew. As the seat of the Indonesian administration, it was taken up by Indonesians of diverse origins, as well as by East Timorese coming down from the hills. Thus, under Indonesian rule, Dili became an even more plural, complex, and ambiguous space, housing power and social modernization projects of various sorts, while turning more indigenized than ever.

The 1999 Referendum once more altered the urban scenario. Restitution of the country’s right to independence led to an abrupt abandonment of Dili by the Indonesian public servants who very likely represented more than half of its population. At the same time, there was a new wave of East Timorese migration from the hills to the capital, as well as the return from Australia, Portugal, and Mozambique of East Timorese who were in exile since the Indonesian occupation, many of whom regarded as mestizos and assimilated people under Portuguese rule.

At present, Dili has about 200,000 people of different class, ethnic, and national origins (counting United Nations personnel) who settled during the various migration flows. It is a plural and diversified space (SIMIÃO, 2006), where multiple modernization projects, appropriations and reinventions of “usos e costumes” circulate. In this place strongly marked by the memory of political events that deeply affected the country in the twentieth century, social actors constantly negotiate their “traditions” (*lisan*), their “usos e costumes” of which *barlake/hafolin* is a fundamental part.

2. *Barlake* and Dili type of marriage

On my last research trip to Dili, I began to explore some issues related to marriage negotiations. Among other things, I wanted to know how marriages were arranged, so as to better understand the contemporary place of reciprocity ethics in that part of what Errington (1900), following the legacy of Van Wouden (1968), Lévi-Strauss (1982), and Fox (1990), dubbed as the exchange archipelago. On the first days of my research, I was startled with the following remarks:

But do you want to know about the Dili type of marriage or about the other types of marriage? (...) Many people try to imitate the Dili type of marriage, but few succeed. (...) Even hill people now want to marry in Dili style (...) In the Dili type of marriage there is no *barlake* (Mr. João).

These comments by my wise interlocutor pointed at the need to consider the diversity of ways to look upon and organize weddings in East Timor as a whole, particularly the differences in negotiating and carrying them out both in town and on the hills.

It goes without saying that in a town with approximately 200,000 people and a complex history, marriage rituals are structured in diverse ways, depending on the dynamics of class, ethnic origin, religious persuasion, family trajectories, educational experience, etc.¹⁰ Actually, many couples live together before marriage, whether they so wish, or because of family pressure in view of an unexpected pregnancy.¹¹ Given such a diversity of contexts, I must clarify that the discussion that follows revolves around controversies about the organization of official marriages, meaning, for most people in the Dili milieu, weddings carried out in the Catholic Church, which is also charged with civil registry.

In marriage negotiations the circulation of goods is fundamental, whether they happen in Dili or on the hills. In fact, these negotiations initiate a sequence of exchanges of goods and services that will connect the concerned houses/families on a long term basis.¹² There is no necessary opposition between persons and things. In fact, such

10 In order to maintain my focus in this discussion, I do not describe the various ceremonies that comprise marriage negotiations. The reader may consult the text “Riqueza ou Preço da Noiva?: Regimes morais em disputa nas negociações matrimoniais timorenses” presented at the 2009 Anthropology of Mercosul Meeting, available at [http://www.ram2009.unsam.edu.ar/GT/GT%2029%20-%20Antropología%20de%20las%20Moralidades/GT29%20-%20Ponencia%20\[Silva\].pdf](http://www.ram2009.unsam.edu.ar/GT/GT%2029%20-%20Antropología%20de%20las%20Moralidades/GT29%20-%20Ponencia%20[Silva].pdf).

11 Some Church authorities I met during my research named women who live with their husbands but are not married under the Catholic Church as *barlankeadas*. This does not mean there was indeed a *barlake* prestation/transference/payment for these women. It is rather a derogatory term used to disqualify women who live beyond the pale of Christian/Catholic rules. They are thus classified for being regarded as standing closer to a village way of life. In some Dili contexts of sociability this label is considered offensive in so far as the villages are taken to be places of backwardness and obscurantism.

12 For a discussion of the meaning and implications of marriage exchange among the various Eastern Indonesia peoples, see Barnes, 1980. For a revision of the role of bridewealth among the various East Timor indigenous peoples, see David Hicks in this volume. When speaking of marriage negotiations, my interlocutors often used the term *family* to refer, in many cases, to what in anthropological theory has been called *house* (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1983; CARSTEN and HUGH-JONES, 1995). I keep the term *house/family* in order to preserve the semantic polyphony of my material. It also expresses Dili’s multireferential and transitional universe, as well as the dialogic character of the anthropological enterprise.

negotiations are inconceivable without the circulation of goods, even when *barlake* is not carried out/requested. Between the houses, other goods circulate besides the woman: buffalo, *belak* (gold or silver discs), *surik* (swords), *morteen* (necklaces), *buu malus* (areca, betel, and chalk), goats, hogs, *tais* (locally woven cloth), rice, drinks, cigarettes, old coins, and money. The direction and quantity of these goods are predetermined, depending on the ethnolinguistic group, and the position of the ritual houses in their membership universe. The house, which is the basic exogamous unit, is objectified as a descent group that constitutes a moral-religious community dedicated to the cult of the ancestors.

The *barlake/hafolin* system comprises a sequence of exchanges offered by the groom's house/family to the bride's house/family as an alliance prestation (DUMONT, 1957). Its contents vary and are negotiated between both houses/families according to the custom of their ancestors, the prestations given for the bride's mother, the position of each family in the contemporary social structure, and, eventually, the bride's own condition: whether she is a virgin, whether she has higher education, whether she has a job, etc.¹³ The time needed to conclude the *hafolin* transference to the bride's house/family varies a great deal; it can be immediate or last until the couple's death. In the marriage context, *umane* are all the relatives connected to the house that gives away women. In contrast, *fetosaan* are all the members of the house that receives women.

Barlake prestations, among other things, can sever the spiritual bond of the woman with her ritual house of origin, after which her allegiance is exclusively with her husband's ritual house. This possibility, however, is the object of numerous negotiations. It depends on the implications of the marriage for the original ethnolinguistic groups of both bride and groom, and on the social situation of the respective ritual houses with regard to their reproduction expectations.

3. *Barlake* practices and discourses

13 This is a rather simplest description of the composition and direction of bridewealth between houses/families of patrilineal and virilocal "custom." It does not apply to groups of matrilineal and uxorilocal "custom."

Between November 2008 and March 2009, I was present at the negotiations for ten marriages among urban elites of East Timor. That experience made me confront the variety of procedures and the lack of consensus about the meaning and importance of *barlake*. In fact, its meaning is under dispute as certain actors negotiate their social position by assigning themselves to different places (Dili or *foho*; town or the hills). For instance, if someone says that *barlake* is merely about “buying” a wife, and hence, a barbaric custom, he is presenting himself as a person from Dili (*ema Dili*), that is, a *modern/polite/civilized* individual. On the other hand, one may say that *barlake* is a way of recognizing the “value” and the “origins” of the bride. By saying that, a person is presenting himself as an authentic Timorese, someone who knows and honors his own traditions and understands the “real” meaning of *barlake*; someone strongly connected to the hills.

It is not unusual for different members of a single house/family to claim distinct positions vis-à-vis *hafolin*. The bride and groom may not wish to request it, but their parents, uncles and aunts are in favor of it, or, reversely, the couple’s parents may not request *barlake*, but end up giving in to their siblings’ pressure. It can be, therefore, an awkward disagreement, which may set off not only alliances, but also disputes, ruptures, and resentment.

3.1 The negativity of *barlake*

In this section I analyze some of the arguments used by those who affirm not to practice *hafolin*. It is a striking position on the part of people who critically evaluate *barlake* as an operation for selling women. Denial of *barlake* is justified as a strategy to preserve access to married daughters and assure the latter’s individual right to freely come and go to their families of origin. It is suggested that lack of *barlake* guarantees the union of the nuclear family and of the houses/families connected by marriage. This argument presupposes that the total payment of *barlake* severs the relationships between relatives (especially between parents and daughters), besides being the object of innumerable conflicts between the houses/families involved. It is also said that relinquishing *barlake* avoids domestic violence, in so far as it is thought to also be motivated by the pressures put upon the husband to settle his obligations with his wife’s family. I often came across a criticism of *barlake* according to which the affect and respect between bride

and groom were much more important than *barlake*. In such statements *barlake* is depicted as being in opposition to the individualistic ideology of romantic love.

Another common criticism of *barlake* is based on the assumption that humans and things are incommensurable: “The value of peoples is not equal to the value of things,” stated a bridegroom whose marriage negotiation I happened to follow. It was then suggested that the *barlake* custom, regarded as quite common on the hills and among the ancestors of Dili people, was due to an excessive interest in material things. With no access to education, those people did not perceive that buffalo and ritual objects, such as *belak* and *surik*, were not comparable to the value of a human being. This and other discourses are common among Catholic Church authorities in East Timor. To the criticism of *barlake* is added a criticism of what is taken to be an irrational use of goods and resources, once again, attributed to hill people or to the uneducated in Dili. It is suggested that these people go through considerable sacrifices for long periods of time in order to accumulate goods and money for marriage rituals and feasts, thus exposing themselves to unacceptable deprivations: they fail to send their children to school, don’t feed them properly, live in precarious and unhygienic houses, dress badly, etc. I should mention that there is a growing kind of discourse among the local elite that attributes what they call *poverty* of the country’s population to the big investments made in rituals, which, in their view, preclude the minimum wealth accumulation that is necessary for “development.”

It is also interesting to notice that my interlocutors unanimously found very positive the fact that, in Dili, marriages are always the object of various orders of negotiation between the families. On the hills, to the contrary, it would be necessary to offer precisely what people requested. It was suggested that the most expensive *barlake* in Timor was among the Fataluku of Lospalos (the country’s easternmost district) who demanded approximately 77 buffalo for a marriage, depending on the status of the ritual house/family involved. It is not by chance that the Lospalos natives are accused of being very fearless and violent, in sharp contrast to *Dili people*. We thus see that the acting out and the *modus operandi* of marriage negotiations are submitted to elaborate symbolic reckonings, which, in turn, become the basis for constructing collective representations about the diverse peoples and spaces that make up the country.

Nevertheless, these criticisms aimed at the *barlake/hafolin* custom co-exist side by side with the acceptance of other practices that are structured around the circulation of goods and services that are central to Dili sociability. Although some houses/families deny they practice *barlake*, they demand of the groom's house the payment of what they call *aitukan-be'e manas* (literally firewood and hot water)¹⁴ in the form of a specific sum in dollars (between 500 and 3,000) as compensation for the effort invested by the parents to raise their daughter.

When asked about the differences between *barlake* and *aitukan-be'e manas*, my interlocutors gave various interpretations. Some stated that *aitukan-be'e manas* were qualified as non *barlake* because they were given exclusively to the bride's biological parents, unlike *barlake* that should also be distributed among her uncles and aunts, siblings, and cousins. However, in two gift exchange ceremonies – a ceremony in which part of the requested goods for the marriage are ritually handed over to the bride's family – I witnessed sums of money classified as *aitukan-be'e manas* to be given to the men of the bride's house, such as uncles and cousins. I bring out these examples to show that we are dealing with a complex and ambiguous universe where multiple moral regimes operate simultaneously, as they are strategically appropriated by the actors.

I therefore suggest that we take *barlake* and *aitukan-be'e manas* as distinct modes of alliance prestations – as Renard-Clamagirand (1982) proposes for differentiating big price from small price – because they sort out specific regimes of rights over persons and things involved in marriage exchanges. It is not possible to deduct the nature of marriage prestations from the goods that circulate. Their meaning and implications are constructed along the negotiation process between the houses/families. When *aitukan-be'e manas* stays solely with the bride's biological parents, it can be interpreted as a change of bride price/wealth in the urban context in the sense of reaffirming the value of the nuclear family as the main unit of social reproduction.

I would still like to point out that, in the limited context of my research, those who show variations in the discourses presented above were mainly East Timor people involved in the

¹⁴ The term *aitukan-be'e manas* is a metaphor expressing the effort invested by the bride's family in her upbringing; once again, the main reference is the set of hill practices. At childbirth, pregnant women are confined indoors and a fire is lit besides them to heat water used in the birth. Afterwards, the women remain secluded at home for some weeks, always bathing in hot water. It is believed that hot water purifies the woman's body, ridding it of the secretions and impurity of pregnancy.

women's movement, descendants of assimilated and mestizo people whose close relatives, such as parents and uncles, have lived in Dili for at least two decades. Thus, negating *barlake* becomes a sign of social distinction among certain elite groups who emulate projects of Western modernity by opposing them to what they consider to be habits pertaining to the hills and hill people (*ema foho*). These represent this place and its people either as irrational and intolerant, or materialistic and much too collectivistic. Moreover, the hills are commonly seen as a place of deprivation and material precariousness.

3.2 The positivity of *barlake*

“We have to do it. Otherwise, our children won't know us”

Mr. Francisco, spokesperson for the house/family of his sister's daughter¹⁵

In my research I observed a positive attitude toward *barlake* among the following social actors: 1) men; 2) the elderly; 3) people who migrated to Dili in less than one decade and apparently closer to traditional rituals; and 4) people who enjoy a good position in Dili due to the high standing of their houses/families in the local hierarchies. I am referring mainly to the descendants of noble houses, some of which are said to have been important partners of the Portuguese colonial State. For this reason, their members had privileged access to education.

Among the arguments used to justify the use of *barlake* is that it creates a bond between families and provides mutual aid in adverse situations. This is so because, among other things, the *barlake* transference of a specific set of goods is not always done at once. In fact, most often, it seems to be the opposite. The *barlake* payment comes in installments for years after the

¹⁵ As mediators in marriage negotiations, spokespersons (*lia nain* in Tétum) act as representatives of the interacting houses/families. The spokesperson is in general a male member of the bride's/groom's ritual house, knowledgeable in his *traditions* (*lisan*) and skilled in negotiations of this kind. Spokespersons are also respected for their appropriate oratory in contexts of negotiation, and their familiarity with what is known as diplomatic language; they know how to say the right word at the right moment. Given that words are perlocutionary technologies that are crucial in those contexts, these are very important skills. On occasion, it is possible to appoint spokespersons who do not belong to either house/family, that are hired by the parties involved due to their renowned competence in that kind of negotiation.

wedding, and thus commits the houses/families involved to engage in mutual aid. For some people, it was a device for establishing social rules on the hills, at a time when there was no State to say who had rights and duties over what.

For one of my interlocutors, people who were against *barlake* – among whom were those who saw it as a mere transaction of buying and selling women and as a cause of breach between families – had ideas that came from lack of knowledge of its deep meaning. He further stated that *hafolin* was a kind of deference on the part of the *fetosaan* (wife receivers) toward the *umane* (wife givers) for making the woman available and hence, contributing to the physical reproduction of the former's house. A member of an elite house/family from the Ainaro district, he went on to say that part of the *barlake* goods received by his family at the ceremony I witnessed, especially money (two thousand dollars), would be distributed among all the men of his house/family. The elder would get more than the younger, but that would all receive their share for having contributed, one way or another, to the upbringing of the bride, now to be part of their own *fetosaan* kindred. At that moment, my interlocutor tried to impress me as a great connoisseur of the “usos e costumes,” that is, the moral universe that legitimated even his high social status, as opposed to those who mouthed a different opinion about *hafolin* because, as he said, they, in fact, did not know it.

A main concern in the ceremonies of marriage negotiation is with the use of the appropriate words, oratory skills, application of adequate ritual forms and formulae, and compliance to the bargaining limits vis-à-vis the *umane*'s requests. In one of the cases I observed, the *umane* insisted on presenting what they expected to be *barlake*, even though they had previously agreed not to receive that much. According to the *umane*'s *lia nain* (spokesperson), that was required so that the families could learn about their respective traditions (*lisan*). Otherwise, their *gerasaum* (offspring) would no longer recognize them.

I also witnessed a gift exchange ceremony that generated a controversy between the bride's and the groom's families regarding the money the *fetosaan* wished to donate to the *umane*. Apparently, they had decided no *barlake* would be given, as the bride's relatives were people long assimilated. Nevertheless, at the moment of the ritual speeches between the respective spokespersons and the other members of both families, the groom's relatives asked the

others to accept at least a little money. They argued that this was their custom, their *lisan*. The groom's family insisted on donating about two thousand dollars to the bride's family. On another occasion, a priest who had acted as spokesperson for his cousin's house/family said he placed a symbolic request for *barlake*, even though he knew it would not be paid. He asserted he did so to honor his cousin and her *lisan*, and to show that she belonged to a family, she had an origin.¹⁶ Furthermore, some of my interlocutors stated that a woman who enters her husband's house/family with a small offering or no offering at all – be it through *barlake* or *aitukan-be'e manas* – starts out in a very subaltern position, as a valueless woman. In this sense, *barlake* would be a way to dignify her.

At this point, we should keep in mind that ancestry and origin are fundamental values among many peoples in East Indonesia. They organize relations of precedence between individuals and social groups. Fox says:

Ideas of origin are themselves a matter of concern in most Austronesian societies and hence a suitable subject for investigation. However, such indigenous ideas of origin involve a complex array of notions. Conceptions of ancestry are invariably important but rarely is ancestry alone a sufficient and exclusive criterion for defining origins. Recourse to notions of place is also critical in identifying persons and groups, and thus in tracing origins. Similarly, alliance, defined in the broad sense of relations of persons and groups to one another, is also an important element in defining origins. Together all of these notions imply an attitude to the past: that it is knowable and that such knowledge is of value (...) (FOX, 1996: 5).

Therefore, to state and evoke “usos e costumes” related to *barlake*, even in weddings for which the material transmission of gifts was relinquished (although there might have been *aitukan-be'e manas*), serves the purpose of recognizing the bride's value in terms of her origin, her ancestry. It thus makes sense to say that for a significant part of the population that migrated to Dili in the last three decades, being connected to the hills, to their sacred houses and lineages, is a sign of prestige.¹⁷ From this perspective, the hills are positively evaluated. They are the place of the ancestors and as such they are the custodians of forces and agencies that must be recognized and

¹⁶ Cunha (2009) found similar situations in her research on Dili contemporary marriages.

¹⁷ In his research on the legislation related to domestic violence in the Covalima district in East Timor, Daniel Simião noticed that the local population qualified as poor the person who was devoid of social ties (personal communication). This perception concurs with my analysis above, suggesting that a woman's value depends on whether she can be placed in a series of relationships, be they by descent or alliance.

ritually managed in order to maintain a proper flow of life wherever it is. One should remember Fox's idea about the potential reversibility between genealogy and topogeny (1997: 12). To enunciate places in ritual contexts has, according to him, the following functions: 1) to define origins and lines of precedence among related social groups; and 2) to provide a chronological succession of events so as to situate social actors in space and time.

The data presented above also suggest that marriage negotiations in Dili potentially operate as forms of mutual recognition between houses/families with regard to their "usos e costumes", their "origin", their local identities, and, in the last analysis, their own ancestors to whom respect and deference are due lest they curse and inflict punishment upon the living. Here it is important to keep in mind how far one can negotiate, for to insist on a unilateral deal may look like disrespect. In fact, rather than bargaining, people make an effort to give more, because a gift is a means to construct one's status and may alter the standing of social relationships.

We can see, then, that the dilemmas and negotiations that surround the organization of marriages impose upon Dili residents a dialogue with what they take to be the "usos e costumes" of their ancestral house, as well as with their social position both in the city and on the hills, among other considerations of status vis-à-vis the social order. From time to time, these quandaries set off reconsiderations of people's perceptions, reference points, and membership projects. They can also elicit allegiance evaluations and commitment to family nuclei of either *fetosaan* or *umane* that have various reciprocal duties with respect to the organization of marriages and funerals.

I would like to end this section by saying that the *barlake* issue is lived out by many Dili people in highly dramatic style in a context of intense social transformations. Some people – mostly men – praise *barlake* as an antidote to divorce. They say that with *barlake* there is no divorce, which is good for the maintenance of the unity of the ritual house/family. For divorce to occur, it is necessary to give back what was received as *barlake*. For example, in Dili's Court, this issue is the object of dispute in some suits. Many women are compelled to live in a vicious circle of domestic violence because it is impossible for them and their relatives to give back to the husband's house/family the goods donated at the wedding.

4. Final considerations

This analysis is still in the making. For this reason, I would like to add to the previous section some issues I intend to pursue in the future to better understand the different positions the East Timor elites take regarding bridewealth prestations, and, broadly speaking, the indigenous “usos e costumes” and the places to which they are associated.

Firstly, it is crucial to make some sense of the variety of practices and discourses I encountered during my field research. It seems to me that this variation is associated to at least three specific elements: 1) the differences in form and content of total prestations as they are carried out by the various indigenous peoples who live on East Timor borderlands, from where most Dili residents come and with which they keep some sort of tie. As I said above, it is precisely the representations of the Dili elite about the way *barlake* is performed on the hills that make them more or less sympathetic to it; 2) the criteria for ascribing the assimilated to certain East Timorese segments during Portuguese colonization. “Assimilated” were those who adopted Christianity, spoke Portuguese, and, as a consequence (presumed by the colonizers), were “free from their uses and customs.” Hence, to adhere to *barlake* and other forms of “usos e costumes,” was – and continues to be – a mode of social differentiation lived through with ambiguity and a certain dramatic flair; and 3) the various periods and flows of migration from the interior to Dili. I risk the hypothesis that the deeper the roots in the city, the greater the distance and the criticism my interlocutors expressed toward hill patterns of sociability.

An important part of the anti-*barlake* discourses I heard during my fieldwork resides in the representations about the hills that depict them as places bogged down in irrational practices of sociability, where men and things are equalized in exchanges of various sorts, and where illicit deprivation is undertaken for the sake of ritual performances. Although my interlocutors acknowledged the diversity of the “usos e costumes” carried out on the hills, they often associated them to attitudes of intolerance and inflexibility about *barlake*, as epitomized in their statements about the Fataluku onto whom they projected images of great rebelliousness, boisterousness, and unwillingness to engage in “civilized” negotiation. With “hill people,” there would be little space for bargaining, it would be necessary to offer exactly what was requested as *hafolin*, which is often perceived as a deal for selling women.

Nevertheless, even among some local elite groups that declare their distaste for *barlake*, one commonly finds agreement with the animistic practices of ancestor cults. To feed the sacred house and the ancestors is a fundamental part of life, worthy of the resource investment many people make. They fear punishment by the spirits of the dead if ritual prestations for them are not properly done.

Various sorts of misfortune in everyday life are explained as the actions of these spirits upon the living, while cases of success are often attributed to the good will and protection of the ancestors. The hills, as a unique place, are therefore, the reservoir of ambiguous and, hence, powerful possibilities: if, on the one hand, they can be places of obscurantism, on the other, they also hold powerful forces that are activated in the daily life of people in Dili.

The positive outlook of *barlake*, in turn, comes from its appraisal as a means to define rules of social relations between individuals and groups in the absence of the State. For this reason, it is considered to be not only rational, but necessary. From this appraisal derives a sympathetic attitude toward the hills and their related “usos e costumes.” Moreover, *barlake* is viewed as a demonstration of respect and deference, providing kinship ties between houses/families. In the last analysis, its occurrence at weddings permits the celebration of the origins and ancestry of both bride and groom, the nurturing of their bond with sacred houses, and the cult of the ancestors.¹⁸

I suggest that the different outlooks on *barlake* express different forms the Dili elites have to envision and construct the hills as a place *sui generis*. At the same time, these representations reveal tensions and projects about whether or not the social practices associated with the hills should be part of the imaginings about the nation. Answers to these questions are crucial to define the way in which projects of national identification are being built.

The category “usos e costumes” was forged by the Portuguese during their colonization of East Timor. It served to classify the precepts, life ways, and representations that structured the

18 As a preliminary report, it is worth mentioning that Raquel Carvalho, in her undergraduate research on representations about Dili and the hills in post-war documents of the Portuguese colonial administration, came upon the existence of ambiguous images. The hills are regarded either as a place of utter irrationality, or of utter rationality. The city, in turn, is either pictured as a mode of civilization, or as a site of vice, both on the part of the “colonizers” and of the “colonized.”

various dimensions of sociability among indigenous peoples overseas. It has often been an important logical operator to create a “national culture” that sets East Timor apart from its neighbors. This “culture,” however, is not automatically created from what is thought to come from the hills. It is built, on the one hand, upon what the local elites have internalized as the images associated with the hills, which are the outcome of Portuguese and Indonesian colonization. On the other hand, it is the result of how these “usos e costumes” are depicted and how other values, discourses, and practices coming into the country from elsewhere are set against them.

One dimension of this process is the use the local elites make of representations about “usos e costumes” in the construction of the national imagination. But there is yet another element, namely, the way in which local people regularly handle these representations in different social contexts. The interaction between these projects and local practices reveals significant changes in systems of prestige, sometimes altering power configurations and various modes of subjectivation related to, among other things, gender, generation, and regional origin. These phenomena are not unique to East Timor. As a matter of fact, they are typical of processes of nation-building in many island countries in Oceania. Authors such as LiPuma (1995), Guidieri (quoted in BABADZAN, 1988), and Keesing and Tonkinson (1982) have discussed the idea of *Kastom* as an important mediator in the modernization process of countries like Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Fiji, etc. As with the Portuguese *costume*, *kastom* is a modern, colonial invention, just as the notion of customary law and tribe (MAMDANI, 1988), created to organize and strengthen European overseas colonial administrations. As a kind of *bricolage* composed of a selection, decontextualization, and (re)articulation (in some cases, codification) of certain aspects of indigenous classification systems, rituals, crafts, principles of sociability, etc., colonial powers built up a hyperreal indigenous culture (RAMOS, 1994). In post-colonial contexts, *kastom* emerges as the basis for a national culture exhibited as primordial and common to all the peoples who live within the boundaries of a given country. Such a culture is then relayed via State ideological apparatuses like schools, museums, and the like, thus promoting a new understanding of the past at the service of interests in the present of which cultural homogenization is an important part.

Guidieri (quoted in BARBADZAN, 1988) remarks that *kastom* is a State ideology that upholds the deferral of historicity and the reification of what modernity might be, as well as of what is taken to be an “indigenous culture.” National/indigenous culture is then presented as an inventory of timeless facts unrelated to each other. There is, however, no consensus among the elites about what *kastom* really is. Therefore, it is fashioned amidst innumerable disputes in which some facts are silenced –headhunting, for example – while others are highlighted – such as myths, crafts, dances, etc. Among other things, the construction of *kastom* has appeared as an important remedy to the politicization of ethnicity in urban centers.

In various Oceania countries, the *kastom* ideology has hardened along with the ideology of development and national unity. In all of them, the highlands, the hills, figure in the national imagination as foundational places. With the articulation of these three value-ideas (DUMONT, 1997) – *kastom*, development and national unity – it is then possible to consolidate political projects that encourage alternative modernities, that is, processes of modernization without westernization. However, given that the *kastom* ideology is an important political mover, it can also set up strategies of resilience, which for a long time have taken on multiple configurations in East Timor and elsewhere.

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