

Customary social order and authority in the contemporary East Timorese village: persistence and transformation

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Introduction

In May 2002, Timor-Leste formally became an independent, democratic state and the millennium's newest nation. This was the culmination of lengthy processes of change, continuity and resistance in politics, society and culture throughout 450 years of Portuguese colonisation and, following this, the invasion and twenty-four year occupation by neighbouring Indonesia. The emergence of Timor-Leste as a newly independent nation provides a space for the East Timorese people to begin to seek a new political identity.

While formal democracy is quite new to Timor-Leste, there is an authority and leadership system embedded in East Timorese cultures that was established prior to Portuguese colonisation and that continues to guide communal life within most *suku* (villages). Through this system, people are governed by traditional authority figures, including the *liurai* (a hereditary ruler, 'lord of the land'). The *liurai's* authority emanates from a social and political system that is guided by *uma lisan*. *Uma lisan* refers both to physical structures, literally 'sacred houses', but also to social structures that guide relationships between members and between the natural, social and ancestral worlds. This study considers the current situation and influence of traditional rulership and social systems in contemporary East Timorese *suku*, identifying four broad categories that reflect the continuing importance of these systems in Timor-Leste. This article also reflects on the complex relationship between *uma lisan* and the figure of the *liurai*.² The research findings are based on fieldwork conducted in fifteen *suku* listed here with their respective districts: Bairo Pite (Dili), Caicua (Vemasse), Bucoli, Triloka and Uatulia (Baucau), Parlamentu, Fuiloro and Tutuala (Lautem), Loihunu and Waimori and Uma Wa'in Kraik (Viqueque), and Ben Ufe, Lifau, Nipane and Bobometo (Oecusse). Further information on the methodology for this research is available in Anne Brown's article in this volume.

Uma lisan and their attributes

Uma lisan, also known as *uma lulik*, are the primary symbols for social and cultural order in local communities across Timor-Leste. The community considers *uma lisan* a central part of their identity, and they have deep

significance in people's everyday lives. They have particular importance during ritual celebrations such as for marriage, prior to harvesting corn, *tarabandu* (which as will be explained regulates activities and use of resources), and other rituals that provide opportunities for people to gather together. The ancestors and elders of each *uma lisan* continue to protect the *uma lisan* by passing down sacred knowledge through each generation.

Within the social structure of the *uma lisan* there are a number of different authority figures, one of whom is the *lia-na'in*, which literally translates as 'owner of the words'. The *lia-na'in* are responsible for leading and caring for all the families and descendants of the *uma lisan*. Through rituals, they pray to the ancestors for help, asking that the ancestors always accompany the descendants of the *uma lisan* so they can carry out their work in a positive environment. As *lia-na'in* safeguard peace and stability in the family, they also take on an informal role resolving problems or conflicts that arise at the *aldeia* (hamlet) or *suku* (village) level.

In every *suku* there is a complex network of *uma lisan* that mediates and governs relationships between members of the same *uma lisan*, and also regulates relationships between different *uma lisan*. Everyone knows their *uma lisan*, and knows where they fit within the family structure that ties them together. Even though some members may move away from their traditional land and *uma lisan*, they often continue to maintain contact with each other and with the ancestors through this shared identity.

Some families in Dili no longer follow the ways of their *uma lisan*, signifying the loss of a generation from the *uma lisan*. However in almost all other districts across Timor-Leste, the *uma lisan* is central for managing family relationships and for forming new relationships through marriage for the creation of new families. The *uma lisan* also acts as a place to link people with their deceased ancestors. As a *lia-na'in* and *xefe suku* (elected village councillor) from within Lautem district explains, '*uma lisan* represent all of the deceased ancestors ... even though their bodies have died, their spirits continue to live around us, and they are always close to us through the *uma lisan*'.³ As a priest from Venilale put it, 'it is through the *uma lisan* that people can communicate with other people. Every year when we do the ritual before the *sau batar* [corn harvest], they [the current members of the *uma lisan*] pray with gratitude to that which is most high'.⁴ Through these rituals, the people communicate with supernatural powers, using betel nut and betel pepper, sacred swords and other objects that symbolise and represent their ancestors' residence in the spirit world, and asking that they continue to accompany people during their daily lives. According to them, this life does not end with this world. Through death, a new life is gained in another world.

As membership of the *uma lisan* carries an identity that is central to all the house members, this provides an important basis for building peace between related families. This is clearly evident when discussing the experience of political parties in local communities. While the influence of political parties

has created some deep divisions in national politics, this does not appear to have been the case in many local communities. As a senior resident of Tutuala, Lautem district, noted, '...in *suku* Tutuala even though the political parties have come and adopted the party system and some small conflicts have arisen, this hasn't become an obstacle that has torn apart our family relations'.⁵ As he went on to explain, it is relatively easy for the people to resolve problems that arise among themselves because the *lia-na'in* from the *uma lisan* uses family relations to resolve any issues.

There are a number of significant cultural practices through which *uma lisan* contribute to the maintenance of communal cohesion and peaceful social relations. Firstly, the process for preserving or restoring the physical structure of an *uma lisan* also involves strengthening and repairing the social structure of the *uma lisan*. All family members, including in-laws, from close by and far away come together not simply to discuss and agree on how to rebuild the *uma lisan*, but also to resolve any problems between family members. This was seen in one *suku* visited by the research team when a particular *uma lisan* needed to be rebuilt. Before physically rebuilding the sacred house, the *lia-na'in* called all of the members of the *uma lisan* together – particularly those who were involved in various disputes amongst themselves – to sit together and resolve their problems.

Conflict is also dealt with in the *uma lisan* through the *nahe biti bo'ot* tradition, a localised system of conflict management that literally translates as 'rolling out the big mat'. When a conflict arises, the issue is taken to the central *uma lisan* for resolution. There are many ways to conduct a *nahe biti bo'ot* ceremony but there are two broad paths through which the conflict can be resolved. The first is through a system of arbitration, whereby those involved in the conflict gather together with their families and the *lia-na'in* or the *liurai* resolves the dispute. The second path more closely resembles mediation, through which consensus is sought. Both paths are very strong and are trusted throughout the *suku* of Timor-Leste as the first point of call in resolving disputes. If the *liurai* is involved, the ceremony uses some of the *liurai's* symbols to demonstrate the *liurai's* governing power. Alternatively, *nahe biti bo'ot* may also be carried out using the general community *uma lisan*.

Complementing *nahe biti bo'ot* is the social institution of *tarabandu* – a traditional system for establishing social contracts, sanctioned through the power of the ancestors and established through a commitment between all the members of the *uma lisan* in a *suku* or a particular territory. *Tarabandu* operates through ritually banning some activities and requiring others for the good of the community. Each community member, for example, has the right to receive resources from within the *suku*, such as access to clean water and other goods, but also has a responsibility to be careful with these things if they have been consecrated through the *tarabandu* mechanism. In some communities visited, the people are working to re-establish *tarabandu* by referring to democracy, human rights and religious mandates as measuring

tools, in a very deliberate effort to maintain and revitalise their culture so that it can align with and complement the democratic principles espoused by the national government.

Through these traditional institutions of *nahe biti bo'ot* and *tarabandu*, each individual has certain rights and obligations as a member of their community or their cultural society. They have the full right to express themselves, as well as a responsibility to comply with the social contracts that have been established in a particular territory – including activities that are banned or required through *tarabandu*. Both *tarabandu* and *nahe biti bo'ot* are very old institutions, and the ongoing importance of these and other local institutions demonstrates that before modern democracy came to Timor-Leste there already existed an original and organic democracy that organised members of society with both responsibility and rights. Before the new nation of Timor-Leste was formed, all the population were already living with their own social mechanisms and processes of joint decision-making and consensus.⁶ Because of this, some communities remain uneasy about the implementation of formal democracy, and are concerned that it might undermine the resurgence of East Timorese culture. While the system of *uma lisan* continues to provide the foundation for social order and authority within East Timorese *suku*, the strengths of this system for peace and stability are not being recognised officially or protected, and possible methods that could strengthen East Timorese culture, particularly positive aspects that contribute to social cohesion, are being neglected.

The significance of the *liurai*

While the network of *uma lisan* and associated institutions of *nahe biti bo'ot* and *tarabandu* provide the foundation for social cohesion in East Timorese communities, another aspect of customary authority involves the *uma lisan* of the *liurai*. The authority of the *liurai* varies significantly from one *suku* to the next; indeed there is no single model for understanding the authority of the *liurai* in democratic Timor-Leste. Before discussing trends we observed in the various types and degrees of *liurai* authority that exist across Timor-Leste, we must first understand the structure and character of that authority.

Liurai structure

The hereditary rulership of the *liurai* and the rituals and customs surrounding their authority can be traced back many centuries prior to Portuguese rule. Historically, the authority of the *liurai* was established and maintained through the class system of Timor-Leste, which holds political, cultural, and economic significance in each territory or *suku*. At the highest level was the *liurai*, who historically controlled a large territory and population, and during colonial times was referred to as *Dom*, the Portuguese title for prince. Beneath the *Dom* was the council of elders, named *Bahen*. The *Bahen* came from different *aldeia*, and each had different functions. The Portuguese ruled through the *Dom* until the rebellion of 1911–12 (led by the *liurai* of Manufahi,

Dom Boaventura) after which the power of the *Dom* was severely curtailed. Following the defeat of Dom Boaventura, the Portuguese colonisers divided the *liurai*'s authority among the lower-order aristocracy that ruled beneath them, rewarding those who had been faithful and removing others from power.⁷ The Portuguese then ruled through this new class, who were also referred to as '*liurai*', and who collected taxes and labour from the people on behalf of the Portuguese.

However, even prior to the rebellion of Dom Boaventura and the consequent consolidation of Portuguese colonial authority, the presence of the Portuguese had already had a significant impact on the authority structures of the *liurai*, by requiring that the *liurai* exercise various administrative functions and that he be capable of speaking a common language with the Portuguese. As a consequence, the original *liurai* sometimes had their role, power and leadership functions diminished. This was evident in Oecusse, for example, where new *liurai* emerged, known as the '*white liurai*', who were better able to operate according to Portuguese requirements, taking some of the roles of the original *liurai*, known as the '*black liurai*'.

Despite this, the original *liurai* sometimes maintained their cultural responsibilities and power, and passed this on to future generations who were genuine blood-related descendants. In *suku* Tula Ika, Oecusse district, an original '*black liurai*' chose a new '*white liurai*' from another *suku* to take on his administrative and management work. As a senior person of Tula Ika explained:

Our ancestors said, 'I am choosing you as *liurai*. I am uneducated, I speak like a *lia-na'in*, I look after the *uma lisan* and have given power to *Liurai* Costa to undertake the administrative work'. *Liurai* Costa came and lit a candle here. They know their roots. Until today the *liurai* of Tula Ika, *suku* Lifau and the *liurai* of *suku* Costa continue to exist through the consideration of culture. These two types of *liurai* continue to be respected and obeyed by the people.⁸

It was through dynamics such as these that the structure of two *liurai* emerged in Timor-Leste. The '*black liurai*' were all known as people who hold the cane and the flag and are original landowners, signifying that they are the ones who govern the *suku*. But beginning with this second phase of *liurai* rule, which adapted itself to Portuguese requirements, a new *liurai* could also be chosen (preferably from the blood-related descendants of the *liurai*) in order to continue the line of rule in that *suku*. The *liurai* clan would identify among themselves someone who was strong, had natural intelligence and knew how to govern, and they would become the new *liurai* to govern the *suku* when the old *liurai* died or stepped down. If someone did not govern well according to the members of the *liurai*'s clan, then the clan would decide to change to a new person of *liurai* descent who would continue the position into the future.

Despite this turbulent history, there are still *liurai* in some parts of Timor-Leste who belong to the structural level of the *Dom*. It is clear that the exact

dynamics of how the structure of the *liurai* changed during Portuguese times varies significantly from one place to the next, depending on the needs of the community and the extent of external pressure from the Portuguese colonisers.

During the Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste the authority and structure of the *liurai* was impacted yet again, as Indonesia adopted an electoral system that replaced the Portuguese system of indirect rule through the *liurai*. Through the implementation of *Pancasila*, East Timorese communities experienced a 'social shock' as the system was transformed to allow ordinary people to be elected to the position of *liurai*, who then became known as *kepala desa* (village head). In some places, where the *liurai* continued to be trusted to look after their community and were sufficiently educated to deal with the Indonesian administration, communities voted for *kepala desa* who came from the *liurai's uma lisan*. This was the experience of one former *kepala desa* of *Parlamentu suku*, who was a descendant of a *liurai* and served as *kepala desa* for five years.

However, the possibility of voting for people who were traditionally empowered to rule was also highly dependent on the situation under the Indonesian military. For example it was not possible in *suku Caicua*, where from 1980 onwards, the Indonesian military moved the population together with other nearby *suku* groups into the sub-district of Vemasse and chose the village head for the *suku*. This meant that for the duration of the Indonesian occupation, the *kepala desa* of Caicua was chosen through the authority of the Indonesian military and did not come from the *liurai* family. Unlike some *suku* that use the terms *liurai* and *xefe suku* interchangeably, the distinction between the traditional *liurai* and the elected local leader continues to be reflected in *suku Caicua* through the strict use of the term *liurai* to refer to the descendants of the *liurai*, and *xefe suku* to refer to those who have won power through *suku* elections and who therefore govern.

Since the referendum in 1999 and restoration of independence in 2002, East Timorese communities have been experiencing many more changes. Liberal democracy has developed very quickly, and the influences of globalisation and technology now pose a great challenge for the power of the *liurai*. In 2004, the first free *suku*-level elections were held for the *konsellu suku* (council of elected community leaders). Most of the 2004–05 candidates for *xefe suku* came from political parties, but some preferred to run as independent candidates. In this new state of affairs, where sovereignty is no longer in the hands of the *liurai*, there are nonetheless many elected *xefe suku* across Timor-Leste who are from the *liurai's uma lisan*.⁹ The *liurai* are also East Timorese citizens in this democratic state, and democracy does not deny opportunities for *liurai* to obtain positions of power through a political party or as an independent candidate.

While the political structure of the *liurai* no longer exists as it did in pre-colonial and colonial times, the *liurai's uma lisan* continues to carry important

rights and responsibilities in almost all *suku*, functioning according to the needs of each *suku* or territory. In many places the community or people continue to consider the *liurai's uma lisan* as the highest in the *uma lisan* structure, leading the other *uma lisan* during popular traditional celebrations and rituals. This integral role in traditional custom, explored further below, accounts for its persistent influence in contemporary society in Timor-Leste.

The character of liurai authority

The authority of the *liurai* is deeply enmeshed with customary institutions, and traditionally the people both deeply respect and are in awe of them. The *liurai's* power over subjects was dictatorial and when a person went against the *liurai*, they were physically sanctioned. This can be considered an authoritarian, even at times exploitative, model of rule. Even in *suku* where the *liurai* continue to command respect and significant authority within the community, people recall instances in the past when the *liurai* 'governed using a formal whip'. For example, a *liurai* within the Oecusse district, who continues to be highly respected in the community, commented that:

[I]n the past it was good because if we spoke and they didn't believe us we used... the right to beat people up; in the past I hit people, if people from my area didn't follow my directions I just beat them up.¹⁰

Despite this, people still trusted him to lead and protect them during Indonesian times. Similarly, an elder of Uma Wa'in Kraik *suku* of Viqueque district, revealed characteristics of the customs that underpin a *liurai's* authority in that *suku*:

...they existed in the past and continue to exist today. People are not allowed to speak or wave when they meet the *liurai*, this culture must be respected ... The elders in [this *suku*] who are thought of as the mother and father of the *liurai* protect the *liurai* from everything. They protect him within the *suku* as well as if there are interventions from beyond the *suku*. They do whatever the *liurai* says. If the *liurai's* child wants to get married, it is the elders who speak, the parents don't speak. The people give buffalo as the brideprice. The parents cannot give buffalo as a brideprice otherwise the marriage won't endure, they could all die, from the children up to the mother. Their role is to work in the vegetable garden and rice fields to give food to the *liurai*. If there is a message from the *liurai* then the elders are the ones who go. The elders look after and take care of the *liurai*. This custom began with the first *Dom* and continues today. There is an oath between the *liurai* and their subjects so they cannot separate. If the *liurai* visits his subjects and picks out a young piglet, the people will catch it and kill it so the *liurai* can eat. During traditional celebrations with dancing if the *liurai* wants to take a *tais*, sword or *belak* from one of his subjects then the person will give it to him. When playing cards for money, if the *liurai* wants to take everything then he will.¹¹

This explanation is revealing. While the *liurai's* authority demands submission and tributes from his subjects, the community continues to trust him to lead them. In this *suku*, the power of the *liurai* is very strong, and his legitimacy derives from the place he has in *lisan* (or custom). This demonstrates a very specific type of legitimacy – one which is underpinned by a very different worldview to that of the state, and which is symbolised through various customs and objects. There is a deep relationship between the *liurai's* identity and symbolic objects, such as the *rotan* (cane), *kaebauk* (crescent-shaped crown), *mortel*, *kretek* (cigarettes), books, *aimean* (red wood), *babadook* (traditional drum), *tamboor* (drum), and other materials symbolic of the *liurai's* right to rule.

The continuing importance of these rituals and objects demonstrates that many communities continue to recognise the cultural importance of the *liurai*, for a variety of reasons. However, across the *suku* of Timor-Leste, communities now have a variable and complicated relationship with their *liurai*, which is reflective of the ongoing changes to the role and powers of the *liurai* that have taken place in the *suku* since Portuguese colonisation, as communities endeavour to adapt to the overarching requirements of the state.

Analysis

In this study, we have identified four categories that describe the current situation of the *liurai* in different *suku*. The first category considers those *suku* in which the *liurai* no longer have any real power, but the *liurai's uma lisan* continues to be strong. The second category covers those 'new *suku*' that were formed during Indonesian occupation, often comprising of people from different areas, and (as a result) in which both the *liurai's* governing power and the *liurai's uma lisan* are not present. In the third category, there are *suku* that are not new, but where for various reasons the influence of the *liurai* and the *liurai's uma lisan* appear to have died out. In the final category, there are *suku* in which the power of the *liurai* and their *uma lisan* remains strong. The following analysis explains these four categories in more depth.

The liurai no longer has formal power, but their uma lisan remains strong

In the great majority of *suku* that were visited in this research, the *liurai* no longer exercise any formal governing power, but their *uma lisan* remains strong. These *suku* included Uatulia and Caicua in Baucau, *suku* Parlamentu, Fuiloro and Tutuala in Lautem district, and *suku* Nipane, Lifau and Bobometo in Oecusse district. During the Indonesian occupation there were some *liurai* in the *suku* visited who continued to receive trust from the people and therefore won the *suku* elections. However, since independence, times have changed and the *liurai* in these *suku* no longer rule.

Nonetheless, in these *suku* the symbols that signify the power of the *liurai's uma lisan* are clearly in evidence, and the cultural influence of the *liurai* continues to be strong. Even though they are not governing, the *liurai* continue to be trusted and respected by the elected *suku* council and

community members. It is through their cultural authority that some *liurai* continue to assume important roles through their *uma lisan*, maintaining the symbols, rituals and traditional knowledge that underpin their authority, and leading cultural celebrations in the *suku*. For example, in *suku* Uatulia, the *liurai* continues to lead the celebration of *tarabandu* which has important implications for governance. In Uatulia, the *liurai's uma lisan* and the *liurai's* symbols are full of significance for the community. All other *uma lisan* in this *suku* still consider the *liurai's uma lisan* the most important and it continues to be the central location for the implementation of *tarabandu*. The *liurai's* symbols that are used in celebrating *tarabandu* and for other purposes are the *babadook* or *tambor* (a small drum used in ritual dance), *surik* (a sword), and the *liurai's rotan* (cane). These symbols are all full of meaning for safeguarding peace in the community. Whenever a *tarabandu* is re-established in the *suku*, these symbols are taken around the different *aldeia* to make a public announcement to the whole community, whereupon everyone is brought together on a particular day to celebrate and implement it.

It is very common in contemporary Timor-Leste communities to find a separation of powers between the elected *xefe suku*, who is responsible for administrative matters, and the traditional *liurai*, who is responsible for culture and custom. As found in in *suku* Caicua and *suku* Nipane, this separation often involves a ritual bestowal of power from the *liurai* to the *xefe suku*. In *suku* Nipane, the elected *xefe suku* must ask permission of the *liurai's uma lisan* before taking on his role. In this *suku*, when a person is elected who is not a direct descendant of the *liurai*, the new *xefe suku* must take a goat, pig and several chickens to be killed and eaten at the *liurai's uma lisan* in a ritualised request for permission from the *liurai's uma lisan*. The elected *xefe suku* stands at the sacred male pillar in the *liurai's uma lisan* to pray for permission, asking for the spiritual power and strength to lead the people of the *suku*. Through gaining this permission, it is believed that the *xefe suku* will not face any difficulties for the duration of his leadership, because he is not only governing with formal power that he has obtained through the elections, he is also governing with cultural power that comes from the spirits of the *liurai's uma lisan*.¹² The people are frightened to take up the role of *xefe suku* if they do not first carry out this ritual, as there have been situations in the past where natural disasters have been attributed to the failure of the *xefe suku* to take into consideration the *uma lisan* of the *liurai*.

Even where a community has fully embraced the democratic system, many disputes continue to be resolved by traditional authorities through the institution of *nahe biti bo'ot*. *Nahe biti bo'ot* may also draw on the authority of the *liurai* and the *liurai's uma lisan* to give added authority to the proceedings. The central role of the *liurai* or the *liurai's uma lisan* in ongoing traditional practices such as *nahe biti bo'ot* clearly demonstrates the hybridity of authority and governance practices at the local level.¹³ This hybridity is being negotiated in very different ways, depending on the needs of the community. In *suku* Tutuala, the *suku* council and the *suku* community have formed a new

network called *Forum Mata Dalan* (FORMADA). This forum gives a voice to the many different authority figures in the *suku*, including representatives from youth, non-government organisations, students, the *lia-na'in*, and the *liurai*, referred to locally as *rai na'in* or 'landowner'. All members of FORMADA take on a particular role in the forum. The *liurai's* function is to carry out his responsibilities as the original landowner, making judgments about culture and customary traditions when there are family or community problems, and drawing on his deep knowledge of the land and traditional methods for resolving disputes.

In *suku* Lifau, there is a unique mode of cultural recognition of the *liurai* that involves the Catholic Church and can be observed during ceremonies such as those held at Easter or Saint Antonio Day. On these days, when all the Catholic members of the *suku* take candles, flowers and food and gather to make offerings at the Church, this is also understood to show respect to the *liurai*. This is because in Oecusse, the *liurai* were the first to convert to Catholicism. While the *liurai* in *suku* Lifau no longer has any official governance role, his cultural authority is still very strong, and he also is responsible for mediating and incorporating the cultures and beliefs espoused through the Catholic Church.

The reduced role of liurai in new suku

During Indonesian occupation, there were new *suku* established as people were resettled in accordance with the political interests of the Indonesian military. These new *suku* were immediately opened to the Indonesian-run electoral processes and as the *suku* boundaries did not reflect the old kingdoms of Timor-Leste, the *xefe suku* who led these *suku* were not descendants of the *liurai*; rather, they were ordinary people elected directly by the people.

One such new *suku* is Bairo Pite (within the capital city) in the district of Dili, established as a consequence of urbanisation and migration during Indonesian times. There is no *liurai* in this *suku*. However, the *suku* territory was formerly recognised as part of the traditional territory of the Mota Ain *liurai* from *uma lisan* Karaketu Mota Ain. As such, the people and the elected *suku* council members consider *uma lisan* Karaketu Mota Ain, which is located in Bairo Pite, as important for the community. The significance of the *liurai's* *uma lisan* is most obvious in its role in implementing *tarabandu* in the *suku*. The contribution that the *liurai's* *uma lisan* makes through this process is significant, and people consider it an important source of wealth, encouraging peaceful relations and managing the community's natural resources. However implementing the *tarabandu* is not without problems here, as the residents of Bairo Pite come from many different parts of Timor-Leste, and their traditional affiliations and obligations are with the *uma lisan* of their families. This means that some do not consider themselves bound by the *tarabandu* mechanisms that the people have established.

A second case in this category of 'new *suku*' is Triloka, which was established as a consequence of the war. In accordance with Indonesian military requirements, the population were moved from their traditional lands and forcibly resettled, bringing several different *aldeia* from different *suku* together to form *suku* Triloka. There are no *liurai* recognised in this *suku*, but other aspects of culture remain strong – in particular their commitment to *lisan*, and the celebration of *tarabandu* in the *suku*. The situation in Triloka clearly demonstrates that while the significance of *uma lisan* and the influence of the *liurai* are closely related, they are nonetheless different and need to be analysed separately from each other. While the 'monarchical' rule of the *liurai* is no longer in existence in Timor-Leste, the cultural importance of *uma lisan* (which may or may not include the *uma lisan* of the *liurai*) continues to be strong.

The liurai and the liurai's uma lisan are no longer relevant in some suku

This third category analyses those *suku* where, for a variety of reasons, the influence of the *liurai* and the *liurai's uma lisan* has died out. This situation was found in *suku* Loihunu, where the *liurai* had governing power during Portuguese times but was replaced thirty-three years ago by the current *xefe suku*, who was formally re-elected in 2005. Although he was not traditionally empowered to rule, the *xefe suku* clearly had the trust of the community.

A second case, in a *suku* in Viqueque, is a little different in that the elected *xefe suku* is a descendant of the *liurai*, but clearly prefers to use the democratic system and describes his own legitimacy as obtained through the electoral process rather than his family heritage. When asked if the *liurai* in this *suku* still exists, the *xefe suku* replied, 'I refuse to say *liurai*, otherwise people will say I am arrogant – leave it up to the people to see and decide'.¹⁴ Nonetheless, there are still cultural considerations that he must take into account in exercising local leadership, as he explained:

[I]t is best if the *liurai* and non-*liurai* co-operate and do good work for the future. The *liurai* position passes from the old generation to the new generation. My interest is in continuing to consider the council of elders so that my leadership is strong. A leader who does not respect the elders will at some stage have to step down, and the elders will not choose someone who does not respect them.¹⁵

This situation represents a very interesting hybridity of elected and cultural authority. While the position of elected *xefe suku* is described as having replaced the authority of the *liurai*, the council of elders (an authority that traditionally provided checks and balances to the *liurai's* power) nonetheless continues to be respected. This continuing traditional influence, however, does not represent a settled state of affairs. Like all *suku*, the *suku* in question is in a state of transition and there are very real concerns that the cultural practices that are consecrated through the *uma lisan* will be lost. This is because there is now nobody who has the traditional power and knowledge to rebuild the *uma lisan*. As the *xefe suku* explained:

They were going to rebuild the *uma lisan*, re-establish the *tarabandu* system, but it cannot be done because all the *lia-na'in* have died and no-one is brave enough to become a *lia-na'in* and say the prayers. New people are scared to become a *lia-na'in* because if their prayer is wrong they can face suffering such as illness or death.¹⁶

In addition to the fear that their cultural knowledge and traditions are being lost, there were also comments that the influence of democracy and modernisation pose a direct threat to people's culture. As the *xefe suku* stated:

... according to the people's observations, democracy is running smoothly but the people who are receiving and implementing democracy do not know how to use it. Democracy gives freedom for people to speak but people don't listen to each other. They also note that in the past everyone had to act according to their parents and the *liurai* and this also sometimes means that people do not progress forward. Finally there is movement down a democratic path of freedom but it is better that not everything is free; there must be respect for our culture.¹⁷

During our research, people often commented that democracy was understood as giving unlimited freedom and the right to act according to one's own desires, but without respecting the rights of others.¹⁸ Interpretations such as these have naturally led to the rights of others being breached, creating significant problems within communities. The concerns that are expressed in these communities represent the very real threat that is posed when traditions, and traditional institutions, are lost to the people.

The liurai's governing power and culture remains strong

In this final category, there are two *suku* that were identified during fieldwork where the *liurai's* governing power and the influence of the *liurai's uma lisan* remains strong: Uma Wa'in Kraik, and Bucoli. In both of these *suku*, traditional modes of rule continue to be implemented very systematically, and have endured throughout all the phases of East Timorese history.

In *suku* Uma Wa'in Kraik, the current *xefe suku* is the fifth generation of *liurai*, and the people of the *suku* and *liurai* territory refer to him as 'Dom' as a title of respect. This *liurai* won the 2005 *suku* elections, and his position gained further strength during the 2009 elections as he was the only candidate. A similar situation also exists in *suku* Bucoli where, since Timor-Leste gained independence, the *liurai* (in this case a woman) has continued to win the *suku* elections. Like in Uma Wa'in Kraik, the *xefe suku* of Bucoli effectively has a dual authority, where she has both a formal mandate to govern through the *suku* elections and is also informally trusted as a *liurai* to lead the community. When asked about the existence of *liurai* in *suku* Bucoli, a senior resident stated:

... the *liurai* governed in the past, now it's the *xefe suku*. If the *liurai* is abolished we are also abolishing a particular culture. The *liurai* has power and influence that people respect as sacred. People respect the

liurai in the same way they respect a culture, so to abolish it depends on the people. Now people are embarrassed to do the traditional dance, but they are not embarrassed to do the modern dance. This is a sign that it is possible the culture will be lost.¹⁹

There are several reasons why the people may prefer the *liurai* as leader of these *suku* at the present time. The *liurai* maintains and strengthens cultural leadership and is able to use his or her cultural power and authoritarian leadership style in order to guarantee stability and reduce violence in the *suku*. Those who are not descendants of the *liurai* may be afraid to nominate themselves as a candidate for *xefe suku* because the position is considered *lulik* (sacred). For these and possibly other reasons, the people of these *suku* use the democratic process to strengthen the pre-existing traditional governance system in the *suku*. However, as suggested by the senior resident of Bucoli quoted above, this may well change in the future.

Conclusion

The varying results across different *suku* clearly demonstrate the diversity of approaches that communities are taking in negotiating the continuing importance of *lisan*, *uma lisan*, and the *liurai*, while also adapting to the requirements of liberal democracy. While in some *suku* it appears that democracy has posed a challenge to the existence of the *liurai*, other *suku* have used the democratic process to continue to re-elect those who are traditionally empowered to rule. In some new *suku* formed during Indonesian times, they have recognised the strength that the *liurai's uma lisan* can offer to a community, and have effectively 'borrowed' the leadership of the traditional *liurai* – despite the fact that they are not traditionally related – in order to reinstitute various cultural practices such as *tarabandu*. The various ways in which communities are adapting to democracy is very dependent on local history and politics and the particular requirements of *lisan* in that community. These requirements will continue to change according to communal needs and external pressures.

There is however, a very real fear that adopting democracy means that important cultural practices will be lost. Nonetheless, despite communities' sense of unease over what democracy means for culture, there are also many people who are actively working to maintain and revitalise their culture. In almost all *suku*, there is a commitment to rebuilding the *uma lisan*. And in almost all *suku*, there is a push to re-establish systems of *tarabandu*, which may also incorporate new methods to ensure that their culture is in line with the modern system. The continuing role of the *liurai* and the *uma lisan* is a message to East Timorese society and the international community that the formation of Timor-Leste as a nation did not begin from zero. Across the *suku* of Timor-Leste, there was already a cultural package that worked to safeguard the community, regulating people's relations with each other, with the environment, and with the ancestors. While there are some customs that persist in these communities that are not beneficial to people fully realising their rights as equal citizens, our research clearly demonstrates that the implementation

of democracy should give proper consideration to the *uma lisan*, other cultural symbols and practices, and the traditional authority that continues to exist in East Timorese society.

Endnotes

- 1 This article draws on research undertaken for and funded by an AusAID Development Research Award. The author would like to express appreciation to AusAID for making this research possible.
- 2 A more detailed account of research findings on cultural practices and the significance associated with *uma lisan*, the *liurai*, and the current influence of these institutions in Timor-Leste is available in a longer Tetun version of this paper published on the website for *Local-Global*.
- 3 Interview with *xefe suku* and *lia-na'in*, Lautem district, 12 September 2008.
- 4 Interview with parish priest, *suku* Venilale, Baucau district, 28 September 2009.
- 5 Interview with senior resident, *suku* Tutuala, Lautem district, 12 September 2008.
- 6 See also D. Cummins, 'Democracy or democracy? Local experiences of democratisation in Timor-Leste', *Democratization*, vol. 17, no. 5, 2010, pp. 899-919; and M.A. Brown and A. Gusmão, 'Peacebuilding and political hybridity in East Timor', *Peace Review*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2009, pp. 61-9.
- 7 A. Capell, 'People and languages of Timor', *Oceania*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1944, pp. 191-219. See p. 198.
- 8 Interview with senior figure, *suku* Tula Ika, Oecusse district, 5 December 2009.
- 9 See, for example, Z. Grimshaw, 'Interview with Comandante Ular Rihik/Virgilio dos Anjos', 16 October 2009, Dili, Timor-Leste, <<http://www.etan.org/et2010/01january/16/14intrvw.htm>>
- 10 Interview with *liurai*, Oecusse district, 7 December 2009.
- 11 Interview with elder, *suku* Uma Wa'in Kraik, Viqueque district, 28 September 2009.
- 12 See also J. Fox, 'Repaying the debt to Mau Kiak: reflections on Timor's cultural traditions' in D. Mearns and S. Farram, eds, *Democratic Governance in Timor-Leste: Reconciling the Local and the National*, Charles Darwin University Press, Darwin, 2008, pp. 119-28.
- 13 See V. Boege, M.A. Brown, K. Clements and A. Nolan, 'On hybrid political orders and emerging states: what is failing – states in the global south or research and politics in the West?', in M. Fisher and B. Schmelze, eds, *Berghof Handbook for Conflict Resolution Dialogue Series: No 8 Building Peace in the Absence of States*, Berghof Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management, Berlin, 2009, pp. 15-35.
- 14 Interview *xefe suku*, Viqueque district, 27 September 2009.
- 15 *ibid.*
- 16 *ibid.*
- 17 *ibid.*
- 18 Such comments have also been noted in other studies, see for example D. Cummins, 'Democracy or democracy?', and M.A. Brown and A. Gusmão 'Peacebuilding and political hybridity'.
- 19 Interview with senior resident, *suku* Bucoli, Baucau district, 30 September 2009.