



Many Hands International

culture based community development

Research study: Endangered forms of cultural expression of the Fataluku people
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Project Background

Cultural practices are vital for the sustainment of a life that is meaningful and promoting of wellbeing. This is so for all peoples, but particularly so for those whose cultures have been impacted by negative external forces, particularly colonisation in all its forms. The people of Timor-Leste, a small half-island that lies to the north-west of Australia and the east of Indonesia, have been subject to the most extreme forms of colonisation over centuries, with concomitant impact on local culture.

In the early years of Timor's history, small tribal groups lived separately, divided by rugged terrain. At least twenty-five distinct mother tongues were in use during this time (Soares & Dooradi, 2011). Traders occasionally visited these communities, but otherwise they were isolated from the outside world (Connelly, 2003). Portugal claimed the eastern half of the island as a colony in the 1600s for the financial potential they recognised in its forests of sandalwood and teak. For four centuries, the Portuguese ruled this isolated colony in what has been described as a "haze of apathy", with few resources invested in the Timorese people and their nation (Dunn, 1996, p. 23). When the Portuguese abandoned the Timorese to the next wave of invaders in 1974, only 20 kilometres of paved roads, two hospitals and three high schools had been established (Robinson, 2010) and the illiteracy rate was more than 90% (Taylor, 1991). During World War II, the Japanese occupied the island, and local volunteers supported Allied Forces in their battles against the occupiers. This period had tragic consequences for Timor, with loss of life estimated to be as many as 70,000 (Department of Defence Australia, 2002) out of a population of less than 500,000 (Magalhaes, 1996).

A brutal 25-year occupation by Indonesia began in 1974, with as many as 180,000 Timorese people, one-third of the population, losing their lives (UNDP, 2010). Forced re-settlement from productive villages to Indonesian-controlled roadside settlements resulted in widespread starvation over many seasons (Shalom, Chomsky & Albert, 1999; Taylor, 1991). Murder, torture, rape and enforced sterilization made very effective weapons of war. Whole villages were obliterated in frequent large-scale massacres. Scarce resources were spent in support of the long drawn-out resistance battle, and the majority of able men spent decades fighting from inaccessible places in the mountains (Kiernan, 2003). Generations of children had little or no access to education in the chaos.

In 1999, the first national elections stimulated the participation of 98% of the electorate, with an overwhelming majority voting for independence (TLAVA, 2009b). This was an amazing outcome given the well-grounded fears of retaliation from Indonesia. The immediate cataclysm and ensuing violence resulted in the internal displacement of 400,000 people and hundreds of deaths at the hands of Indonesian militia (Nevins, 2005). Almost 90% of the country's infrastructure was destroyed, much of which had been built by the Indonesians themselves (Connelly, 2003). After two years of post-election re-organisation, independence was finally celebrated in May 2002. In the ensuing decade and a half, Timor has been working to establish a functioning independent democracy.

Strength through culture

Despite these overwhelming odds, the Timorese people have a remarkable story of survival. Their success in resisting far more powerful nations provides their strongest base of shared identity (Trindade & Castro, 2007). Timorese culture offers an abiding source of identity and stability throughout their turbulent history and into the present day (Brandao, 2011). This includes the flourishing of “many different language groups, fiercely independent family units, complex marital and commercial exchange systems, animist religious practices and effective health treatment and cures” (Connelly, 2003, p. 2). At least 20 local languages are still in use, which most children speak at home (Lewis, 2009). Culture and traditional practices still provide the primary means of conflict resolution and peace building in most Timorese communities (Brandao, 2011). Since independence, communities across East Timor have been engaged in what scholars have described as a ‘resurgence of custom’ (Hicks 2007). ‘This resurgence is most vividly associated with the rebuilding of sacred ancestral houses (Tetun: *uma lulik*), which were destroyed, abandoned or fell into disrepair during the course of the Indonesian military invasion and occupation’ (Barnes, 2011 p.23 in McWilliam & Traube 2011).

Cultural expression is evident in artefacts still produced by hand around the country (Tatoli ba Kultura, 2012). The most prolific of these are hand woven fabrics *tais* that form the basis of traditional clothing and costume. *Tais* designs and colours illustrate the environmental, cultural and linguistic differences between communities. These are considered very valuable because of their cultural associations, such that one set could be worth as much as six cows (Oxfam, n.d.). Other cultural artefacts still in local production include carvings, ceramics and basketry. Traditional music played on a range of locally made percussion instruments and cultural dance forms continue to play a strong role in Timorese ceremonial life (King, 1963; Dunlop, 2012).

Barnes discusses issues with transmission of knowledge, which is held by elders and passed on only at the last minute. Elders are then the historians, with knowledge of migration, conflict, negotiations and treaties between communities, etc. (2011, pp. 37-40). For example, in Babulo, in the Uatolari subdistrict, Viqueque district, only elders may speak and pass judgement on what is *lulik* (Barnes, 2011, p. 38).

At the same time, there is also concern for the survival of traditional culture, given the very significant negative impacts of colonisation and oppression during Indonesian and Portuguese occupation. Loss of connection to traditional structures, particularly the anchorage of extended family is a growing problem, as young people increasingly move to Dili in search of scarce education and employment opportunities (Scambary, 2012). The current experience of globalisation continues to impact culture and values. Given the nascent stage of Timor’s media industry and public cultural production, influences from overseas, particularly Indonesia, are very significant (Sloman, 2009).

National and international frameworks for cultural preservation

In recognition of the need to support and preserve its unique cultural heritage, Timor-Leste is moving towards ratifying the international Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003. In support of this, the State Secretariat of Tourism, Art and Culture (SETAC) is establishing a register of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as required by the Convention. SETAC is collaborating with UNESCO to assist its staff, other professionals and community members to develop skills related to the safeguarding of ICH.

This project contributes to these efforts to safeguard the nation’s intangible cultural heritage by documenting the elements of the endangered cultural heritage of the Fataluku people.

About Fataluku people and culture

Fataluku population demographic information

There are four distinct language groups and cultures within the District of Lautem, with Fataluku being the largest percentage, at 69%, with a total of 48,910 speakers at the 2010 census. A fifth language group, Makua/Lovaia is in danger of disappearing with the recent deaths of the last speakers of that language. According to Rappaport (2015), Fataluku is grouped into five mutually understandable dialects. Fataluku culture and language is predominant in the four eastern-most sub-districts of Timor-Leste: Lospalos; Lautem, Lorehe and Tutuala.

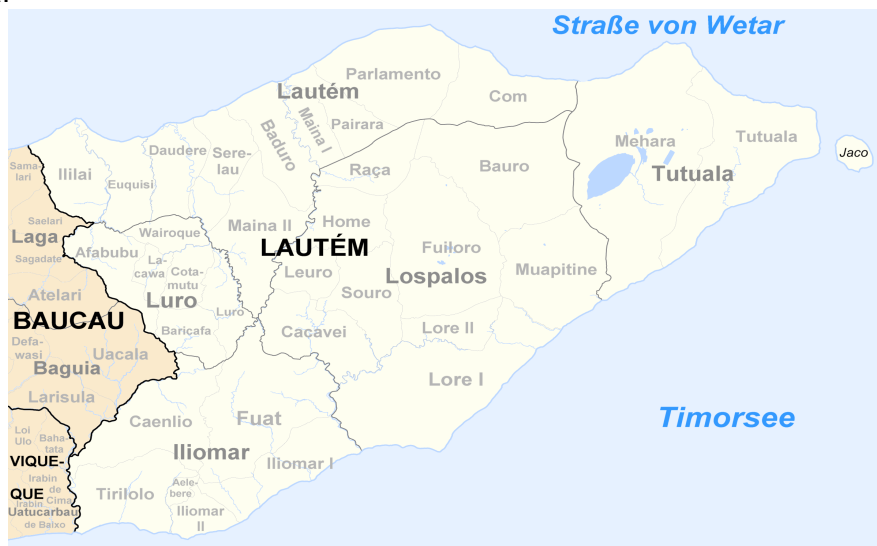


Figure 1: Lautem district showing sub-districts Lospalos, Lautem and Tutuala

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laut%C3%A9m_District#/media/File:Sucos_Lautem.png

LANGUAGE GROUP	CULTURE	NUMBER OF SUKU RELATED TO LANGUAGE GROUP	TOTAL LANGUAGE SPEAKERS IN LAUTEM DISTRICT	PERCENTAGE OF EACH LANGUAGE IN LAUTEM DISTRICT
Fataluku	Fataluku	19	48,910	69%
Makalero	Lero	6	9,687	14%
Makasai'Na'ini	Makasa'e	6	8,481	12%
Sa'ani	Makasa'e	3	4,207	5%
Makua/Lovaia	Lovaia	-	-	Endangered

Table 1: Language and cultural groups in Lautem district (Timor-Leste Census 2010)

SUB DISTRICT	SUKU	SUKU TOTAL	ALDEIA TOTAL	ALDEIA FATALUKU CULTURE	ALDEIA MIXED CULTURAL GROUPS	PEOPLE OF FATALUKU CULTURE	TOTAL POPULATION
Lospalos	Bauro	10	53	50	3	27,800	29,236
	Fuiloro						
	Home						
	Cacavem						
	Leuro						
	Lore I						
	Lore II						
	Muapitine						
	Raça						
Souro							
Lautem	Baduro	10	45	31	14	11,169	14,147
	Com						
	Daudare						
	Euquise						
	Ililai						
	Maina I						
	Maina II						
	Pairara						
	Parlamento						
Serelau							
Tutuala	Tutuala	2	7	7	-	3,836	3,836
	Mehara						
T o t a l		22	105	88	17	42,805	47,219

Table 2: Fataluku speaking populations by aldeia and suku (Timor-Leste Census 2010).

Livelihood in Lautem district

A majority of Lautem residents are farmers, growing largely swidden agriculture combining maize and secondary food crop cultivation with smallholder livestock production (McWilliam, 2011). Fataluku people have a strong connection to the forests and coastal areas in which they reside, which provide a source of wild food and other products to sustain livelihoods. Aside from firewood, timber, and other building materials (bamboo, rotans and thatch for roofing), forests also provide fibres, ropes, baskets, gums and vegetable supplements such as tubers, wild beans, leaf vegetables, resins, honey and forest fruits. Hunting is conducted throughout the year, using various poisons, traps, spears and dogs to source game meat and seafood (McWilliam 2011). Stands of bamboo, sugar palm, tamarind and timber grow in the forests in Lautem. The forest is also home to various species of game birds, deer, wild pigs, monkeys, bats, civet cat and cuscus, which are hunted by local people (Pannell, 2011, p. 224). From the ocean, Fataluku people hunt fish, clams, sea turtles, sea eels, crabs, and sea urchins, as well as freshwater shrimp. Reef gleaning (*meti fai*, *tono fai*) for octopus and crustaceans, seaweed and other edible marine creatures is practised along the foreshore during low tide (McWilliam 2011, p. 75 in McWilliam & Traube 2011).

Existing documentation of Fataluku culture

There is a great store of narratives concerning the origin of the island of Timor and of the various clans (*ratu*) into which Fataluku society is organized; in addition, each *ratu* has special practices and prohibitions, the knowledge of which is *tei*, “restricted” or “dangerous.” *Tei* is considered too “hot” for young people to know—it can render them infertile or damage their health—and accordingly much of the knowledge of *tei* is restricted to the elders, who pass it on only when the next generation reaches middle age. The stories parents tell their children are stories about the origins of their clan, its rules and practices, the origins of their community, and the hardships of the period of resistance to the Indonesian occupation (1975-99). Mothers may sing lullabies (*moco lolole*) to their children that teach them the origins of their own names and the other names particular to their clan. There are also legends about animals, plants, natural features such as individual mountains or the large lake Ira Lalaro, and the sea. Such stories are often believed to “belong” to certain groups of people and not to others: if one asks, for example, for stories about lake Ira Lalaro, one will be told that only the people who live in certain communities near the lake should tell those stories.

A major storehouse of Fataluku oral literature is to be found in the vast body of sung poetry known as *vaihoho* (see below), and probably also in the *sau* singing at the funerals of venerable elders. *Vaihoho* poems may be cast in ordinary daily language (as in the narrative poem about a fatal accident at sea, given in the selection of *vaihoho* texts appended to this report), but they often use a “high” literary language with rare or archaic words. Compounding this difficulty in interpretation is the fact that the symbolism and imagery can be quite obscure, referring in highly condensed form to stories that must be known beforehand if the reference is to be understood (Yampolsky, 2012).

Sadness is the main feeling when singing in Fataluku tradition. The main song theme was once about sad love but now the Fataluku people sing about war (Rappoport 2015). Fataluku songs are frequently sung using diphonic singing (Rappoport 2015). Diphonic – also known as overtone – singing is a type of singing in which the singer manipulates the resonances (or formants) created as air travels from the lungs, past the vocal folds, and out of the lips to form a melody. This creates the impression that the singer is making more than one pitch or melody at the same time.

Fataluku songs are often two-part songs with two or more pairs of singers (of the same or different gender), including a leading voice or *na lafair* (voice big), and a following voice or

na moko (voice child) – also called em hi' a moi (take up and move) and em isi (take descend). Polyphonic technique uses pseudo-drone polyphony. The two voices favour mostly small, simultaneous intervals such as minor and major seconds and minor thirds. They meet in sporadic unisons' (Rappoport 2015, p. 142).

Rappoport (2015) found that vaihoho is the most valued repertoire of the Fataluku people. Vaihoho are traditional poems either spoken or sung, often in call and response format relating to harvest. When sung, this is done a capella by choirs of varying sizes. Vaihoho range in length from one to many stanzas. Poems are used either as part of ritual or for pleasure. Variances in vaihoho are evident between the far east style, where vaihoho is only sung as alternating duets, and the western and southern styles, where in large groups contexts, an initial duet is answered by multiple duets sung simultaneously (Rappoport 2015, pp. 141-2). Two-part singing is performed for 'welcoming guests, weddings, harvests, funerals and concerted works (threshing rice, hauling a tree from the forest, planting the post of a house, harvesting sea worms, walking, passing the time)' (Rappoport 2015, p. 142). Both the poems and music are endangered. It is estimated that approximately 30 per cent of vaihoho poems have already been lost, and the remaining 70 per cent are critically endangered because knowledge of them is held by only a few elders.