

# Research Project Report

## Intangible Cultural Heritage of Tutuala, Lautem, including representation of rock art in cultural elements.

Tutuala District, Lautem, Timor-Leste

**Partners** | NGO Many Hands International with Secretariat of State for Tourism, Art and Culture and community members from sub-district Tutuala.



*Photo:* Tutuala villagers recreate Voton song-prayer asking for a safe journey for sailors (Ildefonso da Silva)



**Many Hands International**  
culture based community development



SECRETARIAT OF STATE FOR  
ART AND CULTURE



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## **Abstract**

The Tutuala region in far eastern Timor-Leste is one of the richest regions of rock art in island South East Asia. More than 30 sites of rock art on cave walls include hundreds of painted images, estimated to be at least 2000-3000 years old. Traditional life is strong in this isolated region of the small island nation of Timor-Leste. Villagers enjoy cultural practices that have spanned generations, connecting the Fataluku people to their ancestors and stories of creation. Findings of this small research project indicate that cultural elements reflecting motifs of the rock art are still in regular use. Tais, traditional weavings used for ceremonial and practical functions, include the largest number of motifs. Images of the cloud, eagle mouth, horse, three boats and poria leaves regularly appear in tais woven in the area. Stories shared by elders connect the rock art with the images in the tais, as well as sacred objects and items not able to be depicted. A song in the vaihoho style, of unaccompanied call and response, is still sung about the rock art, although this is sacred (lulik) and is unable to be documented for public information. Villagers also know a voton, an ancient singing prayer, in which sailors call for safe passage. While they report that this song does not relate directly to the rock art, its themes connect contemporary villagers with ancestors who came from over the sea and depicted their journeys in drawings in the caves.

## **Project aims:**

This research sought to map intangible cultural heritage practices associated with rock art sites in Suku Tutuala, Lautem, Timor-Leste. The project supports the Secretariat of State for Tourism, Art and Culture, Government of Timor-Leste, in their ongoing investigation, safeguarding and promotion of the rock art heritage in the Lautem Administrative Post.

## **Background: Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Nino Konis Santana National Park**

The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) refers to ICH as non-material areas of cultural heritage. It is called intangible because its existence and recognition depends mainly on individual or group knowledge, which is transmitted by imitation and living experience. ICH includes traditions or living expressions inherited from previous generations and passed on to descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts. When thriving, ICH is continuously recreated in response to daily life and provides communities with a sense of identity and meaning.

## **Rock art in the Nino Konis Santana National Park, Tutuala**

The Nino Konis Santana National Park, established in 2007, is Timor-Leste's first national park. It is named in honour of the independence movement hero Nino Konis Santana, who was born in Tutuala. The park is located at the eastern tip of Timor and includes a wide geographic, flora, fauna, bird and marine diversity. It is also home to many Fataluku speaking peoples, who have a unique and particular cultural heritage.

One of the richest regions of rock art sites in island South East Asia occurs in far eastern Timor-Leste (Aubert et al, 2007). There are more than 25 sites of rock art documented in the region, which include hundreds of painted images on cave walls. Nearly all of the sites recorded are in the Nino Konis Santana National Park, mostly in or near the village of Tutuala. These sites are of national significance for Timor Leste, and also of international importance, and could eventually be listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. They are estimated to be at least 2,000 to 3,000 years old, although possibly much older.

Local informants report that the rock art paintings in Tutuala region “pre-existed human occupation, spontaneously appearing ‘in the beginning’” (O’Connor, Pannell & Brockwell, 2013). This is except for images of boats, which are interpreted to mean that new arrivals “in the time of the ancestors” were given permission to land and live in the area. The rock art of Timor Leste is extremely rich in terms of representations of boats. Over the course of time, incoming groups of people have presumably made use of a diverse range of vessels to arrive in the island; boats and the sea play a very important role in the mythologies and ceremonies of the people of Timor.

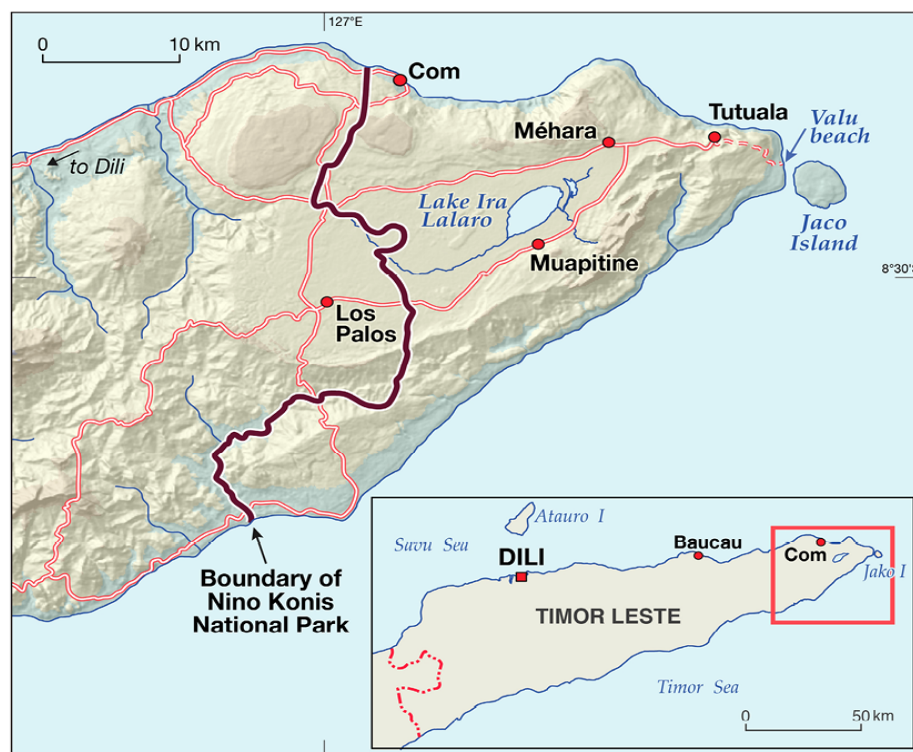


Figure 1: Map of Tutuala Subdistrict and the Nina Konis Santana National Park  
Source: CartoGIS, College of Asia and the Pacific, ANU.

## Cultural practices documented in Tutuala

Cultural practices specific to the Tutuala region are documented in the literature. Strong practices of tais weaving are documented in this area, as in most districts of Timor-Leste. In Tutuala, the weavings are single warp resist dye textiles, with linear design bands that appear on both men’s cloths and women’s tubeskirts. The cultural value of the cloth is determined by the number of bands in the centre of women’s tais. This indicates the number of buffalo required for exchange in marital arrangements between bride and groom’s families. The sides and ends of the cloth have wider bands of motifs that include images of boats, horses and riders, body

accessories including bracelets and haircombs, eagle wings, stars and the sun. These are considered to be reflective of rock art in the region (Finch, 2009).

Vaihoho, a form of unaccompanied traditional singing, is performed in Tutuala at traditional funeral and wedding ceremonies, and when people get together to participate in leisure time activities. Vaihoho singers are divided into male and female groups, so that they can call and respond to each other during the song.

A Fataluku chant, *vetere*, sung before the *meci* hunt, is documented by Dunlop (2012).

Meci nal a kuru mucu nu'ute marite

A uru-uru a poko-poko

Kinamoko usu roit emere nu ma'u

A tapa usu rooi ina taka-taka

Una-uname a, meci name a

Una-uname a, meci name a

Capaku sauke meci sauke a

Capaku sauke meci sauke a

Ehe veter dala mai o lele sekur

Ehe Puiyoho'o ira mucu puiserar o

Ira mucu asena vari fala asa sai o

Vari fala-mire janetiti jani e na rei rei

Asino rei-rei asi e na terei-rei

Ira mucu asena vari fala asa sai o

Vari fala mirejanetiti jani e na rei-rei

Asino rei-rei asi e tarei-rei

## Method

Information was collected for this research through interviews with traditional custodians and community members in Tutuala village in August and September 2015. Participants were asked to share knowledge of their intangible cultural heritage related to rock art in their on Fataluku language. Information was sought about cultural elements across the five ICH domains. The information was documented in Tetun on SETAC ICH inventory forms (sample attached as Appendix 1) and in photos and videos. Written permission was sought from research participants to document the information and take photographs and videos. The information was translated into English for this report.



## Findings

This research explored the relationship between living cultural practices and the ancient rock art of the Tutuala region in far eastern Timor-Leste. Three elements of intangible cultural heritage reflecting rock art were documented:

- stories about the Ili Kere-Kere rock art
- tais weavings reflecting images depicted in the Ili Kere-Kere rock art
- vaihoho— a lulik (sacred) unaccompanied song in call and response style about the the Ili Kere-Kere rock art

Other cultural practices that research participants were enthusiastic to share, that related to the area of the Nino Konis Santana National Park, were also documented:

- voton –singing-prayer for sailing
- koinenepe – dance to celebrate Meci Me, annual collection of sea worms
- flute playing (documented separately and attached as Appendix 2).

## The story of Ili Kere-Kere rock art



Community elder Henrique da Cruz explained the origins of the rock art in Ili Kere Kere, and in so doing, the origins of the first peoples of the region. He described how Fataluku people arrived in Tutuala by boat after being forced to leave their homelands overseas because of fire and flooding. Ili Kere Kere then became the meeting point for different ratus (groups/tribes) to gather to decide how to share the land, who would stay where and what they would do.

*Ili Kere Kere means literally writing stone or writing rock.. . . (the place) existed before the Fataluku ancestors came from overseas . . . They came from a very distant place because there was a flood in their homeland . . . they were looking for dry land to stay because the home land was burnt and flooded."*

*At the caves of Ili Kere Kere there are many paintings in red ochre: boats, animals, human figures and hand stencils. There are also shapes such as stars and radiating circles. Some of the pictures have a meaning, others are just drawings . . . the boat represents the fact that people came far by boat to this place, while the sun image reminds us that the sun will always rise each morning everywhere. They (paintings) have been there for a long time, since we grew up and long before. We don't know who drew them.*

Mr Henrique da Cruz with Village Chief Tutuala Mr Antonio Fonseca, August, 2015  
Photo: Mr Henrique da Cruz

This story about the rock art at Ili Kere Kere was shared by Tutuala elders Maria Madalena and Henrique da Cruz:

*Our ancestor Letivain from Ili Kere Kere first drew a cloud, because according to him, when the island was still forming, there were already clouds, because there'd been a fire lit there. This tells us that before everyone came, life was already starting in Ili Kere Kere.*

*Letivain then drew the mouth of the eagle to depict that this bird was sent ahead of the people to find a good place to land. Other birds had not been so helpful as they had all lied, and only the eagle came back and brought information to his master that there was a dry island ahead where the ship could land. First a painted ship came, which had on board wild horses that had all their feet covered...Then a regular white ship followed.*



*Photos: Sun and antenna images in the rock art at Ili Kere Kere. Photographer: Ildefonso da Silva*



*Photos:  
Boat  
images  
in the  
rock art  
at Ili  
Kere  
Kere.*

*Photographer: Ildefonso da Silva.*



### Tais weavings reflecting the rock art

Women in the Tutuala community, like others all around Timor, continue to weave traditional tais. The many types of tais serve different purposes - some of higher value are exchanged at marriage ceremonies and worn on ceremonial occasions. In Tutuala, one special tais design, known as *sika lau loisa fanu* includes seven motifs from the rock art paintings: cloud, eagle mouth, horse, three boats and poria leaves, as depicted below.



Photo: all motifs





Photo: horse and boat motifs



Photo: boat motif



Photo: poria leaves motif

Photo:

Tutuala elders Maria Madalena and Henrique da Cruz share this story about how the rock art at Ili Kere Kere came to be reflected in motifs in local tais:

*(Our ancestor) Letivain asked his sister Payaceren to include these images in the tais she was weaving. Payaceren wove them, then passed this information to her daughter Lautana, and they have been passed down ever since. Poria leaves are depicted in the last section of this tais, because they are important to the people here. They look very similar to a crab, and are used in weaving and as medicine.*

*The poko itself is not depicted because it is lulik (sacred). Payacerin's daughter had a dream that this is secret knowledge and cannot be shared openly. When Payacerin's daughter was weaving the poko design in the tais, her hands and feet swelled. She had a dream and someone (just someone, I am told, no one knows who) visited her in her dream to tell her this happened because it is sacred.*

*There are two reasons why this is sacred. The first is because it belongs to Lautana's family traditional name – that is, Lautana's children have the traditional name pokotana. The second reason is because it is representative of a 'body' and therefore represents the bodies of Lautana's family and tribe. This is not lulik/sacred but it is the 'secret' of the people who live in Tutuala... No one else knows.*

Community members believe that the images might have been woven into tais for “six generations... perhaps 450-500 years” (Henrique da Cruz, interview). Until recently, people kept pieces of tais from generation to generation. The original ratu (tribe) whose ancestors lived in the area gave permission for others to reproduce these motifs, as permitted by the ancestors. The only restriction was that they must not include the painted boat or horse motif because that belongs to a tribe in Tutuala and it can not be used by others.



**Photo:** (left to right) Maria Madalena, weaver and Informant, her husband Henrique Da Cruz and community members from Tutuala village with tais images of the horse and the boat. The picture includes male and female versions of the same tais, both known as *sika lau loisa fanu*.



## Voton - singing prayer for sailors

Voton is an ancient singing prayer practiced by sailors from the east of Timor-Leste. When ships were faced with danger from big waves, strong winds and stormy conditions, captains would pray with Voton. They would evoke the wonder and strength of their ancestors, and ask that the waves and wind be stopped so that they might continue their journey safely.



Voton is sung in Lovaia/ Makua, an original form of the Fataluku language. These Lovaia/ Makua words ask for safer conditions to allow the sailors to continue on their journey safely:

*Ami sople, imi sople, memele sople,  
Lelere sople, memele tople, lelere tople, tahi alie lilizane*

Translated into Fataluku, the song looks like this:

*Ero a sopole, ando ana sopole,  
et afarika nere, ando ant afarika nere,  
tahi e va'an hai lou-louke ta'at a tepere,  
ia manina, vakum a nina, har keninet ana nere,  
et ia me anina, vakum a nina, ana la'a herana patatana hin la'a.*

And in English, the words approximate this:

*You travel in this direction, and we will travel in this (another) direction.  
When the conditions are rough, please ask the sea to calm,  
so that we can continue to our destination safely.*





**Photo:** Tutuala community members demonstrating Voton on land:

- Joao Canto de Jesus, Alexandra da Cruz, Jose da Costa, Armando da Silva, Jaozito da Cruz, Johanes I. da Costa, Vitoria da Cruz, Brigida Lopes, Anastasia Lopes, Odete Albuquerque, Rosalia Dias Ximenes, Florentina Ximenes

The current generation of community members report that Voton only occurred in Tutuala, but is no longer practiced regularly. They do not recognise a direct link between Voton and the many images of boats in the local rock art. However, both cultural practices reflect a long history of sailing in this seaside community.

## **Vaihoho – traditional call and response singing about the National Park**

One vaihoho (call and response unaccompanied song) shared by research participants celebrates people's happiness about the development of the National Park and the benefits they hope it will bring to the local community. It includes a 'call' asking where the development has come from and the 'response' saying the development has come from Dili.

*Fere asa rini-rinik  
Fere asa tenaen mau nani  
Para hasa hici mau*

There is also a vaihoho directly pertaining to images in the rock art, but it is *lulik* (sacred) so people are not able to share or talk about this publicly.

Here instead is a local Vaihoho song shared when people make *tua* (palm wine) to ask the gods and ancestors for wine enough to last a long time.

*Vata tua leti toto  
Tua ma'arau a leti toto  
Leti tapi tapi toton  
Afii tapi nana ninavali*



**Photo:** Vaihoho singers from Tutuala share their song about the National Park. Alexandra da Cruz, Jose da Costa, Jose da Silva, Vitoria da Cruz, Florentina Ximenes, Odete Albuquerque.



### Koinenepe- dance for meci-collecting

The dance *Koinenepe* pictured here as performed by the Tutuala performing group re-enacts the harvesting of meci, a small green sea worm, which is collected in Lautem twice a year. It is believed that meci were first discovered by the ancestors of Maleki ratu (tribe) from Maleki Nalehun. The collection of meci marks the renewal of the annual cycle of agriculture.



Meci are collected twice a year, in the last quarter of the moon in February, in a process called Maleki (Small Meci), that occurs only in Tutuala. A second process, called Meci Bo'ot (Big Meci), happens at the time of the new moon in March throughout Tutuala, Com and Lorehe sub-districts of Lautem.



Meci (*eunice viridis*) are small photo-sensitive green seaworms that spawn in large quantities at certain times of the year in Lautem district. They provide a rich source of



protein for the people of these seaside communities. Before it is time to begin collecting meci, people sit together and weave small basket from palm leaves for catching the worms. Then they collect a special wood called seria that is very combustible and can burn for a long time. Seria wood is cut in to small splinters and left to dry for one or two weeks. When the time to collect meci nears, all of the people involved come to the seaside and wait. Someone will use the special torch made from seria wood to check the water for meci. If the worms are present, they notify all the people involved and the collection commences.



First, people enter the water up to their waist with their small basket they have woven tied around their necks. They wave their arms through the water in a circular motion and the meci sticks to their arms. They then scrape the meci off and put it in the basket. Depending on how much meci is in the water, this can take between one and two hours. People are careful not to touch the bottom of the basket or the meci will be crushed and unusable. Then the meci are fried or boiled and eaten with rice and corn, or mixed with chilli, lemon and onion and bottled to last for up to one year.

After the collection of the meci, a ceremony called *totiele* occurs. Seria torches and coconut shells bought from the individuals' homes are burned. The meci collectors hold hands and walk around the fire to mark the end of the meci collection, and to take them safely through the evening and travel home safely in the daylight of the following day. In addition to singing and dancing, this ceremony is important for steadying alliances. This also applies to the alliance of the ritual leader with nature and the spirits and the alliance between the political leaders and the general public. The ritual offerings the day after the harvest are called the "feed the spirits".



**Photo:** Koinenepe dance performed by Tutuala dance group: Atanasio Fonseca, Alexandre D.Santos, Izidoro N.D.Santos, Shander Pasca, Silvanio D.Santos, Zonato V. D.Santos, Marcela A.D. Jesus, Maria S. D.Costa, Zita B.V Marques, Ofelia De Lourdes, Flora J. Martins. This group performs regularly at exhibitions and ceremonies both within and outside the district.

## Further stages of the project

A small exhibition is being developed from the results of this research. This will include wall banners depicting photos and text of cultural elements, a short film comprised of videos of these elements taken in Tutuala, and displays of cultural artefacts, including tais weavings showing rock art elements and woven baskets for collecting meci. The exhibition will be held in the gallery at the Lautém Cultural Centre in late October/November 2015. The information including detail in this report and videos and photos will be made available for public information on the website of Many Hands International, (in Fataluku, local language; Tetun, the Timorese national language and English). It will also be included in SETAC's ICH register.

## Conclusion

This modest research project confirms the ongoing relationship between cultural practices of the Fataluku people of Tutuala region of far eastern Timor-Leste and images in ancient rock art of the region. This confirms documented information in the literature including Finch (2009)'s report of these motifs being represented in tais weavings. Only cultural elements related to Ili Kere Kere were explored for this report, leaving additional research about the other sites still to be undertaken. Other living cultural practices in the region include dances and songs about cycles of life in food and nature such as the meci sea worm ceremonies.

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## Appendix 1: Sample ICH form used to collect information



SECRETARIA DE ESTADO DA  
ARTE E CULTURA

### INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE FORM

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE INVENTORY																								
<b>IDENTIFICATION</b> <b>Record Number:</b> <input style="width: 150px;" type="text"/> <b>Name of ICH element:</b> _____ <b>Other name :</b> _____																								
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