

# Coping with “traditions”:

The analysis of East-Timorese nation building from the perspective of a certain anthropology made in Brazil

*Kelly Silva & Daniel Simião*  
*Department of Anthropology*  
*University of Brasilia*

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## Abstract

The purpose of this essay is twofold. First, we explore the extent to which certain practices in urban East Timor perceived as traditional may be associated to different ways of negotiating individual and collective identities while uncovering dilemmas of nation building and state formation. To this effect, we take into account specific variations of current practices in marriage negotiations in Dili, considering their structural role in forging local sociality. Based on repeated field trips, we contend that different discourses about “tradition” can be related to different ways in which one is positioned vis-à-vis the multiple symbolic elements available in current East-Timorese public spaces. As these different meanings of “tradition” also challenge public policies, their application may uncover different ideas about what a nation ought to be. Second, we ponder on the extent to which our specific focus is due to our background as Brazilian anthropologists, built around our dialogue with certain anthropological lines of analysis in Brazil, particularly those related to interethnic friction and the place of indigenous peoples in the national imagination, as well as those dedicated to such themes as cultural diversity, citizenship, and public policies in urban Brazil.

**Keywords:** East Timor, customary practices, nation building, anthropology, Brazil

## Resumo

O presente ensaio tem dois objetivos conexos. Em primeiro lugar, exploramos em que medida certas práticas percebidas como tradicionais no Timor Leste urbano podem estar associadas a diferentes modos de negociar identidades individuais e coletivas, revelando dilemas de construção da nação e formação

do Estado. Para tanto, levamos em consideração variações específicas em práticas correntes de negociações matrimoniais em Díli, tendo em conta seu papel estrutural na sociabilidade local. Com dados de diversas incursões a campo, sugerimos que diferentes discursos sobre a “tradição” relacionam-se a diferentes modos por meio dos quais pessoas e grupos se posicionam diante dos múltiplos elementos simbólicos disponíveis no espaço público timorense contemporâneo. Na medida em que esses diferentes significados de “tradição” envolvem desafios para políticas públicas, sugerimos que seus acionamentos podem revelar diferentes ideias de o que deva ser a nação em Timor Leste. Em segundo lugar, procuramos refletir sobre o quanto esta agenda de pesquisa é tributária de nossa formação como antropólogos brasileiros, construída a partir de diálogos com, entre outras, certas linhagens do saber antropológico feito no Brasil, em especial aquelas que se debruçaram sobre a fricção interétnica e o papel dos povos indígenas na imaginação da nação, bem como as que se dedicaram ao estudo de temas como diversidade cultural, cidadania e políticas públicas no Brasil urbano.

**Palavras-chave:** Timor-Leste, práticas indígenas, construção da nação, antropologia, Brasil

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The purpose of this essay is twofold. Firstly, we explore to what extent certain practices perceived as traditional in urban East Timor may be associated with different ways of negotiating individual and collective identities while uncovering dilemmas pertaining to nation building and state formation. To this effect, we take into account specific variations of current marriage negotiation practices in Dili, considering their structural role in forging local sociality. Second, we consider the extent to which our specific focus derives from our background, which, among other influences, was built around our dialogue with specific anthropological lines of analysis in Brazil<sup>1</sup>. One of these analytical traditions is related to interethnic friction and the place of indigenous peoples in the national imagination. Another one includes cultural diversity, citizenship, and public policies in urban Brazil<sup>2</sup>. This paper, then, handles different *traditions*. One relates to styles or agendas of Brazilian anthropological thinking while the other consists of discourses made by some East Timor elites in Dili on the notion of “tradition” as a political mover<sup>3</sup>.

Our hypothesis is that discourses about “tradition” in Dili are beacons signaling the genealogy of certain phenomena concerning the dialectics of modernization in East Timor. This genealogy must be connected to colonial government and knowledge acts as attempts to manage and make sense of local knowledge by producing a number of narratives about the possible

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2 For an analysis of the various contexts of the anthropological knowledge made in or on Brazil see Peirano 1998, 2008.

3 In this paper we use the word “tradition” in quotes to refer to the emic concept as used by our interlocutors in the field.

meaning of indigenous practices (Mamdani 1998). It seems that in the East Timorese case, as already pointed out by Silva (2004) and Roque (2011a), the idea of “tradition” – translated, invented and negotiated via the Portuguese expression *usos e costumes* – was part of colonial knowledge used by the Portuguese administration to deal with the multiple indigenous realities. Although it was never been codified (as in the case of Mozambique, Goa, and Macau), the idea of *usos e costumes* was an attempt to handle local knowledge for assimilation purposes, with the assumption that eventually it would be replaced with the moral values of *civilization*.<sup>4</sup> Marriage exchanges were considered to be a central part of local knowledge. This is why various colonial discourses about them were produced.<sup>5</sup> Today, the challenges of dealing with indigenous knowledge and practices are expressed in discourses around categories such as *adat*, *lisan*, and *kultura*<sup>6</sup> that still carry the traces of colonial times and seem to defy the process of nation building. There appears to be an important continuity between the colonial narratives about indigenous practices and the current discourses deployed by Dili elites about those called *foho* people (hill people). We associate this process to what other authors have referred to as *kastom* in other contexts (Keesing & Tonkinson 1982) and *adat* (Davidson & Henley 2007), as we tried, through comparison, to understand certain meanings that the uses of “tradition” may express in Dili. On the other hand, the Brazilian intellectual tradition in which we were trained – with its strong emphasis on the study of interethnic relations – leads us to focus on the political implications of discourses about indigenous practices in the context of state formation.

This essay is organized in four main sections. Firstly, we present an overview of the controversies around marriage prestations in Dili and identify certain effects derived from them. Secondly, we describe some of the local contemporary strategies to modernize traditions. Thirdly, we link these

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4 According to Silva (2004), the assimilation of the natives into the *civilized world* was recurrent in Portuguese colonial projects. The project of systemizing local *usos e costumes* for governance purposes was used in that context mainly as a tactic to promote controlled changes in village life towards “civilization” rather than a way to label the natives as incommensurably different from Europeans.

5 For a very interesting analysis of some colonial discourses about marriage practices in Timor see, Roque 2010.

6 The Indonesian word “adat” (which can be translated as “tradition”), the tetum word “lisan” (which can be “custom”) and “kultura”, the tetum version of the Portuguese word for culture, are seen here as different forms of referring to similar categories.

strategies to the management of customary practices by specific states in their attempts to promote nation building. We end the essay with some thoughts about the ways in which our Brazilian training has guided us in the construction of this analytical subject.

## Discourses and practices of Dili marriage prestations

Since Van Wouden's pioneer work (1968 [1935]), marriage exchanges and their effects on social organization have been hoisted to the position of important diacritic in the recognition of Eastern Indonesia as a cultural region *sui generis* in Austronesia<sup>7</sup>. Various ethnographic works about local sociality in the region have demonstrated the pivotal role of marriage exchanges for the negotiation of various aspects of social reproduction, both in pragmatic and cosmological terms (Leach 1951, Fox 1980, Barnes, 1980). In their ideal form, these marriage exchanges are taken as an exemplary case of gift-giving in the forging of relations of alliance. As a result, analyzing their contemporary configurations has become strategic to those interested in understanding the dynamics of the modernization dialectic in East Timor. Indeed, marriage prestations are a common practice in Dili, among various social segments, although there is no consensus as to their nature, meaning, and ideal pattern. The word *barlake* is usually applied to refer to these exchanges, but it seems to be a floating signifier, with no consensus about what they consist of and about their effect on people's sociality. In fact, it is by exploring the different meanings of *barlake* that certain individuals negotiate their place in the world.

Just as in indigenous villages, in Dili's urban setting, marriage exchanges are strong political movers about which multiple discourses and expectations are deployed. 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 and of her family as well as a toll for establishing alliances among families. By saying this, a person is presenting himself as an authentic East Timorese, someone who knows and honors his own traditions and understands the "real" meaning of *barlake*; someone strongly connected to the hills.

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7 The arguments developed in this section were originally stated in Silva 2012a and Simião 2011

In a city such as Dili, with approximately 200 thousand people and a complex formative history, it is inevitable that marriage negotiations are structured in a variety of ways that are influenced by the dynamics of class, ethnic origin, religious persuasion, family trajectories, education records etc. Nevertheless, marriage negotiations between families are always present; *how*, *when* and *what* marriage prestations consist of convey the ways in which the parties involved handle their identities and their reciprocal duties in the urban context and towards their relatives and ancestors in the mountains.

Matrimonial demeanor implies attention to the expectations of the families involved so as to heed their respective *usos e costumes/lisan/adat/kultura*, the local words for customary practices regarding marriage. Their observance is considered necessary for the construction of satisfactory family relationships based on mutual respect. Concretely speaking, this means the need to negotiate the obligations between the parties both at the wedding and in the future. It must be decided, among other things, whether or not there will be a *barlake* or other kinds of gift-functions (such as *aitukan-be'e manas*<sup>8</sup>), the amount and type of goods to be exchanged at the wedding, be they for the festivities (meals for both wife-givers and wife-takers and their guests) or to seal the alliance between the parties. Decisions should also be made about the goods that will be offered by the parties in the course of their relationship. The kinds of goods, resources, and duties negotiated in marriage payments vary greatly. There are no direct links between the kind and quantity of goods negotiated and the rights and obligations in people and things acquired by them. It all depends on the terms defined at the marriage negotiation. The goods and values involved can be defined according to a number of factors: the parties' ancestral *usos e costumes*, the prestations paid by the bride's mother, the current social position of both families, and ultimately the bride's social condition – whether she is a virgin, pregnant, has a university degree, a good job, and so on.

The various attitudes towards marriage prestations express different ways in which East Timorese elites in Dili perceive indigenous *usos e costumes*. Through these they negotiate their place in the world as well as the moments and positions they take in the process of imagining the nation. In our

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8 In a literal translation, firewood and hot water, “Aitukan Bee manas” is the tetum name of one of the gift-functions that constitute the marriage prestation in East Timor.

2008-2009 field research on Dili marriage prestations, we observed that individuals belonging to families that had migrated to the city less than twenty years before, and/or men over fifty tended to request *barlake* and value it. In contrast, those whose house/family had lived in Dili for more than twenty years and/or young people, and/or those associated with the women's movement, and/or the offspring of people locally designated as "assimilated" (*assimilado*) or mestizo (mixed blood) during the Portuguese colonization tended not to request *barlake* and devalue it.

Broadly speaking, we suggest that this variation in marriage prestations in Dili is connected to at least two factors. On the one hand, it reflects the diversity of form and content of the usual marriage prestations between the various ethno-linguistic groups living on East Timor borders with whom many Dili dwellers keep some sort of tie. On the other hand, this variation in Dili discourses reveals important aspects of the status of "assimilated," and now of "modern folk," as deployed in the auto-identification of certain population segments in the country. In the colonial period, those considered to be "assimilated" were people who adopted Christianity, mastered the Portuguese language, and, consequently, as the colonizers assumed, were "free from their *usos e costumes*." Hence, adhering to *barlake* and other forms of *usos e costumes* marked – and still does – social distinctions that are experienced with ambiguity and a certain sense of drama.

Justification to adopt marriage prestations is frequently based on the perception that it is a sort of tool for "mutual aid", for valuing women, maintaining the family united, and paying respect and deference to the ancestors. In turn, criticisms of *barlake* are often grounded on the view that it amounts to the selling of women. As such, it is judged to be illegitimate following the (Western) ideology that persons and things are incommensurable. Added to this is the reproach of what is seen as the irrational use of goods and resources attributed to hill people or the "uneducated" in Dili. This criticism implies that these people would endure long sacrifices in order to accumulate goods and money for the performance of marriage obligations, thus exposing themselves to unacceptable expenses with objectionable results: failure to send their children to school and feed them properly, living in precarious hygiene conditions, dressing poorly, etc. *Barlake* and other indigenous practices are thus regarded as irrational and backward.

Unlike post-independence Indonesia<sup>9</sup>, we notice in East Timor the growth of certain discourses among local elites that see the investment in ritual practices by those they reckon to be the country's poor as an obstacle to accumulate the minimum wealth necessary for "development." It is not by chance that different agents have put forth projects to domesticate these people, in many cases funded by international cooperation agencies for development which, in the past ten years, have been retrieving the idea of culture as a category utilized by government to classify and control the population.

### Modernizing the Tradition

If the meaning of *barlake* is controversial among Dili urbanites, its recognition by the state is no less problematical. One of the institutional sites where it is most difficult to interpret the possible meanings of marriage prestations is the courtroom where criminal suits for sexual assault usually bring out debates about the meaning of compensation agreements in previous attempts to settle the victims' marriage. We followed up cases in which such deals were hastily condemned by local and international judges who interpreted them as undue efforts to interfere in the judicial process (Simião, 2010; 2011). In such cases, the attitude of these law agents reflects in part a broader outlook that is common among East Timorese elites in positions of power who are reluctant to acknowledge as legitimate any versions of duties and justice that fall beyond the pale of the formal legal models. In some of these agents' discourse, the word *tradition* is associated with a backward way of life to be changed by state disciplinary action. Such a view is counterbalanced by the formal recognition of the *customs* of East Timorese *culture*, as stated in article 4 of the Constitution. An example of this is the speech of a Dili court judge who graduated during the Indonesian occupation and was appointed as judge in 2000 by the United Nations Transitory Administration in East Timor (UNTAET). We transcribe an especially revealing passage of the interview he gave us in 2009:

Customary law in East Timor is recognized by the Constitution, but we still need a specific legislation to put it in practice, and we don't have it yet. The Constitution regulates several principles, for instance, equal rights for men

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9 See, for instance, Bowen (1986) who points out the importance of recognizing cultural differences for integration policies in the first years of the independent Indonesia.

and women. These are the universal principles of modern times. But customary law, the *adat*, hasn't yet reached this modern evolution. It is mostly on the hills. People out there observe traditional law as they did in old times. But in town this observance has decreased because people here have a different outlook; they have to adapt to a new situation. Take, for instance, the relationship between the *liurai* [traditional authority] and the people. When I was in elementary school, people couldn't dress like the *liurai*. They had to wear a *lipa* [a kind of skirt]. If they dressed in pants, like the *liurai*, he would tell them to take them off. Later, as time went by, this custom was lost. In 1975 (...) the *liurais* didn't want hill people to be developed like themselves. This changed when people came to Dili. On the hills, people had no access to education, to knowledge, they were very backward. At that time, *liurai* pressure was very strong. But, in due time, that changed. But some people still keep their backward habits. Take, for instance, the *fetosan-umane* relationship. *Fetosan*, those who come into the bride's family have the obligation to give money, cattle, horses, goats; *umane* [the bride's brothers] must reciprocate with *tais* [local fabric] pigs, rice. This is true for some hill places. People say they are fulfilling a higher duty, but, as a consequence, this impoverishes them. Many of them don't have the economic means to do this. By local rules, they are forced to do it. But economic means are not the same for everybody. They have no freedom of choice. Elsewhere there is, for instance, the *barlake*. Women are like trade goods. This is at odds with modern times. Now, human rights tell us about people's rights, freedom of choice, but among many families one is told what to do. This does not follow modern evolution. In some places, when someone dies, tradition has it that people must buy things. They are asked for money and animals to respect tradition. For instance, there are demands for ten thousand dollars! What if one doesn't have this amount? In Dili, this is not mandatory. One can do it, but is not obliged to. On the hills, people without economic means have to do it against their will. This backwardness is the result of lack of education opportunities. Some people up on the hills have a lot of money from agriculture, but they don't change their way of life. They work hard, make lots of money, but don't use it to prepare for the future, like sending their children to school, buying them good clothes. They take the money and use it in festivities and in clan dues. They feast with lots of buffalo, they drink up their money to satisfy animist spirits. All this precludes development.

This judge regards this scenario as clearly divided into two sets of opposed values: one is "backward," characterized by obligations that disrespect

individual rights, serving the control and power interests of local authorities; the other is “modern”, “progressive”, characterized by individual freedom and concern for the nation’s future development. The former must be superseded with access to education or exposure to Dili’s urban ambiance<sup>10</sup>. The same sort of speech can be found among a generation of Timorese judges, trained during the UN administration, who tried to strengthen their own position as enlightened people, and also among Dili dwellers who present themselves as Dili people (*ema Dili*), as opposed to those they call *ema foho* (hill people). Thus, they reinforce the opposition between Dili and the hills as distinct moral spaces whose dynamic has structured diverse dimensions of the colonial and national imagination in East Timor (Silva 2012a).

Framing these discourses is the legacy of the colonial bifurcate state, as Mandani (1998) puts it. Built by European colonial administrations in different African and Asian latitudes – and with an intense continuity in post-colonial times – the bifurcated state created urban spaces as the locus of direct rule, positive law, religion, language, white people and individuals, as opposed to rural spaces, the woods or, in the East Timorese case, the hills. These remained as territories of indirect rule, tradition, customary law, paganism, local dialects etc. Hence, under Portuguese rule, Dili was ideally taken as a colonial town of mestizos and civilized people, where customary practices, such as the *barlake*, were said not to be carried out when its inhabitants were considered to be civilized.

Various heterotopias about human differences – as spelled out in the sciences of social classification (Roque 2011b) – were connected to this colonial praxis. In fact, they overlapped and nourished it by cultivating the ideal cleavage between urban and highland spaces. Roque (2011b:3,9) discusses certain nineteenth-century colonial and anthropological narratives that were meant to make human otherness in Timor and other islands in the region intelligible. He suggests that the hills “came to constitute a powerful locale of human alterity in racial enquires (...) [that] articulate anthropological ideas of primordial black races, colonial imageries of enmity and savagery and indigenous understandings of protection and alterity”. It is, then, worth

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10 The judge’s rhetoric contrasts with some practices of hybridized justice that exist already, such as the use of customary prohibitions for harvesting forest products or hunting (the so called “tara bandu”) by successful public policies for forest control, as Yoder (2007) shows for the district of Oecusse. However, there is a difference between discourses focusing on issues pertaining to rural areas and those with nationwide application.

pointing out that hill, as a toponymic reference, does not refer to the highlands alone. It is the general designation for places inhabited by uncontrolled or uncivilized people.

Similarly to the Dutch administration in the East Indies, along the years, the Portuguese colonial state in Timor changed its attitude towards *usos e costumes*. As stated by Roque (2011a), at the turn of the twentieth-century, the colonial government used in a mimetic way what it perceived to be local or traditional justice practices to settle disputes among the Timorese. After World War II, this policy seems to have shifted to a more explicitly assimilationist project, according to the luso-tropicalist ideology (Fernandes 2011, Silva and Mizuntani 2011). However, all along, local knowledge went through a meticulous process of objectification and reification that resulted in narratives on what the *usos e costumes* of various East Timorese indigenous peoples ought to be.

In various countries in Oceania and Southeast Asia to value *customary practices* represents a complex process that, to a certain extent, is undergoing a sort of revival (Davidson and Henley 2007). Recent studies emphasize the folklorization of cultural differences during the Suharto period, when East Timor was subjected to Jakarta's policies that minimized the importance of local practices in favor of a strong and centralized state. Since Suharto's fall, this policy has gone through fast and radical transformations mostly due to the growth of "traditional communities" (*masiarakat adat*) defense movements and decentralization of state administration. Supported by a global network of social movements for the defense of indigenous and traditional peoples, these communities were created on the basis of demands for differential rights and juridical and administrative autonomy.

UNTAET defended local cultural diversity, but with little impact on public management. It is no coincidence that UN agencies, such as The United Nations Development Program (UNDP), have recently financed studies on customary law in East Timor with the purpose of integrating it into the national judicial system. However, the country's juridical model never considered legal forms of pluralism.<sup>11</sup> All these policies favoring customary practices – whether domesticating or promoting cultural diversity – have,

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11 It is noteworthy that East Timor adopted the civil-law judicial model, which was much more resistant to incorporate forms of legal pluralism than that of common law. Thus, the idea of law as a means to civilize or educate became even more evident and based many of the legal actors' discourses against of "traditional" practices.

however, a common feature, namely, to confine alterity to a reified “locale” or “community,” according to the dominant notions of “tradition” and “culture.” We are then left with the question: what is exactly the content of “culture,” what are, after all, the “traditional” values and practices of East Timor?

The public sphere that has been built up in the country since 1999 presents many examples of disputes around the contents and values of “culture” – in which the meaning of the marriage prestations and its relation to, for instance, domestic violence, plays an important role (Simião 2007; Silva 2010b). Glimpses of these disputes could be seen from the first year of independent government. In 2002, for instance, the motto for the campaign against domestic violence was: “Gender-based Violence has no place in Timorese Culture” (“Violensia basea ba genero laos parte kultura Timor-Leste nian”). Using this slogan, the Office for Promotion of Equality, at that time run by Maria Domingas Fernandes Alves, cleverly refused to oppose “modernity” to “tradition”, choosing instead the strategy of redrawing “tradition” as part of an egalitarian modern framework (Simião 2005).

The same movement appears in Dili marriage prestations nowadays. Nevertheless, whatever the configuration of marriage prestations may be – with or without *barlake* – they are meant to respect tradition, although there is hardly any consensus on what these traditions consist of (Silva 2012b). Regarding this phenomenon, the account presented by one of our interlocutors in Dili about the way his family was trying to cope with *barlake* is noteworthy:

We try to reduce the amount of things exchanged, so as not to be a burden to people. (...) After all, we do this so that custom does not look completely bad. We need to modernize our customs, see them from the perspective of a new way of life.

The issue then – and apparently now – is the persistent *negotiation* of “culture” and a dispute about what the content of “culture” should be, whether to promote it or to condemn it.

## Negotiating the nation

The above data suggest that different discourses about “tradition” can be related to different ways in which a person positions him/herself vis-à-vis the multiple symbolic elements that are available in contemporary East-Timorese public spaces. In managing the distance between themselves and

such categories as city and hills, modern and backward, equality and hierarchy, diverse social actors control identification processes by using the idiom of “tradition”. As these different meanings of “tradition” also entail a challenge to public policies, we assume their use may uncover different ideas of what the nation ought to be. In this section we explore this possibility, although we admit that its potential lies in the future, rather than in the present-day process of East Timorese nation building.

East Timor local elites engaged in the nation-building process classify the country’s indigenous peoples through the use of colonial government categories, such as *usos e costumes* or *adat*. This is not unique to East Timor. In fact, it is typical of nation-building processes in many Oceania island countries. LiPuma (1995), Guidieri (quoted in Babadzan 1988), and Keesing and Tonkinson (1982) discussed the idea of *Kastom* as an important mediator in the modernization process in such countries as Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Fiji, etc. In post-colonial contexts, *kastom* emerges as the basis of a national culture displayed 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 as schools, museums, etc., thus promoting a new understanding of the past at the service of interests in the present of which cultural homogenization is an important part.

In various Oceania countries, the *kastom* ideology has hardened side by side with the ideology of development and national unity. In all of these countries, the highlands and the hills figure in the national imagination as foundational places. With the articulation of these three value-ideas – *kastom*, development and national unity – it is then possible to consolidate political projects that encourage alternative modernities, that is, processes of modernization without (supposedly) westernization<sup>12</sup>. 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.

In recent years international cooperation agencies and the East Timorese state itself have shown a growing interest in those cultural practices that can

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12 It is important to stress that the expectation of respect for custom emerged as the main source of national identity among third-grade students in Dili, in 2010, who participated in the survey about “Attitudes towards national identity among third-grade students in Melanesia and East Timor” directed by Michael Leach. For an analysis of the survey’s findings, see Leach 2012 (forthcoming).

be easily transformed into esthetic attractions, such as the restoration and building of sacred houses (*Uma Lulik*). On the one hand, these activities are displayed by institutional agents as icons of the vitality and cultural diversity of the Timorese identity – see, for instance, the documentary *Uma Lulik* by Victor de Sousa, supported and broadcast by the Portuguese Speaking Countries Community (Sousa, 2009) and the other entitled *Uma Lulik: futuro da tradição* (2011), sponsored by the Timorese Parliament. On the other hand, they help state agents to reinforce their ties with local networks in the *suku*<sup>13</sup> and village level. In ritual events such as the celebration of the building of sacred houses we have attended over the past three years, a special spot was always reserved for the representative of the state (usually the *suku* chief, but also personnel from Dili and international agencies). Beside the *Manefoum*, the *Umane*, and the *Festa Nain* sites – the usual three groups formed around specific local ceremonies – there is now a special hut for the *Estado* (the state).

Since marriage ties ultimately define the group structure at these ceremonies (*Monefoum-Umane*), support given by state and cooperation agencies to the ceremonies can have a significant impact on the intensification of the practices and obligations in marriage exchanges. Therefore, the above-quoted judge's complaints notwithstanding, local obligations can be fostered by state policies, albeit involuntarily. This is not surprising as long as "the state" is not a unified and coherent entity, but rather a cluster of different and often contradictory projects and perspectives. At any rate, it calls attention to the important links that exist between the current exchange system, the process of state formation, and the national imagination.

Recently, McWilliam (2011) suggested that the resurgence of exchange relationships and their networks of reciprocal obligations can be related – at least in the cases he examined in East Timor's eastern region – to local economic strategies to overcome the collapse of the market economy after Indonesia withdrew from East Timor in 1999. In part we agree with his argument, but the so-called re-emergence<sup>14</sup> of exchange obligations should be

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13 In East Timor, *suku* is the administrative unity between the subdistrict and the village. It comprises a number of villages.

14 The suggestion that customary practices are re-emerging in East Timor after independence restoration is quite common in various contemporary accounts on the country's sociality (Hicks 2007; Barnes 2010, among others). However, it is not yet clear how far these processes were ignored during the Indonesian period. Since the notion of customary practices is very imprecise, we deem it more appropriate to unpack it and consider which were less usual during Indonesian occupation (some were widely used, as

analyzed from a broader perspective, that is, in the context of the pervasiveness of what we could call the reciprocity ethos in East Timorese social life (Silva 2010a, 2012b). The idiom of “indebtedness” is frequently used by Dili urbanites to refer to different domains of sociality, from the electoral process and patronage relationships to marriage negotiations. It is also a common element in political conflicts, which, since 2002, have always involved complaints about breaches in reciprocal obligations (Silva 2010a).

On the other hand, negotiating reciprocal obligations in terms perceived as *traditional* or *customary* can be a way of asserting the distinctiveness of local Houses. Among several East Timorese urbanites, this identification process continues to have an Austronesian flavor, with its recurring references to origin, ancestry, alliance, and history as fundamental values (Fox 1980, 1995, 1996, 2009).

When state policies seize these “traditional” practices, they may enter a long process of imagining the nation. In this context, the use of colonial categories such as *usos e costumes* seems to be a return to the (not so distant) “past” to find a reference for the future. Thus, a comparison between the uses of “tradition” in East Timor and of *adat* in Indonesia and “traditional communities” in Brazil, may open up a new research perspective. In the last two countries, the idea of “tradition” can be understood as a semantic cluster that links rights and duties to history, law and land. This semantic cluster figures in the political scenario as important for advocacy in support of vulnerable rural people coping with state and international interests. At the same time, it plays a part in state formation and in the dynamics of people’s identification (Davidson & Henley, 2007). In East Timor, this seems not to be the case yet. “Tradition” has been used to refer to justice and nation in a context where the place of local identities is still to be defined. Further ethnographic research should reveal how close it will follow international trends.

### **The seeing eye as an organ of tradition: a glance at anthropological thinking in Brazil**

The analysis sketched above comes from a range of issues that has guided us as Brazilian researchers working in East Timor. In approaching marriage

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McWilliam [2005] demonstrates) as to better understand how they are being reshaped nowadays.

prestations in Dili and the process of nation building in East Timor, we have intensified a dialogue with certain subfields – the anthropology of colonialism and global forms of governance, the ethnology of Eastern Indonesia, and the history of nation building in Southeast Asia and Oceania – that are underexplored in Brazilian anthropologies, but are central elsewhere. On the other hand, many of our insights derive from certain traditions of anthropological research made in Brazil. To conclude this article, we would like to briefly comment on the specificity of this approach with regard to our training as anthropologists in Brazil. We have identified two aspects: concern with nation building and its relation to cultural diversity, citizenship, and public policies.

### **Nation building and indigenous societies**

As Mariza Peirano (1981) pointed out, anthropological studies in Brazil have been interested in nation building since the 1930s, especially with Gilberto Freyre's use of the concept of culture. For a long time, the search for a national integration narrative accounting for the country's historical and regional diversity pervaded research topics and theoretical production. A new outlook emerged, specifically in the studies of indigenous peoples that sought to understand not only their social organization and cosmologies, but also the dynamics of their relationships with the state and national society. In the late 1960s, Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira's (1974) work on social identity and interethnic relations launched a tradition of studies about conflict that seek to understand ethnic identities as bounded by tensions and conflicts between indigenous groups and the broader Brazilian imagined community. Along these lines, as Alcida Ramos (1990, 1998) pointed out that "anthropology made in Brazil" was particularly interested in the place the indigenous peoples occupy in the nation's imagination, while it was João Pacheco de Oliveira (2004) who stressed the issue of territories and cultural identities.

When we look into cases such as that of East Timor against this background, we are compelled to focus on the way certain discourses about "culture" or "tradition" relate to forms of imagining the nation. Certain features, (city versus hill, modernity versus tradition), appropriated in national East Timorese discourses about "culture", unveil the way in which local identities are articulated. This articulation seems to be geographic rather than ethnic. For instance, we do not hear a person who is temporarily based in Dili say he or she is a *Tokodede*, *Kemak*, *Tetum* etc, as we hear him or her say "I'm from

Liquiçá” or, more specifically, “of such and such a *village* of Liquiçá.” This geographical idiom is even applied to conflicts of various sorts, such as the 2006 crisis<sup>15</sup> that seems to have been triggered off by the opposition between east (*firaku*) and west (*kaladi*).

### Cultural diversity, citizenship, and public policies

Some branches of the anthropology made in Brazil focusing on interethnic relations have built a corpus of studies that relate categories such as rights, citizenship, and recognition. Recent policies reinforcing the rights of traditional peoples<sup>16</sup> have contributed to a growing awareness of how difficult it is for the legal and juridical system to incorporate the diversity of identities, land rights, and local systems of justice. A publication (Leite 2005) sponsored by the Brazilian Anthropological Association shows the wealth of these debates and the urgent need to project them onto the country’s academic scenario, particularly since the 1988 Federal Constitution.

In Brazil, these studies are informed by a strong tradition of research on social movements and the construction of citizenship, beginning in the urban anthropology of the 1980s (led by Eunice Durham [2004] and Ruth Cardoso [1983]). This research approach has engendered studies in political anthropology with new approaches about social values and practices in contexts traditionally the object of other social sciences. Examples are electoral processes, justice and conflict resolution, the dynamics and discourse of non-governmental organizations, development, global flows of people and values. In sum, they are nodal points between so-called “civil society” and the “state.” These studies provide important tools for the analysis of sociality and the incorporation of broader symbolic and social representations into the dynamics of localized policies.

With this set of concerns in mind, our studies on East Timor have been framed by questions about the articulation of discourses by institutional agents with those of ordinary people on social practices and their connection to projects to bring about state and nation political integration. In the

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15 In 2006, conflicts that originated inside the Timorese army and police force, resulted in the dissolution of the first constitutional government and the emergence of about 120.000 displaced people. In the local analysis of the crisis, it was common to explain it as being triggered off by tensions between people from the west of the country (*loromonu/kaladi*) and those from the east (*lorosae/firaku*)

16 For example, policies to regulate procedures of recognition and demarcation of indigenous lands and those of the so-called “quilombolas” – slave-descendent black communities.

East Timorese case, the absence of the indigenous peoples as a legal concept since the 1960s has resulted in the inclusion of all East Timorese as citizens, regardless of their ethnic/and/or cultural differences. Thus, unlike the Indonesia *adat* revivalist movement, for instance, where local identities were empowered by the discourse of a global network of social movements for traditional peoples' self-determination, the East Timorese debate about state recognition of cultural traditions was somewhat generic, as in the proposed legislation to incorporate customary law for the inclusion in the judicial system, without contradiction with existing laws and practices. This methodological approach has also led us to see the dilemmas related to the management of local practices for nation building purposes revealed in the controversies about marriage exchanges among Dili elites.

These outstanding features are immediately detected by someone who has been trained in some of the Brazilian styles of anthropology of which the present analysis is a product.

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## About the authors

Kelly Silva is assistant professor of social anthropology at the University of Brasilia. She is currently a visiting fellow of The Australian National University (ANU) at the School of Culture, History and Language/College of Asia and Pacific. She is also a researcher of the National Institute for Comparative Studies in Conflict Resolution (INCT/InEAC). Since 2002, she has done research on processes of invention, transposition and subversion of modernity in East Timor, focusing on themes such as state formation, nation building, international cooperation, and elite dynamics. She is the author of a number of articles in academic journals and of the following books: *As nações desunidas. Práticas da ONU e a estruturação do Estado em Timor-Leste* (Brazil. Editora UFMG, forthcoming); *Ita maun alin. O livro do irmão mais novo. Afinidades Antropológicas em torno de Timor-Leste* (co-edited with Lucio Sousa. Portugal. Edições Colibri, 2011); *Timor-Leste por trás do palco: cooperação internacional e a dialética da construção do Estado* (co-edited with Daniel Simião. Brazil. Editora UFMG, 2007). Email: [kellysa@uol.com.br](mailto:kellysa@uol.com.br)

Daniel S. Simião, PhD in social anthropology, is assistant professor at the Department of Anthropology, University of Brasilia, Brazil. He has done research in East Timor since 2002, focusing mainly on gender and justice. He is co-editor, with Kelly Silva, of *Timor-Leste por Trás do Palco* published in Brazil (Editora UFMG, 2007) and has published several articles on the building of the justice systems and domestic violence in East Timor. He is also a researcher of the National Institute for Comparative Studies in Conflict Resolution (INCT/InEAC), and of the Brazilian Agency for Scientific Development (CNPq). Email: [simiao@unb.br](mailto:simiao@unb.br)