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## Expressions of the ‘good life’ and visions of the future: Reflections from Dili and Uatolari

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In this chapter, we take up Arjun Appadurai’s (2013) call for a better anthropological understanding of the construction of the future as a ‘cultural fact’ and the implications of this for what he calls people’s ‘capacity to aspire’ (ibid.: 290) – their ability to mobilise resources in order to make strategic decisions about their future. Appadurai argues that debate and discussion around ‘futures’ is often dominated by ‘plans, goals and targets’ – language that is associated with development. Culture, on the other hand, is too readily associated with ‘habit, custom, heritage and tradition’, and therefore dismissed as grounded in the past. Yet the future cannot be other than ‘cultural’ because it is ‘in culture that ideas of the future, as much as the past, are embedded and nurtured’ (ibid.: 179–180). It is within ‘culture’, understood broadly as local systems of value, meaning and communication, that people are enabled or constrained in their ‘capacity to aspire’.

In our exploration of the construction of the future as a cultural fact, we consider the significance of three Tetun idioms – *matak-malirin* (‘the green and cool’), *tempu rai-diak* (‘the tranquil time’) and *halerik* (‘lament’) – in shaping people’s hopes and desires of the future in the context of the widespread revitalisation and recalibration of customary

beliefs and practices in independence-era Timor-Leste. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Dili and Babulo, Uatolari subdistrict, we suggest that while the material articulation of these hopes and desires and the individual or collective capacity to mobilise resources to achieve them are enabled or constrained by people's structural position in society, ideas about the future continue to be shaped by a shared cultural framework and vision for what constitutes a 'good life'.

## Customary renewal in post-occupation Timor-Leste: The case of Babulo

Since 1999, the rebuilding of ancestral or origin houses in Babulo has occurred at a remarkable rate. As of 2015, at least 26 houses have been rebuilt. The length and complexity of the house-building process is determined by a variety of factors: the choice of particular types of timber and roofing materials; their procurement from specific forested areas; the need to follow a certain order of construction and conduct the relevant rituals; and the necessity of involving all house members, representatives from other houses of the same origin group and houses related through marriage to ensure no outstanding conflicts exist between these groups. If we consider the time, effort and resources invested in every house reconstruction, we can begin to understand the centrality of this process to post-occupation social and ritual life.

Acts of customary renewal represent a cultural response to the uncertainties and opportunities created by independence (see Barnes 2017; Bovensiepen 2015). By 'cultural response', we mean that these acts are motivated by 'aspirations and desires' that 'grow out of [people's] own structures of life' (Ortner 2006: 147). These 'structures of life' constitute the cultural framework within which the people of Babulo operate. This framework is not immutable or fixed, but rooted in human experience and continually shaped by it. Moreover, it is inseparable from patterns of distribution of material resources, and therefore intimately bound to issues of power (Appadurai 2013; Bourdieu 1979; Ortner 2006). This 'cultural' response to independence is not motivated by a desire to re-create the past in the present; rather, it represents an attempt to draw on the past in order to negotiate the future (Appadurai 2013; Geertz 1973; Weiner 1992). We consider the significance of three cultural expressions – *matak-malirin* ('the green and cool'), *tempu rai-diak* ('the tranquil

time') and *halerik* ('the lament') – in the context of the experiences of the people of Babulo, living both in Dili and their native village, to explore their engagement with local processes of customary renewal and the implications of this for their 'capacity to aspire'. We argue that renewed participation in customary practices reveals a continued commitment to a shared cultural framework and shared vision for what constitutes a 'good life'. However, acts of customary renewal are also sites for the production of consensus and demonstrate the open and dynamic nature of local culture (Appadurai 2013).

### *Matak-malirin* ('the green and cool')

One local understanding of the 'good life' is expressed in the concept of *matak-malirin* – *matak* meaning 'newly green' or 'sprouting', and *malirin* meaning 'cool'. The concept of *matak-malirin* refers to 'a state of good health and productive life energy' (see Kehi and Palmer 2012: 447; Trindade 2014; Vroklage 1952). Also referred to in Naueti as *bua-malu* (betel leaves and areca nuts), this concept combines a sense of 'coolness', associated with calm and peace, with the 'newly green' or 'sprouting', which represents the idea of fertility and bounty (Trindade 2014). The categorical opposite of 'coolness' is 'heat', which symbolises danger and potential violence – a state of disorder in which categorical distinctions run the risk of mixing or being blurred (Bovensiepen 2015; Douglas 2005).

The concept of *matak-malirin* draws on a vision of society where life, understood as generative potential, is continually given, received, reciprocated and renewed through exchange or transmission (Traube 1986: 130). This in an 'inclusive' society that involves a cycle of exchanges across human-to-human and human-to-non-human relations (Palmer 2015; Barnes 2017; Trindade 2015). A state of *matak-malirin* can be achieved through participation in ritual and adherence to local norms and practices that serve to regulate these exchanges or, in other words, to sustain the 'flow of life'. In the context of communal rituals, such as rice or corn harvest (Tetun: *sau hare* or *sau batar*), *matak-malirin* is distributed to participants in the form of a portion of the sacrificial meal and ritually blessed betel leaves and areca nut.

Yet the practical and visible articulation of how *matak-malirin* might be achieved is contextually contingent, influenced by individual and familiar life trajectories and structural positions within society. What constitutes

a state of *matak-malirin* for a person from Babulo living in Dili with regular employment is not necessarily the same as a person living in the village, whose livelihood depends on near-subsistence agriculture and foraging. Those who live a modern life in Dili no longer hope for a better harvest, but instead aim to have a nice job in an air-conditioned office, a nice car to drive and a comfortable house, etc. Influenced by global images of what constitutes a 'good life', a government employee from Babulo, living in Dili or moving between rural and urban areas, may aspire to a degree of commercial and wealth-based prosperity, social mobility, personal autonomy and recognition. A farmer in Babulo, on the other hand, may hope for a successful harvest and an opportunity to earn some cash income in order to send his or her children to school. However, the aspirations of both employee and farmer continue to be textured by deeply embedded local values, beliefs and ethics that require investment in social and symbolic resources, rather than material ones.

People from rural areas living in Dili regularly return to their village to participate in collective rituals, such as the corn and rice harvest (Naueti: *masi eka rae* and *masi hare*). Additionally, they contribute in cash or kind (usually collectively) to house rebuilding and maintenance, and they partake in the life cycle ceremonial exchanges (Tetun: *lia moris*, *lia mate*) that involve families and houses related by birth or marriage. They do so for the same reasons as those who remain in rural areas and also participate in these rituals: they believe that failure to engage in the social and symbolic promotion of life increases the risk of both social exclusion and ancestral or divine retribution in the form of infertility or death.

As Palmer points out, continued participation and investment in the 'customary economy' runs counter to 'neoliberal logics' and 'capitalist certainty' (Palmer 2015: 23). Surplus from agriculture, wage labour, remittances and business enterprises is revitalising the customary economy and redistributing wealth in ways which challenge capitalist principles (ibid.). Within this customary economy, people seek to reinvigorate relations (with the living and the dead), not necessarily for the short-term economic benefits these might provide, but for the long-term security they represent (Gudeman 2001; McWilliam 2011: 755).

This process is not without its imbalances and tensions. A conception of society based on the generation and regeneration of life provides a cultural framework for structuring action in the social world, but is also the basis of social distinctions and inequalities (Bourdieu 1979; Ortner 2006).

The resurgent 'customary economy' has also become a site of struggle over symbolic and material resources. Ceremonial occasions and ritual exchanges become opportunities for relative ostentation and competitive gift-giving aimed at affirming, contesting, negotiating or recalibrating status and/or political influence (see also McWilliam 2011). Many people complain of the burden of the multiple and often costly demands for contributions to the cycle of life and death rituals, which underpin the customary economy and constrain rather than enable their vision of the 'good life'. Nevertheless, it is the excesses of the system rather than the system itself that tend to be the object of resentment and criticism.

### *Tempu rai-diak* ('the tranquil time')

One of the distinctive features of customary renewal in Babulo is the reprisal of domain-wide ceremonies, including the seasonal corn and rice harvest festivals and a ceremony of thanksgiving, usually conducted only every 10–15 years, to the founder-ancestors of the ritual domain of Babulo Mane Hitu, which encompasses much of the territory of the present village (*suku*) of Babulo. These constitute key ceremonies during which *matak-malirin* is requested from the founder-ancestors of the domain and symbolically distributed to participants in the form of blessings with water and betel-nut spittle as well as ritually prepared meat, corn and/or rice, betel nuts and betel leaves (Naueti: *bua nua malus*). When people are blessed with *matak-malirin*, they believe they are living in *tempu rai-diak*.

The driving force behind this reprisal has come from members of the senior houses of the Daralari origin group, who are considered to be the descendants of the founder-ancestors of the ritual domain. The Naueti term *rea netana*, meaning 'source of the earth', is used to describe members of the senior houses of the Daralari origin group, and the formal ritual title *rea mumu*, *rea uatu* ('iron rod of the earth, stone of land') is bestowed on one representative of this group who operates in collaboration and consultation with two or three elders, ritual specialists of his descent group. The notion of *rea netana*, understood as 'source of the land' or 'master of the land', exists in varying forms throughout East Timor and the Austronesian cultural sphere more broadly (Lewis 1988; Vischer 2009). It is said that in the not-so-distant past, the source of the land held overarching rights to the allocation and apportionment of land and natural resources. In some cases, they also collected tribute and

were afforded the right to demand labour and other services from those living within their domain. Their principal role, however, was that of overseeing collective rituals to ensure the prosperity of their domain and its people as a whole (cf. McWilliam 1991). In parts of Timor-Leste, the ritual management of customary domains complemented and supported the maintenance of a distinct executive political authority (Traube 1986). In other areas, it is claimed that ritual and political authority were one and the same.

Daralari claims to emplaced authority are based on narratives of origin that establish the founder-ancestors of the domain as a source of life and fertility (see Barnes 2017). The power and authority of the Daralari source of the land depend on their capacity to ensure that the basis of their claims is recognised and accepted by others. It is by asserting their direct relationship to the founder-ancestors through the possession of sacred objects and knowledge that the Daralari source of the land maintain their control over the means to access the source of life and fertility and bestow *matak-malirin* on others (cf. Godelier 1999: 187).

Since independence, the Daralari source of the land have been extremely strategic in the way they have sought public acknowledgement and recognition of their status in relation to other groups living within their domain, as well as to outsiders. For example, they have sought to reassert their claims to emplaced authority in relation to displaced communities living within their domain regarding the management of local water sources; in relation to neighbouring groups regarding the demarcation of sacred ancestral sites; and in relation to the Church regarding the right to receive baptismal certificates – which remain the most accessible means of obtaining legal recognition as a person by the state (see Barnes 2017).

The Daralari source of the land are motivated by a desire, which also shaped their political choices during the process of decolonisation that followed the Carnation Revolution in Portugal, as well as during the Indonesian occupation. In conversation with the most senior Daralari elder about his choice to join Fretilin (*Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente*) in 1974, he described how representatives from all the major parties came to Babulo during the brief yet tumultuous period of time between the Carnation Revolution in April 1974 and the Indonesian invasion in December 1975:

[T]hey [the parties] came distributing party membership cards. I listened to what they all had to say, but I chose Fretilin because they used the phrase *ukun rasik a'an* ['self-government']. They were the only ones who told us we should govern ourselves, according to our own customs. That is what we wanted then and what we want now. (Carlos Amaral, pers. comm., 2006)

The implication of Carlos's statement was a desire to return to a pre-colonial (or, at the very least, pre-1910) past, when the land and its people were ruled by the law of *ukun* (literally, 'rule, regulate') and *bandu* (literally, 'forbidden'), and the source of the land held both ritual and political power over the domain.

The concept of *tempu rai-diak* is often used to refer to an 'imagined' or idealised past. For example, *tempu rai-diak* is frequently used to describe *tempu beiala sira* ('the time of the ancestors') – an imagined time of peace where there was no shortage of food, no war and no violence, when people could 'freely go to their farms without fear'. As Babo-Soares (2003: 89) describes it:

[L]ife in the *beiala* period is portrayed as peaceful, calm and governed by the rules of *ukun* (lit., rule, regulate) and *bandu* (lit., forbidden) or customary law. Emphasis is placed on the point that in the time of the ancestors life was peaceful, calm and bountiful. There was no shortage of food and the people lived a good life. This is the kind of life later interrupted by the invasion of outsiders. In public conversations, people refer back to the period of *beiala* as the time of *rai diak* (lit., earth/soil good) or peaceful times without making a reference to the opposite period, *raia at* (lit., earth/soil bad) or bad times. The colonial period is generally referred to as the time of war, famine and so on.

It makes sense why the time of the ancestors might be portrayed in such a way. In the pre-colonial past, the population of Timor was much smaller; competition for food, land and other natural resources was not as intense as it is today. While there were undoubtedly conflicts during this time, peace and tranquillity tend to be more easily created and maintained, or at the very least contained, when natural resources are abundant.

*Tempu rai-diak* does not necessarily place emphasis on the lack of conflict, but rather on the existence of a stable social order regulated by the law or the rules of *ukun* and *bandu*. When used to differentiate between colonial periods, some people of an older generation refer to the Portuguese colonial period as *tempu rai-diak*, despite the fact that during this time

there was intra-Timorese conflict, people were traded as slaves in exchange for gunpowder, and ammunition and rebellions were mounted against the colonial order and bloodily repressed. Yet, in comparison to the Indonesian occupation, when over 200,000 people died as a direct consequence of war and famine (CAVR 2013), the Portuguese period – particularly when the colonial authorities ruled the country indirectly through local kings and potentates (*liurai*) – was relatively peaceful. Nevertheless, for those born or raised during the Indonesian occupation and those who did not experience the real or imagined ‘peace’ of the Portuguese colonial era, such as former slaves, *tempu rai-diak* does not lie in the past, but in the present.

Contemporary processes of customary renewal draw on particular interpretations of the past not in order to re-create the past in the present, but rather to provide moral validation to contemporary institutions or political interests; they can even serve as a basis for the creation of new values (Reid and Marr 1979, cited in Babo-Soares 2003: 108).

## *Halerik* (‘lament’)

When the Timorese sense that they are not blessed with *matak-malirin* or are not living in *tempu rai-diak*, they may *halerik* (‘sing their lament’). *Halerik* (*ha*: ‘to do’, *lerik*: ‘lament’) refers to the singing or chanting of suffering. It is used to seek external assistance, and it represents the voice of the powerless (*ema kbi’it laek*) to the powerful (*ema bo’ot*). Often it is women, children or the elderly who perform or vocalise *halerik* when they face difficulties in their life. *Halerik* speaks out the truth and describes social, economic and political problems. When watching local television news in Timor-Leste, it is common to hear people say ‘*Rona netik ami nia halerik*’ (‘Please listen to our *halerik*’).

This chanting of suffering, or *halerik*, can be expressed as song, poetry, crying (during funerals) or singing with dancing (*dahur*). It also sung in church during mass. In song, for example, we can see the famous Timorese *halerik* ‘*E Foho Ramelau*’ (‘Eh Mount Ramelau’) in the lines ‘*Tansa Timoroan atan ba bebeik, tansa Timoroan terus ba bebeik*’ (‘Why are Timorese still enslaved, why do Timorese still suffer?’). When people sing this song and repeat such an expression over and over, it gives them strength to fight for a better future.

There are differences between the uses of *halerik* during the Indonesian occupation and after independence. During Indonesian occupation, *halerik* focused on the fight for freedom or self-determination (*ukun rasikan*), the end of violence (*terus*) caused by the Indonesians, and the economic burden (*susar*) caused by war and displacement. After independence, the tone of *halerik* has changed – today's *halerik* revolves around the basic needs of the *ema kbi'it laek sira* (powerless).

Domain-wide ceremonies such as the aforementioned seasonal corn and rice harvest ceremonies (Naueti: *masi eka rae* and *masi hare*) are performed by the source of the land on behalf of the origin groups that live within the ritual domain of Babulo. These communal ceremonies, which involve invocation, sacrifice, commensality and the redistribution of *matak-malirin* in the form of *bua-malus* (areca nut and betel leaves) and ritually transformed food, also serve to create and reaffirm the social organisation of the domain. At the same time, these occasions articulate and emphasise the differences in rank and status that exist between groups.

By taking part in these ceremonies (and other acts of customary renewal, such as house-building, which recognise hierarchy and precedence between houses) and investing considerable resources in them, participants from the various origin groups involved appear to accept the cultural framework upon which the power and authority of the Daralari source of the land is constructed and, consequently, their position of relative subordination in relation to the Daralari source of the land (see Rappaport 1999). Yet the pursuit of *matak-malirin* does not necessarily imply 'over-attachment' or misplaced loyalty towards dominant cultural norms (Appadurai 2013). Acceptance is often circumscribed, and the same acts of renewal that play a critical role in enabling the Daralari source of the land to reassert their claims to emplaced authority also provide a performative medium for negotiation and contestation (see Bourdieu 1979; Bovensiepen 2015).

During the rice harvest ceremony in 2008, the people of Roma hamlet, descendants of a group of former slaves (Naueti: *ata*) who formerly held no position in local orders of precedence, were called by name to receive their portion of the ritual meal and ancestral blessings. Although the Roma people usually receive ancestral blessings during ritual cooling ceremonies in the form of holy water and betel-nut spittle, this was the first time they had been called out by name to receive a portion of the

ritually transformed meal. The conditions of their incorporation – on this occasion, at least – were related to the particular context in which the rice harvest was taking place.

The ceremony took place a few weeks after a number of settlements in Babulo and the neighbouring village of Uaitame had been attacked and burnt down, allegedly by radical members of the Fretilin party, during the course of the presidential election campaign. During the unrest, the Daralari source of the land had decided to remove sacred objects from the sacred Daralari houses for safekeeping in the forest. It was decided that during the rice harvest ceremony, the objects would be replaced and the land would be ‘made cool’ once again. At the time of the attacks, the people of Roma hamlet had rallied around the Daralari source of the land and joined other groups in the defence of the *suku*.

The people of Roma hamlet are sometimes referred to by other groups as the ‘*aldeia* [hamlet] without land’. Unlike the majority of the rest of the *suku* population, the people of Roma hamlet are largely of Makassae, rather than Naueti, descent. According to one history of the origins of this group, the Roma ancestors served a *liurai* from Babulo who lived in exile near Quelicai. When this *liurai* was invited to return and rule over the people of Babulo, it is said he agreed on the condition that he could bring his ‘own people’, who ‘stuck to him like seeds of a long grass’. There are no Roma ‘house’ structures in Babulo. Historically, members of this group were incorporated into their masters’ houses, albeit without the same privileges and duties. The Roma were not granted specific areas of land on which to farm or settle, but instead were servants to the chiefly houses of Babulo. Their main task was to watch over the herds of buffalo that belonged to their masters. In time, the descendants of the Roma started farming near the animal pastures and enclosures they guarded. Many among this group now claim these plots of land as their own based on long-term occupancy rights.

The hamlet of Roma was created after independence by the then-Fretilin-dominated government in recognition of the Roma people’s role in the struggle for independence. There is no doubt that the aspiration of the people of Roma hamlet resonated with Fretilin’s rhetoric concerning putting an end ‘to all forms of domination of our people’ (Jolliffe 1978: 331). However, despite their gains in achieving recognition in the eyes of the state and (to a degree) the Daralari source of the land, the people of Roma hamlet remain marginalised within the *suku*. Although

there is a general consensus that they should no longer be referred to as such, members of core origin groups, including the Daralari source of the land, continue to identify the people of Roma hamlet as former slaves. Senior Daralari men and women suggest that slavery disappeared during the Indonesian occupation. They argue that during this time, people 'like the Roma' were given the same opportunities as everybody else. In particular, they were able to access education and improve their situation through economic activity and employment.

Nevertheless, social exclusion remains a reality for many members of Roma hamlet. In 2006, members of the principal house of Aha Bu'u (the ancestral house of the former *liurai* and *chefe suco* of Babulo) began collecting material to rebuild their ancestral house. In the past, the descendants of the people of Roma hamlet who served that house of Aha Bu'u as slaves would have done much of this work without payment. However, in recognition of their right to receive remuneration for their labour, the headman of Aha Bu'u had arranged with the new headman of Roma hamlet to recruit members of the hamlet to collect *unu* (Tetun: *tali metan*; botanical: *Arenga pinnata*), a type of fibre obtained from black sugar palm, for which they would receive cash in exchange. But not all those who collected *unu* were treated equally.

In 2007, a man from Roma, who had collected *unu* for the house at Aha Bu'u but was refused payment, killed the hamlet chief of Roma. In the village, rumours began to spread about the incident. The general agreement was that the suspect, who immediately turned himself in to the local police, had acted out of desperation. A witness to the incident said that the suspect had approached the hamlet chief to discuss the payment for some *unu* he had collected for the house of Aha Bu'u, but the hamlet chief informed the suspect that he was not permitted to collect *unu* and refused to pay him. At this, the suspect grew agitated, threatening the hamlet chief and declaring, 'What can I do? I have no land to farm and I cannot collect *unu*? How am I going to feed my family?' He then struck the hamlet chief with his machete and broke down. The man's desperation was echoed in the lament (*halerik*) of his distraught wife.

The incident prompted much discussion about the predicament of those who do not have access to land or depend on others to gain access to land and other resources within the village. It transpired that the suspect did in fact farm a small piece of land; furthermore, he had 11 children to clothe, feed and send to school, and no means of earning cash. There were some

in the village who suggested that, as citizens of independent Timor-Leste, everyone had the same rights to access land and other natural resources, while a member of one of the senior Daralari houses argued that if the Roma wanted land and other resources, they should return to their village of origin.

The people of the hamlet of Roma have sought recognition from both the state and the Daralari source of the land. While these two paths to recognition might seem incommensurable, they are both critical to the people of Roma's vision of the future and their capacity to aspire to greater opportunity. The people of Roma hamlet continue to seek ancestral blessings from the Daralari source of the land because they continue to rely on the fertility and bounty of the land – and because they believe that there is more at stake than their livelihoods. In seeking recognition and protection of state-sanctioned rights, however, they have been able to open up an arena for debate and inquiry regarding their position within the ritual community. Change will not happen overnight, but it is possible to suggest that a platform for the 'production of consensus' is in the making (Appadurai 2013: 184).

## Conclusion

Although the pursuit of *matak-malirin* may continue to be a common aspiration of all the people of Babulo, the material articulation of this desire and individual or collective 'capacity to aspire' to achieve their goals, expressed as *tempu rai-diak*, is enabled or constrained by their structural position within society. The 'capacity to aspire' for people of Babulo is deeply relational: the Daralari source of the land realise that their authority and legitimacy rely on the acknowledgement and recognition of others, yet they are well aware that their efforts to revitalise customary relations and practices are of little importance if people living within their domain do not *fiar* (Portuguese: 'trust, rely on'), in the sense of both belief and trust (see Traube 2017: 47). Similarly, the people of Roma hamlet also know that their access to land and resources within the domain of Babulo depends on seeking recognition from the state and the Daralari source of the land realise that their authority and legitimacy rely on the acknowledgement and recognition of others, yet they are well aware that their efforts to revitalise customary relations and practices are of little importance if people living within their domain do not *fiar*

(Portuguese/Tetum: 'trust, rely on'). The loan-word *fiar* has a complex meaning, which encompasses both belief and trust (see Traube 2017: 47). Under these circumstances, a solution to the challenge of improving the socioeconomic conditions of subaltern groups may lie in working with these structures rather than against them (Appadurai 2013).

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