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The politics of culture and the culture of politics—a case study of gender and politics in Lospalos, Timor-Leste

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Analysis

The politics of culture and the culture of politics—a case study of gender and politics in Lospalos, Timor-Leste

Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes

In Timor-Leste the fight against Indonesian occupation, social conservatism, the persistence of ethnic and cultural mores and the prioritisation of caste and adat have shaped gender relations in both public and private life. In the early struggle for power after independence women fought long and hard for recognition as important political actors and concomitantly the implementation of a policy of affirmative action to ensure their place in the new National Parliament—a battle initially sidelined and defeated by primarily international political androcentricity.

Recent achievements of almost 30 per cent representation of women in the National Parliament demonstrate that women have come a long way in a very short time.¹ Nevertheless, the problems of regional political and socio-economic incorporation have impeded the establishment of a full and complete citizenship for women. This paper considers how the politics of culture and traditional mores in a post-conflict situation can determine and shape the political struggle for gender equity both within and across the different generations of Timorese men and women.

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In August 1999 a landmark referendum saw 78.5 per cent of the Timorese population vote in favour of independence signalling the beginning of the end of the Indonesian military occupation of East Timor. The brutality which characterised the occupation and led to the death of over 180,000² Timorese through famine, torture, disease and assassination fuelled the ‘scorched earth policy’ of the bitter military withdrawal of September 1999, when they destroyed 75 per cent of the infrastructure,³ rendered the health and education institutions inoperable and killed at least 1400 Timorese men and women. As Fernandes Alves et al poignantly recall:

*Sadly, widespread massacres and killing started immediately after the long awaited decision and the surroundings were turned into ash. Not a single person was around in the streets—only the sound of birds and the cry of dogs could be heard [...] Darkness, bloodshed, poverty, hunger, death and suffering—all this has ended with this new day, our independence, our liberation.*⁴

From the ashes of occupation rose the high expectations of both men and women in reconstructing a truly independent Timorese nation. Yet for women the stakes were much higher. The substantive role and sacrifice of women through their participation in both direct action and the armed struggle for independence had, in a suspended political reality, offered women a lived practical equality with men. Yet in the construction of a new democratic nation, how far might this be consolidated with respect to women’s equality of status and terms of citizenship in the post-independence period?

The establishment of the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor [UNTAET] to oversee the post-conflict reconstruction of the country was without precedent both in terms of the powers invested in the administration and its broad remit to support capacity-building initiatives for the move towards self-governance, create the conditions for sustainable development and support the development of social and civil services. Moreover, in accordance with SCR 1325 the Administration would undertake its peacekeeping mission incorporating the principles of gender equality. This was mainly achieved through a broad range of training under the rubrics of a gender mainstreaming strategy and included within this was training across all departments of the central administration, including all UN staff and some NGOs.⁵

Important as part of this process was the commitment to establish a Gender Affairs Unit within UNTAET which would oversee gender mainstreaming and promote gender equality

and women's empowerment. Although under-resourced and short-lived it set an important precedent and led to the establishment of the Office for the Promotion of Equality [OPE] located within the Prime Ministerial Office on the election of the independent government of Timor-Leste in 2002. The OPE became a formidable force; following the principles of the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women [CEDAW] it ensures the mainstreaming of gender in the development of new legislation, policy and procedures.⁶

For the UN, the UNTAET mission in Timor was deemed a success but criticism of the Administration by others has been scathing both generally, being defined by one author as 'benevolent colonialism',⁷ and more specifically countering 'insider' claims of gender sensitivity.⁸ Groves, for example, argues that UNTAET was technically a military peacekeeping operation responsible for post-conflict reconstruction. Essentially, it supported an anomalous and contradictory transitional political environment in Timor-Leste within which there was little pretence of gender inclusion or equity:

Women's historic involvement in the Timor-Leste fight for independence was unquestionable however they had been excluded in the international and national dialogue for peace. Women not already within the elite group were also excluded from the military and administrative structures of UNTAET and CNRT. At no level were women outside of the Fretilin hierarchy even being consulted in the process of national reconciliation or reconstruction. Women joked that they were not even included as token 'dolls' during the reconstruction and reconciliation processes.⁹

Thus, the Administration in the writing of the new Constitution, the process of state building and the institution of a functioning democracy chose which organisations and individuals it would consult with and in the final analysis all decisions were made by UNTAET. In sum, the reconstruction of Timor-Leste was undertaken according to international values and principles none more so than that of gender equality.

The socio-political distancing between an urbane Dili and the rest of Timor-Leste, depicted as resistant and cynical, began with the installation of UNTAET and reached its apotheosis in the eruption of conflict and the 'troubles' in April 2006. For the majority of the Timorese population situated outside of Dili, the fulcrum of socio-political change, the process of reconstruction was one of Timorisation, the relocation of customary law (adat) and cultural values and practices as central to the lives and

well-being of the ethnic communities across the districts and sucos of Timor-Leste. The resurgence influence of adat among the majority of the Timorese population was considered lamentable by the UN, INGOs and NGOs alike.¹⁰ Their total engagement in the top down process of nation building, especially the construction of a democratic political system and the development of legal institutions proceeded at the expense of a more inclusive and consultative programme of Timorese social and political development.

It was not so much that the population in districts outside of Dili were resistant to change but rather that the main forms of communication were either unintelligible or unavailable to the majority of the Timorese population. The question of language, for example, made communication difficult not least in written form. Designating Portuguese as the official language and Tetum the national language, the former spoken principally in Dili and the latter 'understood' by the majority of the Timorese population, was extremely problematic.¹¹ Moreover, in view of the fact that the number of male Portuguese speakers outnumbered that of female speakers by five to one, women were at a significant disadvantage. The Constitution, for example, was written in Portuguese and as such there was limited consultation outside of Dili, which mainly consisted of a discussion around a verbal précis of the main articles of the draft Constitution.¹² The situation was exacerbated by a severely compromised infrastructure, most especially that of telecommunications and media resources, which in a post-conflict political environment served only to further isolate Dili from the rest of Timor-Leste. As one community leader bemoaned:

*Here in Lospalos we are completely isolated, with the problem of transport and electricity things are every difficult [...] We all have the parabolic aials— what for?—How can we change anything if people cannot see what is going on in the rest of the country let alone the rest of the world. People here are badly informed at best [...]*¹³

The expectation that independence would act as a conduit for new ideas, changing perspectives and 'mindsets' was a hope too far for the devastated rural communities still reeling from the brutality and economic devastation of Indonesian occupation. The post-independence mantra of 'normalisation' in rural communities signalled the shoring up of the predominant patriarchal traditions and a resurgence of adat in which culturally specific social constructions of gender were based on the concept of complementarity rather than equality. It is precisely within this cultural conjecture that Timorese women were caught in the cusp of change.

In the aforementioned political climate, the 'new' gender discourse, ideas of democracy and human rights fell on fallow ground. In the struggle for political influence and economic survival gender simply was not on the agenda. As a Timorese Oxfam worker commented at a conference in 2005:

*Traditionally in Timor, gender is seen as a male concept that foreigners are imposing on people as a trade off for support in terms of funding and technical assistance. Along with terms such as 'human rights' and 'democracy' the term gender sits on a bookshelf with a donor logo plastered on the front.*¹⁴

In view of women's foremost role in the Timorese resistance to colonialism and the battle for independence, women were faced with an uphill struggle to ensure their inclusion in the political reconstruction of the nation on equal terms. Within a highly centralised political model of reconstruction ideas of gender equality and political inclusion were to find far greater acceptance in the national political arena located in Dili than in the outlying districts where patriarchal traditions would predominate in local politics.

In the case of Lospalos, a sub-district which suffered inordinately in the fight against Indonesian occupation and which is deemed socially conservative, the persistence of ethnic and cultural mores and the prioritisation of caste and *adat* have shaped gender relations in both public and private life. This article, in the first instance, will evaluate women's role in the fight for independence and the problems faced by women in translating a politics of resistance into a politics of inclusion in the post-conflict reconstruction of Timor-Leste. Furthermore, using Lospalos as a case study, it will consider how a local politics of culture in a post-conflict situation can determine the cultural specificity of politics and shape the struggle for gender equity both within and across the different generations of Timorese men and women.

Fight for freedom, radical politics and independence

Women's substantive and prominent role in the organised resistance to Indonesian occupation and the fight for independence has been well documented with women constituting at least 30 per cent of those in both combative and non-combative roles in the struggle.¹⁵ Women were members of both the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Fretilin) and its armed wing The Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor (Falantil) and were as much a public face of the resistance as men.¹⁶ Fretilin,

early on in its existence, positioned itself against the oppression of women and in its Political Manual especially critiqued the traditional practices of barlaque and polygamy.¹⁷ Yet in the 1980s its political priorities changed and women of the resistance were, for the most part, expected to prioritise national liberation over their own.

Nevertheless, in August 1975 women established their own political wing within the organisation, The Popular Organisation of East Timorese Women (OPMT), which by the 1980s had mobilised many thousands of women in a bifurcated struggle on the one hand against colonialism and the Indonesian occupation and on the other against gender inequality and in favour of women's rights. As one female ex-Falantil fighter stated:

*Women never had the same rights as men. For that reason we created the OPMT but difficulties still existed [...] In the past there was support for change with respect to culture—radical change. In the guerrilla forces we had the culture of the aldeia and we were realistic not idealistic fighters. It wasn't that we didn't have our culture anymore, we had change but with certain limitations, that is, women have responsibilities as well as rights.*¹⁸

Those responsibilities were not only political but, most importantly, those which focussed on the family and the community. Under all the constraints, pressure and dangers of resistance under colonial occupation women were essentially multi-tasking. All in all women were placed in the anomalous position of fighting for national independence and social change while at the same time fostering and sustaining adat and cultural tradition on the grounds that 'there can be no Timorese nation without Timorese culture'.¹⁹

A member of the OPMT explains it thus:

*The women that participated in the resistance had various qualities and, as we saw it, our culture, everything was being destroyed. It was women who sustained it [adat] in the communities. Women had it very difficult—the enemy could break us but couldn't destroy our culture.*²⁰

Women were at the forefront of the resistance to the 'Indonesianisation' of Timor through the socialisation of their children and the maintenance of Timorese culture and traditions in the local community throughout the Indonesian occupation. In this way, women were essentially complicit in supporting the very cultural mores which would impede the implementation of changes to address gender inequality in Timorese society in the post-independence period.

The organisational structure of the OPMT closely followed that of Fretilin with committees established from Dili to the regions and villages of a predominantly rural Timor-Leste. This comprehensive women's network was of significant importance to the resistance whereby women of the OPMT undertook the majority of clandestine activities and support for Fretilin and the Falantil fighters.²¹ In 1996, Emma Franks acknowledged the importance of women's role in the resistance stating: 'The people's self-sufficiency should be seen as a strategy of resistance and it is women who have provided the way for maintaining Timorese ethnic identity, presence and defiance.'²² The repercussions for women's engagement in the resistance were violent and unremitting. As observers of the time frequently remarked, a significant feature of the Indonesian occupation was its 'planned, organised and sustained attack on women' and that it had 'a culture of violence with a gender dimension'.²³ The principal 'victims' of this gender specific violence were women of the OPMT who at the very least were considered to be 'resistors' or associated with, if not members of, Falantil. Women were subject to rape, sexual torture, extrajudicial killing, sexual imprisonment, forced 'concubinage' and coerced sterilisation.²⁴ The level and intensity of sexual violence against women was such that it is considered to be equal to that of Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia.

Nevertheless, while women will speak about their role and experience in the resistance, few have spoken publicly about their experience as survivors of sexual violence and human rights violations. In 2002 at the hearings of the Commission for Admission, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR) in Timor-Leste, which was responsible for the collection of evidence of Human Rights violations under Indonesian occupation, only 21.4 per cent of the depositions were from women and that includes both survivors of and witnesses to such violations.²⁵ The traditional and religious leaders interviewed in this study spoke as 'outsiders' in their references to the suffering of women during the occupation. Women who had been part of the resistance spoke at length of their participation but said nothing of their suffering only that of others even if, as had happened in the case of one respondent, they had been captured by the Indonesian military. Both female members of the resistance and the local nuns spoke of how the infant children of women of the resistance would be brought down from the mountains at night to be placed in the care of the local convent.²⁶ No one spoke of the single mothers of 'enemy' children but of widows and orphans.²⁷ In Lospalos often what was not said became more important than what was. There was a real sense of people wanting to 'move on' with their lives. For practical reasons both in the present and the future they would abandon any significant recognition of 'unusual times'

in which actions and experiences entered into direct contradistinction to local adat tradition and cultural mores.

It is such silence that has contributed to a general lack of recognition of women's role in the fight against colonialism and in the liberation of Timor-Leste. It is the OPMT which is credited with being the first mass women's movement and, apart from a brief sojourn amalgamated with its politically independent 'doppelganger', The Timorese Women's Organisation (OMT), during the transition period, remains the largest geographically networked women's organisation in Timor-Leste. By the 1990s, however, the reality of women's suffering and the violation of the human rights of all women led to a surge in the establishment of women's NGOs in Dili which organised around issues arising from women's experience such as gender justice, women's human rights and violence against women. It was clear to all of the women's organisations by the end of the Indonesian occupation that they would need to consolidate their resources and energy to fight for the right to participate in the constitutional process and to be heard. Thus, in 2000 the OPMT and 15 other women's NGOs came together to form Rede Feto Timor Lorosae [the East Timorese Women's Network] with the aim of lobbying the transitional government and the Constituent Assembly to assume its responsibilities with respect to gender equality and the full participation of women in the process.

Rede Feto, as part of the process, organised the First National Women's Congress in June 2000 which was attended by 400 women from all over Timor-Leste.²⁸ It was here that women put together a National Plan of Action which sought the recognition of women as important political actors and concomitantly the implementation of a policy of affirmative action to ensure their place in a new National Parliament.²⁹ This document was handed over to the head of UNTAET, Sergio Viera de Mello, who treated it as a policy document distributing it to all departments in the transitional government. Rede Feto continued to put pressure on UNTAET and the National Council most especially with respect to their demand for a 30 per cent quota for women in the upcoming elections for the Constitutional Assembly in 2001. However, the request was summarily denied on the grounds that a quota was 'not in accordance with UN standards for "free and fair" elections'³⁰—a curious rebuttal when a precedent for the use of quotas had already been set in the Community Empowerment Project for the development of council elections and for the numbers of civil servants in public administration.³¹

Nevertheless, following vociferous protests by women's organisations UNTAET offered assistance through their newly founded Gender Affairs Bureau, offering training and

special support for potential women candidates in civic education and leadership training.³² Rede Feto turned to lobbying political parties to place women up at the top of the candidates' lists to ensure that they had a good chance of being elected. In the end despite the absence of a gender quota women secured an impressive 26 per cent of the seats in the Constitutional Assembly.³³ Only one of the 23 women elected representatives had attended the UNTAET-sponsored workshops.³⁴ From the evidence available it would seem that outside of Dili the majority of voters living in the rural districts, faced with problems of communication and lack of media access, were left poorly informed and choosing to vote for what they knew and who they could trust. The principal beneficiary in the election was Fretilin, the party which had fought for and would deliver independence. Both men and women candidates associated with Fretilin fared much better than those of lesser known parties or candidates that chose to stand independently. For the successful women candidates this could be both a blessing and a curse because they were expected to place the party political agenda before questions of gender equality and women's rights and some complained that in effect they were being silenced.³⁵

In 2005, women were able to prime their electoral muscles once again in the local suco council elections in which women for the first time were guaranteed three seats under the new quota system and the opportunity to stand for the position of suco chief.³⁶ Previously suco councils consisted of male elders headed by the traditional male *lia na'in*, the latter position was hereditary and considered to be the 'human embodiments of the ancestral order'.³⁷ The *lia na'in* in local community politics acted as advisor, arbitrator and judge but the new post of suco chief would be a political one and in some communities these two positions remained distinct and this split some communities down the middle. While Western democratic practice might have been a welcome change in national politics, the situation was quite the opposite at district and local level. Add to this the multifarious nature of adat among the different ethno-linguistic groups of Timor-Leste and one has the basis for a volatile cultural political climate. Under *adat* women are not expected to have role in public decision-making, they cannot become *lia na'in* or lead the discussion in suco meetings. Thus, with the juxtapositioning of traditional leaders with political leaders and the introduction of ideas of equality into local politics there was always a possibility that this might serve to undermine the elected councils in the eyes of the community.³⁸

Of the 443 existing sucos in Timor-Leste a woman was elected suco chief in a mere seven.³⁹ Lospalos sub-district offers a real sense of the trials and tribulations of a local politics ideologically estranged from the national politics of a post-independent

Timor-Leste. In Lospalos women's NGOs worked hard to promote and support women candidates for the position of suco chief and several women chose to stand for election. One by one the women stood down; one respondent stated that this was a result of a concerted effort by men to get the women to withdraw on the basis that they would never vote for them. Yet one woman in the Suco of Com did not do so and initially enjoyed the support of her family and her husband who are members of a highly respected caste. When she won the election many men laughed and humiliated her in public which embarrassed both her husband and family and this led to her resignation. Yet, in spite of this, most of the respondents in this study felt that having women elected onto the local councils and to stand for election as suco chiefs was a major advance:

Things are much more progressive for now for women. In the past you would never have even thought that a woman might be chefe de suco—now we have women candidates for the position [. . .] Yes it was difficult for that woman last election [...] Time has moved on but people's minds are slow to change.⁴⁰

Moreover, in view of the tacit separation of powers between traditional and elected chiefs which, in practical terms at least, gave suco chiefs a similar standing to that of the *lia na'in* this would present significant cultural obstacles to the election of women to this position in the near future.⁴¹

In Lospalos, a consistent explanation given for women's 'poor' representation in local politics was the need for women to prove themselves politically, to gain the skills necessary to participate politically and stand for election. Curiously, no such 'training' or 'apprenticeship' was mentioned as a prerequisite for men entering politics. On the contrary, one gained the impression that for men such 'skills' were innate, whereas for women they were considered learned skills. The male District Administrator explained the situation thus:

Here it isn't a question of whether a woman becomes a political candidate or not. The question is whether they will or not and for that a woman needs capacity-building, they have to join organisations, including women's organisations, political parties and co-operatives, serve their time, get people knowing what they can do and gain confidence in themselves to become chefe de suco or chefe de aldeia. Only this way can they get elected.

Yet for some women there was a real sense that independence had led to a 'roll back' in women's political standing and a failure to acknowledge women's political participation and contribution to the liberation struggle:

Women who were in the resistance in the mountains fighting continue to struggle until now. Women were in everything then, it depended on your abilities. Then we were all equal, now we are supposed to accept the idea that only men can make the decisions and give orders. The women left the mountains with a different mentality. It seems that men did not.⁴² In 1975, the resistance depended on the real force of women and women's rights depend on this becoming more than a symbolic gesture.⁴³

Thus, even women who had played a prominent role in the resistance movement were feeling disenfranchised and disillusioned.

A meeting with the elected suco chiefs of Lospalos offered an opportunity to explore their ideas and attitudes with respect to gender equity. Moreover, this would also enable us to judge how the broad range of training sponsored by the OPE and that funded by INGOs in the promotion and understanding of gender equality had been received in this conservative and highly patriarchal environment. By the response, the suco chiefs had been subject to training overkill, not least with respect to their role in raising awareness in their communities of the criminal nature of domestic violence.⁴⁴ There had been training on the subject of women's rights which had also been delivered to the women in the sucos. The discontent of the suco chiefs was not only palpable but in some cases quite vocal. The consensus was that domestic violence in some sucos had become an increasing problem but the traditional justice system had always dealt with what in, their view, was a private matter. Adat offered the opportunity for reconciliation and compensation without exacerbating an already difficult situation by moving grievances into the public arena of the courts.⁴⁵

Moreover, the suco chiefs also criticised the fact that training was given to women about their rights and as such women thought that they could do as they liked. While they conceded that women were clearly entitled to have the same rights as men this should, it was argued, occur within the knowledge of what women's priorities should be—most especially their principal obligation as wives and mothers—the conclusion being that if women 'did the right thing' then domestic violence would not occur. In discussing the range of training and its outcomes the Lospalos District Administrator pointed out that some women were also less than receptive to the ideas presented in the training programmes:

In almost every district there has been a lot of training about women's rights—encouraging women to change. But some women do not care to understand

*about women's rights and are happier to keep things as they are. Men are the ones that have a mentality that has to change. They are not happy when women come back from training and say they have rights and that women can do this or that. Men are just not prepared to accept that kind of talk.*⁴⁶

Clearly, in the short term, the efforts of the OPE and women's NGOs in ensuring that the laws and political practice of a newly independent Timor-Leste conform to international standards of human rights and gender equality were not well received in this particular district. Thus, in a difficult period of political, social and economic reconstruction, the reinstatement of cultural conservatism and traditional cultural attitudes led to the prioritisation of a system of gender relations which had persisted for generations.

Gender relations and cultural politics

The social construction of gender in Timorese society is profoundly affected by the local cultural mores and traditions of the distinctive ethno-linguistic groups that make up the population of Timor-Leste. Interestingly enough, irrespective of social status, geographical location and gender or ethnicity people spoke of equal rights in conjunction with the question of responsibilities. Thus, most people would agree that men and women have equal rights but different responsibilities. In view of the fact that what men do in Timorese society has a higher status than what women do, whether at 'work' or in the family then gender inequality of some calibre must persist. A consistent critique made by women's NGOs, as well as by INGOS, has been that the persistence of traditional cultural practices in Timor is one of the major obstacles to achieving gender equity and female empowerment, most especially the contracting of marriage through the important customary practice of Barlaque which shaped the nature of gender relations both before and after marriage. Moreover, in Lospalos there was the culturally specific social stratification of caste which influenced the cultural expectations, in material terms, of the requisite family responsibilities associated with the practice of Barlaque.

In Lospalos caste is one of the most important factors influencing a person's social standing and community obligations. There are four principal castes: Ratu is the highest and considered to be a 'regal' caste; the second caste is called Paca; the third is Akan; and the lowest caste is Acar. The fourth caste was often referred to as the 'unspeakable' caste by some but for most it was a caste with no standing or value in the community.⁴⁷

For the most part people spoke only of the first three higher castes: 'Acar is the caste we shouldn't refer to. In Lospalos it's your caste that matters in everything, including business. People having respect for you works in your favour whether you are male or female'.⁴⁸ Caste is also an important factor with respect to marriage. In the past marriages were arranged strictly along caste lines and families would invest a considerable amount of time in investigating and confirming an intended spouse's caste affiliation. According to traditional cultural mores if a couple were not of the same caste then there would be no marriage. In recent times, young men and women are able to choose their partners but they are still expected to marry from within their own caste. Inter-caste marriage is still frowned upon; women are not permitted to marry men of a lower caste but in some circumstances men may do so.⁴⁹

Barlaque, a marriage settlement or bride price, is probably the most important cultural practice which impacts on gender relations both before and after marriage. A bride price is expected to be paid to the bride's family before marriage as recognition of her social standing and value to her family, and represents the sacrifice and cost of bringing up a daughter. Traditionally, it is an important cultural act of exchange within which the 'wife givers', the bride's family, bestow the 'value' of fertility on the 'wife takers', the groom's family.⁵⁰ This is considered to be a 'sacred' obligation, one that cannot be dismissed or rejected. The barlaque is agreed upon by the families of the bride and groom before marriage and the size of the barlaque is determined by the social caste of the bride. Among the Ratu, the highest caste, there is a mean barlaque value of 77 buffalo and even today among this caste, in some cases, barlaque may actually exceed this value. This in effect was considered to be the 'gold standard' of barlaque but with lower castes this would be negotiated and reduced accordingly. Where families do not own cattle or animals, then gold, money or goods of similar value would be exchanged. Thus, the marriage settlement involved an exchange of goods between the two families with the bride's family giving valuable *tais*, and in some cases animals such as goats or pigs, to the groom's family.⁵¹

Nevertheless, over the last decade, the ongoing economic crisis and economic hardships suffered by all castes had impacted on the tradition. Flexibility within negotiations over barlaque was universally recognised. In the lowest caste this might mean paying no barlaque at all while in the higher castes the value of the barlaque might not be reduced but the change was in the way it was received with part payment before the marriage and the rest being given in 'instalments' until the debt was paid. It is also a debt that if not paid will pass on to the next generation to resolve. A local government official used his personal situation as an example:

I paid barlaque for my wife. I do not necessarily support the tradition but I paid it out of respect. Still I only paid part of it and the rest I continue to pay in instalments. The payment of barlaque recognises the identity and standing of the woman. Identity and status in our culture is important, you have to show respect [. . .] So I paid what I could afford, but it was a gesture—perhaps it might become only symbolic or an amount that is a gesture but at the moment we all have to be realistic. It isn't just the barlaque itself, if it's not paid the debt passes on to the next generation [. . .] it never ends, so it is a debt for all.⁵²

In Lospalos, there was an ongoing critique of the high material obligations still demanded by the custom of paying barlaque. On the one hand, there were those that felt that the *lia na'in* should be taking the lead in promulgating change while, on the other, according to the *lia na'in* that we spoke to, elders were increasingly involved in resolving disputes with respect to barlaque in order to arrive at a compromise in view of the fact that people 'have neither the animals nor the money anymore'.⁵³ Overall, it was argued that after marriage both husband and wife were burdened with an ongoing barlaque debt which could put an unwarranted strain on marital relations already tested in the difficult socio-economic conditions with which all Timorese families are faced.

Another consistent theme which runs through the literature, the political discourse of women's NGOs as well as the interviews in this research is the belief that there was a direct relationship between the custom of Barlaque and the increase in the incidence of domestic violence in Timor-Leste.⁵⁴ In the first instance, it was stated that while, in theory at least, barlaque is frequently spoken of as a custom which recognised the value of women in the community and society, the attitude of some men towards barlaque and its significance seems to imply the opposite. For these men, the act of paying barlaque automatically gives men power and control over women. Moreover, in doing so it is not unusual for men who abuse their wives to state that they are 'beating their barlaque', thus, wives for these men are something that they have paid for and therefore own in the same way that they own buffalo or goats. Across many of the interviews there was a real tension between the explanations of the traditional principles of barlaque and the role of barlaque in practice. This can be illustrated in the following quotations from different interviews that give a sense of this tension and a desire for change which ran across generations:

It's the idea that Barlaque is somehow buying someone. Too many men have this in their minds. You can't buy a person. Respect comes first and foremost in

*a marriage, that and equality, and barlaque is about giving the woman value not taking it away from her.*⁵⁵

*One disadvantage of this is that men feel that they are better than women because women are 'sold' to them which make men superior and men are not slow to say so. It is this that I think is negative [. . .] Parents should demand less. Something more symbolic, they should counsel their children to make it a change that applies to everyone.*⁵⁶

*There is no need to follow these ways, they are not good for us [. . .] If a girl and boy are in love then let them get married. You should consider that first. There is no need to give barlaque, buffalo, goats, pigs, we don't want this [. . .] If you give barlaque then when you do something wrong you have to keep quiet, when the man says that you can't cry because he is beating his barlaque [. . .] If they don't pay barlaque then the man would have to do what the woman says and follow her.*⁵⁷

For the most part, the consensus was that adat and the prevailing cultural mores should be transformed/adapted to conform to the actual situation in which people live. Support for the cultural system which structured individual lives and that of the community was exceptionally strong irrespective of social status, age or gender, and the expectation was that change should be both gradual and meaningful.

There were already signs that social change was taking place in Lospalos. Certainly, since the end of the Indonesian occupation young people have experienced greater freedom to leave the house, play sports and engage in mixed gender social events. Previously a young woman, for example, would not have been allowed to go out unless accompanied by her father or a male relative:

*What we see now is a real change. It's not the same as before. Now both boys and girls attend Sunday school together. You see young men and women dancing together and holding hands, this is normal for most people but a big change in Timor.*⁵⁸

Within the contemporary environment of greater personal freedom there are indications that young people are not only expressing disquiet about following traditions such as barlaque but are challenging the social value of caste. Anecdotal evidence suggests that young people wish to choose their own partners on emotional criteria rather than that based on

social or economic status. Moreover, there is some evidence that young men and women are far more willing, than previous generations, to challenge parental authority and customary law.

Traditionally, once a marriage has been contracted the couple go through a traditional ceremony and then the marriage is consecrated by the Church in a second ceremony, perhaps because the practice is believed to strengthen marriage ties and guarantee the longevity of a marriage. The belief is that this makes the marriage stronger because in the traditional ceremony the *lia na'in* creates the ties of friendship between the two families and makes them as one under customary law—something that an elder described as being ‘above’ God because to break one’s word, to turn one’s back on a marriage brings misfortune to both families.⁵⁹ By bringing two families together the obligations of the marriage runs across a much broader alliance than that consecrated by the church where it is the man and woman who are brought together in an alliance before God. In customary law the first alliance must be created before the second and as such there are many superstitions with respect to not only having both ceremonies but also the order in which they should be carried out.

Under customary law the rights and obligations of women and men within marriage are considered to be different but equal. Yet the gender division of labour within the family is fairly demarcated and even under the present difficult circumstances immutable. Men are expected to be the principal providers for the family and to seek work outside the home either working in their own fields or a job, while the woman is expected to prioritise home and family, working in or near the home. Most respondents acknowledged that while this was what was traditionally expected in practice the reality is often quite different:

In rural families most people say that the light jobs belong to women while the heavy jobs are for men. Actually if you look out in the fields it is the exact opposite [. . .] Sometimes in families both men and women work and then both should share the responsibility for supporting the family. Men take their role as men seriously and still see themselves as the breadwinner. Women still take charge of the family and responsibility for the domestic side of things [. . .] Men come home from work and sleep or do nothing but women come home to start work again. For women it is a double day.⁶⁰

In farming families where both man and wife are engaged in agriculture women have the double burden of engaging in a wide range of farming activities and undertaking unpaid productive work in the home. Men were more likely to share farming activities or

undertake domestic duties in special circumstances or when women were absent from the home. In all of the farming families women were the ones that took farm produce and handicrafts to the market to sell and on these occasions men would take care of the children and may, in rare cases, cook and this would occur on a regular basis. The only other circumstance that a man might be required to take on the 'woman's tasks' in the home is for a month or two after a woman has given birth when the husband would take over the women's agricultural tasks and, in the absence of family support, undertake some of the household tasks. In households where both women and men have paid employment outside of the home, a woman's responsibility for unpaid productive work in the home remains a priority even if the husband may 'help' on occasion the woman was still expected to undertake the majority of tasks associated with household maintenance and cleaning.

Whereas traditionally men were said to be the principal decision-makers both within the family and in the community, from this study it was clear that within the family joint decision-making was the norm.⁶¹ In most farming families, however, it is women who control the money in the household. With high levels of unemployment and a limited circulation of money within Lospalos there was a certain logic in women controlling what little money comes into the household in that most of what there is will be spent on household needs. Moreover, women seemed to be the principal workers and income generators in the farming households not only being in control of the retailing and bartering of family produce but also in making Tais and handicrafts to sell on the market to generate extra income for the family. All of our respondents spoke, with dismay, of how a significant proportion of rural women were often sustaining entire families with little or no input from men:

What adat says is that its women's role to cook and wash and men's to look for work. In real life, in Lospalos, most men don't go looking for work and most of the work on the farm is also carried out by women. You see men gambling in the market while women are working. The soil in Lospalos is the most fertile in Timor—but do you see men in the fields planting or farming?⁶² There are a lot of problems here, economic problems and problems of employment. Men and women in conflict with one another; yet it is women who are working hard to support their families without that many families would be in a desperate situation. Men seem to have lost hope [. . .]⁶³

In Lospalos, while women may exercise a prominent role in decision-making within the family, as we have already shown, this is not translated into effective participation in decision-making in public life.

While men might have been prepared to 'lose face' in their personal lives, they were certainly not prepared to do so in public. For example, in the criminalisation of domestic violence, a new policy was introduced making suco chiefs legally obliged to 'prevent' domestic violence, and the intensive local training that followed met with considerable resistance, not least in Lospalos. Suco chiefs resented the political interference in 'private matters' which, in their view, was being dealt with perfectly well under *adat* law. The public discussion which accompanied the few cases brought by women to the newly founded court system would have contributed to the suco chiefs sense of 'losing face' in view of their new role. According to the District Administrator the profile of domestic violence had certainly increased in recent times:

*Domestic violence in Lospalos is common since the economic difficulties, which is leading to divorce in a few cases. But this is still decided mostly at community level but a few cases are coming to the district prosecutor from the initiative of women whose ideas towards divorce are changing.*⁶⁴

At community level it was the local priest or traditional elders that were dealing with domestic conflict. The deliberations and counselling delivered at this level was geared towards the reconciliation of the couple and, under *adat* law, compensation.⁶⁵ Moreover, there were existing preconceptions held by both men and women with respect to what constituted domestic violence, as opposed to, for example, chastisement.⁶⁶ In the world of personal politics, this became a cultural distinction between unjustified abuse and justifiable abuse. In the local community there was no support for the former but a significant acceptance of the latter. Within traditional forms of mediation the emphasis was on a woman's behaviour or misbehaviour broadly defined and related to women's role or responsibility within the family such as not cooking a meal, or a failure to prioritise her responsibilities as a wife or mother. There was anecdotal evidence that since the introduction of a court system domestic violence was being treated as a much more serious issue under *adat* law and traditional elders were willing to punish offenders accordingly:

Domestic violence is an issue here [...] Yes I have given advice to couples in this situation and we often manage to sort things out [...] If a woman was being badly beaten? [...] I would do the same as I would for my own daughter,

I would tell the man to leave the home and never go back. Women's work mainly supports the family, at least in basic things like food and clothing, so the man gone is no big loss around here [. . .] I don't like abuse of any kind, we saw enough of that when the Indonesians were here and women were abused by them, worse than animals [. . .] We can't have our own men doing that to their own wives, these men will have to pay one way or another under traditional law.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, the fact that some women were prepared to take their grievances into the court system when adat law failed to protect women's rights with the same tenacity that it upholds the principle of women's responsibilities demonstrates that women are making choices. The fact that they have such choices with respect to legal redress is an important advance for women and probably more than any other factor will act as a catalyst for change in adat law sooner rather than later.

The culture of politics and the pursuit of change

In Timor-Leste, the turbulent politics of the post-independence period has served to radicalise gender politics through the consolidation of the resources of women's organisations and NGOS to promote and defend women's rights and the principle of gender equality in the Constitution and in national politics. Recent achievements in the election of 2007 of almost 30 per cent representation of women in the National Parliament and the first female candidate for Prime Minister demonstrate that women have come a long way in a very short time.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the problems of regional political and socio-economic incorporation have impeded the establishment of full and complete citizenship for women.

The centralisation of Timorese politics in the hands of the Dili-based national government by UNTAET became further entrenched after 2002 with the election of the Constitutional Parliament. Regional administrations within this structure were little more than political conduits for implementing policy and law promulgated by the National Parliament. Local politics, estranged from Dili, took on even greater significance as the *chefe de sucos* exercised far more political influence than elected members of the National Parliament. Thus, the politics of culture took precedence over the 'new' politics of gender inclusivity in the construction of an independent Timor. Within this political milieu the entry of women into positions of leadership at the level of the sucos was literally 'cut off at

the pass'. The abysmal showing of women in the 2005 local elections was most certainly a direct result of the distancing of the capital from the rest of Timor. Thus, the political machinations of a self-designated progressive urban population in Dili ran in contradistinction to what was considered a retrogressive conservative environment nurtured among the rural majority outside of the capital. Thus, the results of women's sojourn into contesting leadership roles within local politics became a self-fulfilling prophesy.

In a similar vein, the training written and instituted in Dili for implementation and dissemination in the sub-districts of the regional administrations was poorly received in Lospalos. A lack of consultation with the local community certainly inhibited the process. For example, some discussions with the local *lia na'in*, who were extremely well informed and most knowledgeable about their areas of jurisdiction and the problems in their community, would provide considerable support and insight which might inform future training workshops in ways that would be culturally appropriate and meaningful.

It would be wrong however, to say that all was lost in raising political awareness of gender-centric issues through training which was inevitably premised on an understanding of and support for gender equality. In Lospalos, whatever the feelings of the gainsaid about the content or the delivery of the training workshops on women's rights, the question of women's rights was on the local agenda for discussion. This included the more controversial issues of traditional practice, marriage, women's role in the economy and the future status of women in local politics. Every single respondent expressed ideas with relation to what such rights constituted, how they might or should be realised and the cultural context of rights and equality. Moreover, the social and economic tribulations of reconstruction were already exerting pressure for change whereby the gap between traditional cultural mores, which overlaid the nature of gender relations and practice within personal relationships, was slowly widening. Change, when it comes, does so at its own pace. Right now, for the majority of women, day to day survival in an impoverished Timor-Leste takes precedence.

Acknowledgements

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inequality. My sincere thanks go to Maria Isabel, Ita and Lizety for their assistance and to UNIFEM for giving me the opportunity to initiate the project. A special thanks to Milena Pires and Amarsanaa Darisuren for their encouragement and support.

Endnotes

1. 29.2 per cent—that is 19 of a total of 65 members of parliament.
2. Allden, 'Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Women's Security', 6. Estimates of the number of deaths vary as constituting a loss of between one quarter to one third of the Timorese population under Indonesian rule.
3. Infrastructure here included electricity, water supply, telecommunications, media, public and private buildings and factory machinery. In the eastern districts of Timor entire buffalo herds of the farming communities were wiped out leaving many families destitute.
4. Fernandes Alves et al, *Written with Blood*, 56 and 67.
5. Whittington, 'Gender and Peacekeeping', 1285.
6. Now called the Office of the Advisor for the Promotion of Equality.
7. Traub, 'Inventing East Timor', 75.
8. Whittington, 'Gender and Peacekeeping', 1287. Whittington even goes as far as to recommend that this should be a model for future UN administrations.
9. Groves, 'Operationalising Human Security', 14. See also, Joshi, 'Creating and Limiting Opportunities', 29–36.
10. Groves, 'Operationalising Human Security'.
11. Tetum, for a large proportion of the population in the districts outside of Dili, was essentially a second language. People preferred to use their local dialect even if they could speak Tetum.
12. Allden argues that even individuals or groups who wished to make a contribution to the draft Constitution found that their submissions to the Constituent Assembly were not considered unless they were submitted through a political party. See Allden, 'Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Women's Security', 15.
13. Interview with community leader, Lospalos, April 2006.
14. De Araujo, 'Oxfam and Partners in East Timor', 22.
15. See especially Cristalis and Scott, *Independent Women*; and Fernandes Alves et al, *Written with Blood*.
16. See Franks, 'Women and Resistance in East Timor'.
17. Wandita et al, 'Learning to Engender Reparations', 290.
18. Interview with female ex-Falantil fighter, Dili, April 2006.
19. Ibid.
20. Interview with a member of the OPMT, Dili, April 2006.
21. Women constituted over 60 per cent of the clandestine movement. Cristalis and Scott, *Independent Women*, 39–42.
22. Franks, 'Women and Resistance in East Timor', 163.
23. Powell, Sian, 2001. 'East Timor's Children of the Enemy'. *The Weekend Australian*, 10 March, 1; and Franks, 'Women and Resistance in East Timor', 160. See also Mason, 'Women, Violence and Non-Violent Resistance'; and Wandita et al, 'Learning to Engender Reparations'.
24. Here I use the term sexual imprisonment to refer to the taking of 'comfort women' and the term forced concubinage for the taking of 'wives' by individual military personnel who were often referred to as 'kept' women.
25. Wandita et al, 'Learning to Engender Reparations', 290.
26. For the most part these were children born outside of traditionally recognised or conventional marital relationships.
27. Rape was virtually a daily occurrence under Indonesian occupation and there were many children born as a result of the violation of women. A significant number of women chose to raise these children as a single parent, in view of the fact that marriage for these women would be out of the question. Over half of the women giving birth to 'enemy children' were taken in and supported by their community.
28. A second Congress was held in 2004 at which Rede Feto further developed the Women's Platform for Action consolidating its role as an umbrella organisation for lobbying the National Parliament on issues of women's rights and the pursuit of gender equality.
29. Fernandes Alves et al, *Written with Blood*, 59–60; Allden, 'Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Women's Security', 8.
30. Whittington, 'Gender and Peacekeeping', 1287.
31. For an interesting first hand account of dealing with the various UN administrations see, Joshi, 'Creating and Limiting Opportunities'.
32. Some 150 women participated in this training with participants attending from all 13 districts of Timor-Leste.
33. This was all the more important when in 2002 the Constitutional Assembly voted itself as the first parliament of East Timor, which postponed the following elections until 2007.

34. Allden, 'Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Women's Security', 12.
35. See Cristalis and Scott, *Independent Women*, 82–83.
36. A suco consists of several villages [aldeias]. Women had two designated places on the suco council plus one of the two youth positions was allocated to a female.
37. Hicks, 'Community and Nation State in East Timor', 14.
38. *Ibid.*, 15–16.
39. *Initial Report, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, 6.
40. Interview with *lia na'in*, Lospalos, April 2006.
41. In Lospalos many traditional elders failed to get elected to the position of suco chief and for the most part this position was taken by younger men usually members of Fretilin.
42. Interview with female ex-member of the resistance movement, Lospalos, April 2006.
43. Interview with female member of the OMT, Lospalos, April 2006.
44. There were at least two training initiatives organised by different INGOs delivered within six months of each other in Lospalos for suco chiefs who seemed to feel victimised in the process.
45. Within adat men are expected to pay compensation to the wife's family should domestic violence occur. This was believed to act as a deterrent and to facilitate reconciliation between the couple.
46. Interview with District Administrator, Lospalos, April 2006.
47. Acar were considered to be outcasts and many people were afraid of them because it was said that they practiced black magic and could bring misfortune to people in the community.
48. Interview with government official, Lospalos, April 2006.
49. Should a couple from different castes wish to marry, without family sanction, they are expected to leave home and live somewhere else—essentially they are estranged from their families.
50. This tradition and the obligations that go with it have been invoked until the present—should a woman fail to conceive then according to adat the man has the right to take a second wife. Both the first wife and her family must agree. If the man seeks another wife without permission then his family has to pay barlaque to the woman's family. For a definitive investigation of such traditions see Hicks, *Tetum Ghosts and Kin*.
51. *Tais* are the distinctive traditional hand woven cloths made by women in Timor-Leste. They have specific cultural significance and are part of a family and community heritage. Special *tais* are worn on ceremonial occasions and are extremely valuable. It is these cloths that are used in barlaque as a form of exchange.
52. Interview with government administrator, Lospalos, April 2006.
53. Interview with *lia na'in*, Lospalos, April 2006.
54. For a discussion of the issues see Simiao, 'Representando Corpo e Violencia'; Grenfell, 'Legal Pluralism'; and Asia Foundation, *Land and Justice in East Timor*.
55. Interview with traditional elder, Lospalos, April 2006.
56. Interview with male District Administrator, Lospalos, April 2006.
57. Interview with female youth, 17 years old, Lospalos, April 2006.
58. Interview with Catholic nun, Lospalos, April 2006.
59. Interview with elder, Lospalos, April 2006.
60. Interview with female government official, Lospalos, April 2006.
61. This was the case whether the respondents were farmers, civil servants or elders.
62. Interview with Catholic nun, Lospalos, April 2006.
63. Interview with *lia na'in*, Lospalos, April 2006.
64. Interview with male District Administrator, Lospalos, April 2006.
65. The issues involved in these processes are beyond the remit of this article. See especially, Swaine, *Traditional Justice*; Simiao, 'Representando Corpo e Violencia'; and Grenfell, 'Legal Pluralism'.
66. For violent abuse to be considered domestic violence 'blood' would need to be drawn and the woman severely beaten.
67. Interview with *lia na'in*, Lospalos, April 2006.
68. 29.2 per cent—that is 19 of a total of 65 members of parliament. Moreover, there are three women heading key ministries in the new government—Minister for State Administration, Minister for Planning and Finances and Minister for Education, Culture, Youth Affairs and Sports.

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