

Community and nation-state in East Timor

A view from the periphery

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Fig. 1. The centre encounters the periphery. In April-May 2005 Dili was invaded by youth from every district in East Timor protesting – at least nominally – against prime minister Mari Alkatiri's proposal to abandon the requirement that Catholicism remain compulsory in schools. The protest, instigated by the clergy, succeeded.



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1. The conventional long-form designation for the country is officially the 'Democratic Republic of Timor Leste' but it is also commonly referred to as 'Timor Lorosa'e', 'Timor Leste', and, in the past, 'Portuguese Timor', 'Timor Timor', and 'Timtim'.

2. This paper deals only with Dili and its hinterland. There is, however, the matter of the alleged antagonisms among local regions themselves, such as that claimed to exist between 'westerners' and 'easterners'. This distinction, which earlier in 2006 was interpreted by some observers to be hardly more than a factitious pseudo-issue, now appears to have developed a life of its own. One Timorese has described how gangs of youths routinely accost taxi drivers who venture into the hinterland to ascertain whether they are 'westerners' or 'easterners' (Ximenes 2006). Should this discriminatory trend gain momentum it might well become another force threatening the unity of the nation-state.

After several years of relative obscurity East Timor,¹ half an island some 400 kilometres north of Western Australia, returned to the headlines in April last year when mob assaults and house-torching recalled the wanton devastation inflicted upon Timorese by the Indonesian-inspired militias in 1999 (Fig. 1). The political upshot was that a new prime minister – José Ramos-Horta – replaced the incumbent, Mari Alkatiri, in July; he now presides over a government which has greater likelihood of going at least some of the way towards solving the country's most pressing problems than its predecessor. These problems include unemployment, illiteracy, a deplorable health care system, an inadequate infrastructure, a dysfunctional juridical system, a moribund police organization, and a miniscule army which serves no purpose.

Ramos-Horta has his work cut out and the difficulties may prove intractable. But it would seem from the public pronouncements he has made so far that Ramos-Horta does recognize them as the threat they are to his country's stability. Certainly he comes to his new job with resolve. The problems are only too well acknowledged by the many international organizations now working in the country and receive sporadic media attention, so instead of rehearsing them yet again I intend here to focus on a more neglected aspect of East Timor. Although related to these other issues this problem is sufficiently distinctive to merit consideration in its own right; it concerns what might be described as the dysfunctional relationship between the capital, Dili, and the rest of the country, its hinterland.²

For the purposes of government East Timor consists of 13 districts, in one of which lies Dili (Fig. 2), whose approximately 150,000 inhabitants make it by far the largest town in a country with a population of about 920,000. Each district is divided into sub-districts, with both administrative units governed from a small capital town of their own. The sub-districts are comprised of indigenous local communities called *sukus*.³ Each of these local communities follows its own *adat* (a Malay term conventionally glossed as 'tradition', 'custom', 'way of the ancestors', 'customary

law')⁴ and is made up of several villages (*aldeias*). These in turn are organized into patrilineal/patrilocal or matrilineal/matrilocal hamlets or house-clusters (*knua*). Before 2002 East Timor had never received international recognition as an independent nation-state and had been subject to the successive external authorities of Portugal, Indonesia and the United Nations. Each brought about different changes in the relationship between Dili and its many hundreds of local communities, and to grasp fully the nature of the problem addressed in this paper we need to understand what these influences were.

Before independence

Geography imposes physical obstacles to efficient communication between Dili and the hinterland. Hemmed in by the Wetar Strait to the north and by steep mountains on all other sides, the town is far from ideally located for a capital. Moreover, the further one travels into the hinterland the more rugged the terrain becomes, and even on the southern plain flooding in the rainy season renders travel impossible in some regions. Roads are difficult to build and are vulnerable in places to mudslides which, besides seriously hampering traffic, add to the cost of maintenance. Under the Portuguese colonial government these obstacles impeded administrative centralization, and in the absence of threats of insurgency the inhabitants of the peripheral districts were permitted to follow the dictates of their *adat* untrammelled by central authority.

This 'hands-off' attitude terminated after 7 December 1975 when the armed forces of the Republic of Indonesia entered the country. The following July East Timor was incorporated into the republic and its inhabitants were subjected to a ruthless programme of political indoctrination devised to transform them with all speed into Indonesian citizens. Using the administrative structure bequeathed them by Portugal (a structure which corresponds closely to that operating today), the administration began an intensive programme of road- and bridge-building to further this end. As part of this policy its agents forced people

Fig. 2. The districts and principal towns of Timor Leste.

3. According to one source (Nixon 2005) the total number of *sukus* in East Timor is between 340 and 397 depending upon the criteria used in the calculation. The latter appears to be the generally agreed figure.

4. As far as I am aware the word *adat* was not used in East Timor during Portuguese times and it appears to have gained currency only after the 1975 invasion. The term has, however, proved an admirably apt and useful rubric for the Timorese.

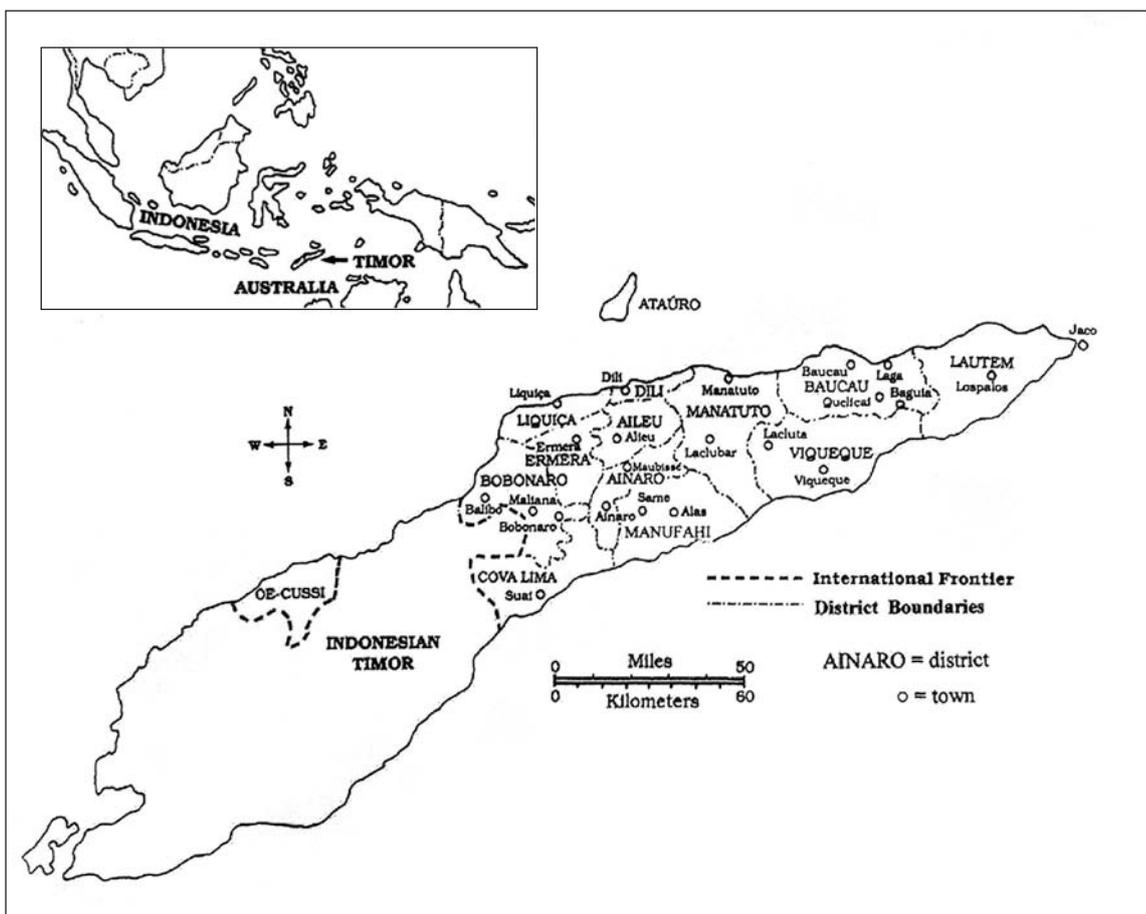
5. UNTAET was endowed with overall responsibility for the administration of East Timor and was empowered to exercise all legislative and executive authority, including the administration of justice' (United Nations 2000: 56). Despite its proselytizing goals in East Timor, in pressing the Indonesian government to consent to what was in effect a plebiscite on independence in August 1999 the United Nations played an essential part in enabling the Timorese to win their independence.

6. Tetum, an Austronesian language, is the indigenous language of many Timorese residing along parts of the south coast and in the central mountains straddling the border with Indonesia. During the Portuguese period Tetum, mixed with Portuguese and Malay loan-words, was adopted by the residents of Dili as a means of communication between Timorese who otherwise only spoke their own language. By the time of the Indonesian invasion Tetum had come to take on something of the quality of a *lingua franca*, though many Timorese never did understand it. This variety of Tetum was known as 'Dili Tetum' or 'Tetum Praça', and is the form adopted as the national language. Increasingly it is becoming replete with foreign loan-words, mainly of English, Portuguese and Malay origin. The indigenous – and much less adulterated – form of Tetum is known as Tetum Terik.

7. They include Austronesian languages such as Mambai and Galoli as well as the non-Austronesian languages Bunak, Fataluku and Makassai.

8. East Timor's communication gap could scarcely be more graphically demonstrated than by the personal language policy of one senior politician in the national government, who was a serious contender for the premiership in July 2006. She refuses to speak Tetum to her fellow Timorese and insists on addressing them in Portuguese, even though most do not understand what she is saying (Cleary 2006).

9. Sponsorship of 'non-traditional' candidates of both sexes for these new political offices comes from the political parties, such as Fretilin, for whom party membership rather than social rank is a determining



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to abandon their traditional lands in the *sukus* and take up residence in special encampments where they could be more easily monitored. Centralization was furthered by replacing those *liurais* – traditional rulers or 'kings', the indigenous *suku* chiefs – who could not be relied upon to enact policy issuing from the capital with local apparatchiks who would. The centralizing strategy involved policies of universal education, the teaching of the Indonesian national language Bahasa Indonesia, standard school uniforms, and the inculcation of such patriotic habits as saluting the Indonesian flag.

The Indonesian pursuit of rapid change in the hinterland fomented division in some local communities. Politically appointed chiefs were seen by local people as serving the ends of the central government with no endorsement from their ancestors. Traditional *liurais*, on the other hand, though displaced in many *sukus*, were human embodiments of ancestral order. At the same time, however, the aggressive policy implemented by the Indonesian government did succeed in presenting new values to village people. Thus by dint of vigorous indoctrination over the next 23 years the central authority gradually brought local government within Dili's administrative ambit. One result was that when Indonesia formally ceded East Timor in October 1999, national and local government formed something resembling an integrated polity.

On 25 October the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) formally came into being to assist the Timorese in establishing a constitution, as a first step towards nationhood. To further this goal UNTAET devised programmes to inject into Timorese thinking such stock Western socio-political notions as democracy, social equality and gender equality, which were both alien to and inconsistent with *adat*. Nevertheless UNTAET and other international agencies determined that Timorese men and women should assimilate these notions to prepare them for citizenship in the modern nation-state that the United Nations intended to 'midwife'.⁵

Two decades of 'Indonesianization' had acquainted the Timorese in varying measure with certain of these values, such as gender equality, but others, more especially those with a distinctly 'Western' flavour like democracy and freedom of speech, were quite novel. UNTAET's programme succeeded up to a point before its mission officially ended on 20 May 2002 and the Timorese found themselves under yet another administration (UNTAET remained for a further three years to lend assistance to the new government). This time it was their own, for on that day the Democratic Republic of Timor Leste was born.

The Democratic Republic of Timor Leste

In contrast to the United Nations, which continued the process of centralization Indonesia had initiated, four years of independence has eroded the connective bonds the Indonesian occupation had been establishing between Dili and the *sukus*. Several factors are responsible but two are especially detrimental. The first is the resurgence of *adat* ('traditions') in many communities, a revival of local self-esteem, flamboyantly indexed by the rebuilding of *adat* or ritual houses (*uma lulik*). Under the Indonesian occupation these structures, which accommodated an array of sacred artefacts associated with the ancestors, were either destroyed by the military or else left to fall apart after their owners were forced from their lands. But with the coming of independence people have begun returning to their *sukus* and reconstructing the buildings to honour their ancestors.

The second factor is the national leaders' curious lack of resolve about strengthening the ties between the capital and the local communities, even though they surely realize this is essential if the nation-state is to remain stable. Indeed, certain political decisions have actually militated against consolidation. The choice of Portuguese as the official language and Tetum as the national language, though readily understandable given East Timor's history, is a prime example.⁶ Today Portuguese is spoken

Fig. 3. In the more 'traditional' local communities the ritual of kissing the *liurai*'s hand serves to convey the respect to which his high rank is entitled. Here the *liurai* of Uma Ua'in Craik, a predominately Tetum Terik-speaking *suku*, in Viqueque sub-district, in Viqueque town church on the occasion of the wedding of his son, in August 2005.



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Fig. 4 (right). Mambai adat house under construction near Maubisse. Many parts of the hinterland are witnessing a revival of tradition represented materially by the rebuilding of ritual houses that were destroyed during the Indonesian occupation. Shown here is one such *uma lulik* under construction. Fig. 5 (far right). Workers take a break during construction of the Mambai adat house.



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qualification for support. Regarding the category *lia na'in*, a traditional *lia na'in* is a story-teller. Some are so well versed in traditional customs and legal precedents they become repositories of knowledge and precedent for the *liurai* in his traditional capacity as *suku* judge. The new construction put upon this designation, however, connotes 'elder' or 'adviser' rather than an individual having an authoritative knowledge of local *adat*. Traditional *lia na'in* cannot be voted into office since there is no such office.

10. For the social anthropologist the fruits of ethnographic enquiry are most in evidence in the detailed account of life at the grassroots level. Whether research is undertaken for scholarly purposes or under contract to public agencies, or a combination of both, the intensive scrutiny to which the fieldworker subjects the daily lives of community members also helps us arrive at a more realistic understanding of the consequences of any innovations introduced from the world outside.

11. While this comment regarding consultations is on the mark, I would point out that *suku* courts, under the direction of *liurais*, have been adjudicating disputes for generations. However, international agencies do not classify what *liurais* dispense as 'justice' because *adat* fails to embrace gender equity and cognate notions key to the values of Western advocacy groups and organizations.

12. As of March 2005 only one *suku* had a woman as its chief. Tellingly, this *suku* was located in the capital (Nixon 2005).

only in Dili, and only by Lusophile politicians or Brazilian or Portuguese agency workers or schoolteachers imported to teach the language. And while Tetum is more generally understood throughout the country than any other indigenous language, in local communities even people comfortable with their national language prefer to speak their regional tongue, of which East Timor has more than a dozen.⁷ In some communities only a few individuals are able, or willing, to speak it at all.⁸

As communities favour their own language, so, too, they identify with their local *adat* rather than with new values filtering down from the capital. Male authority, primacy of elder over younger, social status arising from birth, and rank validated by ancestral myths are the values that define villagers' social identity. Ideas and institutions imported from the capital necessarily lack this compelling quality. Proponents of Western values deprecate the *adat*'s continuing influence on the daily lives of the Timorese, since to them it bears little relation to the way citizens of a modern nation-state should live. Interestingly, criticism is especially strident among Timorese professionals based in Dili, particularly those working in the fields of economics and agriculture, who see a massive waste of resources in such widespread practices as building ritual houses.

The international agencies, for their part, are more aggressive than the government in advocating Western values, but somewhat to their chagrin discover that villagers continue to have a tenacious investment in their own culture. Thus, however receptive local people may appear to these foreign values, when external pressure exerted by government and agencies is not maintained, the innate conservatism of villagers reemerges to stifle whatever innovations may have been initiated.

An instructive example is provided by the office of *suku* chief. Under the new democratic protocols promoted by the United Nations, international agencies and the national government, *suku* chiefs are elected, but sometimes the successful candidate happens not to be a traditional *liurai*. In this situation, as under Indonesian rule, the *suku* has, in effect, two political leaders contending for the loyalty of villagers. One is the democratically elected incumbent, who is the local representative of the national government. The other is the *liurai*, whose leadership is vouchsafed by the ancestors. So strong is the power of the *adat* that even voters who helped a rival candidate become chief regard the *liurai* as the more authentic of the two figures. Thus in situations of need villagers are as likely to turn to their *liurai* for assistance as to seek help from the official they elected. The *adat*, after all, prescribes behaviour between persons of socially defined categories so that villagers know what to expect from their relationship with the *liurai*. In contrast, some profess not to understand the function of the new-style *suku* chief and how to relate to him. Even some chiefs appear perplexed.

Opposition between these rival constellations of socio-political values is further aggravated by the imposition of novel political categories alien to the *adat*. Traditional local *suku* councils are composed exclusively of senior males; however, the new protocols set aside a number of seats designated for individuals who fit into categories defined according to contemporary Western ideology. Accordingly there is a 'female youth' representative (*juventude fetu*), a 'male youth' representative (*juventude mane*), two women's representatives (*representante fetu*), and an 'elder' (misleadingly referred to as a *lia na'in*).⁹ Superficially, the government's and international agencies' mandate to

Fig 6 (right). Foreign Minister Ramos-Horta (on right) with President Yudhoyono (on left) in Dili on 9 April 2005, at the site where Indonesian troops massacred over 270 Timorese on 12 November 1991.



Fig. 7 (far right). Under the protocols of the UNTAET/ national government suku/aldeia elections held in 2005 required residents to elect incumbents for offices unknown in traditional society. These consisted of a 'female youth' representative, a 'male youth' representative, two women's representatives, and an 'elder'. Successful candidates are included in the local suku council together with the suku chief and the heads of each village (aldeia) in the suku.



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introduce 'equality' into local polities has been executed. But because they lack the endorsement of *adat* these new categories cause confusion in the *sukus* and – by reinforcing local conviction that the ancestors really do know best – actually serve to undermine them.

These socio-political impediments to a more centralized polity are compounded, and communication between capital and local communities prejudiced still further, by the condition of the country's infrastructure. In many regions roads are disintegrating badly. As I saw for myself in 2005, for example, the main road linking the towns of Bobonaro in the western mountains and Same on the southern plain was so full of potholes that buses could travel only in the downhill direction. Then, too, there is the singular position of the district of Oe-Cussi, geographically removed from the capital – and the rest of East Timor (Fig. 2) – and accessible only by an unreliable ferry from Dili that takes the better part of a night, or by an overland route which crosses the international border, an enterprise fraught with inconvenience.

State and nation

The lack of cohesion between centre and periphery in East Timor has parallels elsewhere in the world, of course, though it is certainly not universal in Southeast Asia, as Hans Antl6f (1995) has demonstrated for Java. Other studies in Indonesia, however, such as Patricia Spyer's (2000) account of modernization in the region of Aru, reveal something resembling the tensions in East Timor. Further afield one can find more extreme cases, as in Burma where some peripheral areas are so alienated from the centre as to have become quasi-states in their own right (Smith 2006: 20).

At present the Democratic Republic of Timor Leste has nothing approaching Burma's degree of alienation, but in order for it to become an integrated nation-state its political leaders will need to demonstrate a firmer determination to bring this about than they have so far, and international agencies must adopt a more realistic attitude to local *adat*. They need, in short, to rely less on the 'top-down' model of development and more on the 'grassroots' alternative.¹⁰ This will mean government and international agencies including local input in their plans for 'modernizing' East Timor, a strategy that might enable them to tap into the local dynamism now expended on such activities as the rebuilding of *adat* houses. For that matter, Timorese villagers might actually be asked what changes in their community they would like or would be willing to embrace. As one agency report notes, 'The governments' [*sic*] failure to conduct public "consultations" in the process of drafting new laws also contributes to the lack of local ownership and understanding on how the law

can provide justice to the people' (Asia Foundation 2004 [ca.]: 12).¹¹

How might this be accomplished most effectively? In the more conservative *sukus* government and agencies should pay rather more attention to the advice of the *liurais* and less to notions issuing from some 'representative' pool of informants selected by the conventional bureaucratic mindset, which in any case typically converge with those of the agencies in question. Recognized in their respective *sukus* as the principal local decision-makers, *liurais* are the 'point-men' from whom outsiders need guidance. They have an unrivalled knowledge of villagers' aspirations, and government/agency programmes that do not recognize their unique authority will find their goals under threat from the outset. This is not to say that *liurais* are invariably popular or even particularly influential in their communities. But they know their *sukus* and so their views need to be taken into account.

Even villagers in *sukus* more accommodating to outside ideas are wary about assimilating foreign notions at odds with what their ancestors taught them. 'Gender equality' and 'age equality' are two prime examples. According to the typical *adat* women cannot, for example, become *liurais*,¹² heads of descent groups or hamlets, nor even lead discussions in *suku* council meetings. When traditions are challenged by categorical innovations it is not difficult to understand why tension arises between the new and the old – hardly the most auspicious foundation upon which to build a modern system of institutions. In one *suku* on the south coast just before the 2005 *suku/aldeia* elections, my wife and I witnessed a combined attempt by a prominent politician and the head of one of the largest international agencies to find a woman candidate willing to stand for a political office that was also open to men. To my knowledge there were no takers.

This failure to win support among the peripheral populace is no small matter. Damien Kingsbury (2005: 233-234) has recently described 'nationalism' as a sense of belonging to a political group 'in which constituent members voluntarily identify [...] in common as members of a broad form of united expression' and 'the state' as 'a spatial territory and the laws and institutions that govern it'. The street violence in Dili, which has already caused the deaths of more than two dozen persons, has induced some political pundits to suggest that the much-lauded 'nation-building' carried out by the United Nations has proved a failure (cf. Perlez 2006, Ramos-Horta 2006, Donnan 2006). I consider this assessment premature, especially with Ramos-Horta as prime minister, but the tenuous nature of the bonds linking local communities with the capital has the potential to undermine the foundations of the new nation-state and casts a shadow over its future. ●