

# SACRED SEAS: histories of origin and settlement from Timor-Leste

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## **Introduction**

In this paper I explore the significance of water, and in particular the sea, as a source of generative power around which local and regional socio-political orders are constructed. First I consider the symbolic power of the sea in local histories of origin and settlement among Naueti-speaking house-based communities located in Babulo on the south-eastern coast of Timor-Leste. I describe how relationships between people and the sea serve to establish and maintain local ritual and political orders between house-based groups. I argue that the ability to control the power of the sea in a material form, as sacred objects contained within sacred structures provides ‘cosmological authenticity’ to local claims of power and authority. I then consider these local claims to power in relation to conflicting and/or complementary narratives from historically significant and encompassing centres of power and authority. In particular, I consider the history of the Tetun-speaking coastal kingdom of Luca and their relationship to Babulo.

## **The ethnographic setting**

Babulo is located on the south-eastern coast of East Timor. The population is predominantly Naueti speaking. A minority are of Makassae origins and a number of families are of mixed Naueti and Makassae descent.

The majority of the population of Babulo are (near) subsistence farmers and foragers who rely on the land and the environment as their main source of prosperity and well-being. Despite a considerable coastline, during my fieldwork I observed only a handful of households engage in

fishing activities.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this are manifold. The lack of ice-making and transport facilities means there is only a very limited local market and most fish is caught for household consumption. Furthermore, the reef – the best fishing ground – is located quite far out in relation to the main coastal settlement, Aliambata, and the shallow sandy waters are home to salt-water crocodiles. Other fishing activities, such as shrimp harvesting in the freshwater catchments of the Bee Bui River, are seasonal.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, fishing rights are said to be the prerogative of members of the Daralari and Beli lineage houses who claim to the status of Source of the Land.

In recent years a growing number households of civil servants (teachers, health-workers, local government employees) and those receiving a state pension such as widows and war-veterans have been able to count on a regular source of cash income. Local opportunities for wage-labour are sporadic, temporary and mostly involve manual labour in state-sponsored infrastructure projects. Unsurprisingly, there is considerable movement, particularly of young people aged between 15 and 30, towards regional towns or the capital in search of education and employment opportunities.

About half the current population of Babulo are originally from Afaloicai, a village originally located to the north of Babulo. The majority of people from Afaloicai were forcibly relocated to Babulo during the Indonesian occupation but some were also part of earlier migratory movements from the Matebian region.<sup>3</sup> The other half are members of one of the eight constituent hamlets that officially form part of Babulo village. Hamlets in East Timor continue to be a social rather than a territorial category and the population of these hamlets broadly corresponds to a descent group or clan consisting of a number of lineages or sub-lineages centred around their respective ‘sacred houses’ or *um luli*.

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<sup>1</sup> When I inquired about the lack of fishing activities a number of people suggested to me that the people are Babulo are not naturally coastal people. They only moved to coastal areas following the Indonesian invasion and therefore there is no ‘culture’ of fishing.

<sup>2</sup> In the past, I was told that fishing at the Bee Saen lagoon was regulated by means of a yearly ceremony performed by the ritual authorities of Vessoru-Uaitame to ‘open’ the lagoon to the sea. Once the lagoon was open, the fish in the lagoon would swim towards the sea providing local people with bumper catches.

<sup>3</sup> Although many of the people from Afaloicai have long been settled in the area, they continue to maintain links to their ancestral lands (returning on a regular basis to their place of origin to participate in collective rituals or house-based activities) and make a clear distinction when speaking about their place of residence and place of origin. Despite the fact that they ‘officially’ live within the territorial boundaries of Babulo, the people of Afaloicai remain under the jurisdiction of their own hamlet and village officials.

Research for this paper was conducted mainly in relation to five hamlets: Beli, Daralari, Aha Bu'u, Kota Nisi and Roma. The house-based groups that underpin these five hamlets form the core of a distinct ritual domain (*rea luli*) known as *rea luli Ina Ama Beli Daralari/Babulo Mane Hitu* (Mother, father Beli Daralari/Babulo Seven Brothers) which is centred on the principal sacred houses of Daralari hamlet, the *uma buta* (white house) and *uma ita* (black house) located at a place called Uato Soba on Baha Liurai (The King's Mountain).<sup>4</sup>

### **The emplaced authority of the Source of the Land**

The notion of 'lord of the land', commonly expressed as *rai nain* in Tetun, exists in varying forms throughout Timor-Leste and the Austronesian cultural sphere more broadly. Typically, it refers to one particular clan or origin group and their senior leaders, who claim historic-mythical attachments to, and exercise ritual authority over, defined areas of land and natural resources. While there has been considerable scholarship on traditional or 'local' governance structures in post-occupation Timor-Leste, much of this has focused on forms of 'political' rather than 'ritual' authority (Hohe, 2002; Ospina and Hohe, 2002; Cummins, 2010; Brown, 2012; Nixon, 2006). As a consequence, the significance of customary beliefs and practices concerning the relationship between people and the land, and what this reveals about the dynamics of power at local level, has been overlooked.

In Tetun the notion of *rai nain* has a double meaning – one human and visible and the other non-human and invisible (McWilliam, 2011). Although in Nauteti the notion of lord of the land (*rai nain*) is often also conflated in the single term *rea bu'u* (*rea* land, *bu'u* lord) distinct terms also exist for its human (*rea netana*, source of the land) and non-human (*rea bu'u*, lord of the land) manifestations. In its human and visible form, *rea netana* (source of the land) refers to one particular clan or origin group and their senior leaders, who claim historic-mythical attachments to, and exercise ritual authority over, defined areas of land and natural resources. In its non-human and invisible application *rea bu'u* (lord of the land) refers to autochthonous non-human or 'spirit' entities that, together with the ancestors, animate the natural environment. McWilliam has argued

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout this chapter I refer to this domain as 'the ritual domain of Babulo'. The hamlets of Liasidi, Abadere and Asamuta form part of a distinct ritual domain.

that the ‘doubly constituted notion of the ‘lord of the land ... reflects a deep orientation to binary classification and the ontological basis of diarchy as a characteristic of Austronesian ritual polities’ (2011, 63). In Babulo, assertions of authority or control over defined territories or domains are ‘simultaneously’ claims about relationships and obligations towards the ancestors and non-human or ‘spirit’ entities that reside in, and are believed to enliven, the land.

In Babulo, only members of the senior houses of the Daralari descent group are considered to be ‘people of the source’ (*ki rea netana*). The formal ritual title of *rea mumu*, *rea uato* (iron rod of the earth, stone of the land) is bestowed on one senior Daralari representative who operates in collaboration and consultation with two or three elders, who are also ritual specialists.<sup>5</sup> Together these senior members of the Daralari descent group claim over-arching responsibility for the resolution of disputes concerning access to land and natural resources within the ritual domain of Babulo; establish seasonal interdictions regulating the planting and harvesting of crops as well as access to certain areas of old-forest and certain bodies of water; and conduct major collective rituals associated with the agricultural calendar and smaller house-based rituals directed towards house-ancestors. Since independence, they have been regularly called on by local government authorities to perform ceremonies aimed at facilitating the implementation of development projects or infrastructure works within the domain.

Daralari claims to emplaced authority are based on narratives of origin that not only establish their ancestors as the founders of the ritual domain but also connect the founder-ancestors to the generative power of the sea. These narratives are not uncontested and multiple narratives of origin coexist among the various house-based groups that form part of Babulo. Nevertheless, the reason why the Daralari origin narratives continue to claim pre-eminence, I suggest, lies in the energy and intensity invested in preserving relationships and alliances, and guarding sacred legacies that link the Daralari to the primordial past and the sacred origins of life and fertility.

## **People of the sea**

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<sup>5</sup> As Traube (1986: 113) observed in the Mambae ritual context, in Babulo the language of authority is singular. Although the over-arching authority of the ‘source of the land’ is embodied in one senior Daralari elder who is given the title of iron rod of the earth, stone of the land (*rea mumu*, *rea uato*), source of the land status is collectively shared by senior male members of the Daralari founder-houses.

The Daralari consider themselves to be ‘people of the sea’ and trace their descent back to a shape-shifting crocodile king and his seven sons. Daralari narratives of origin recount the journey of their ancestors from a far away kingdom across the seas to Timor island.<sup>6</sup> This journey takes place in the ‘ancient time of the ancestors and forebears’. It traces the path of the ancestors through various key locations on their journey to Timor and it establishes the precise landing point of the ancestors on the coastline of Babulo at a place called Kai Sahe Luli.

Kai Sahe Luli is a rocky outcrop which forms the shape of a crocodile tail on the coast of Babulo some 4 km from the settlement of Aliambata. As the landing place of the ancestors, Kai Sahe Luli is imbued with symbolism and spiritual potency. Not only does its shape of the outcrop resemble that of the tail of the great crocodile on which the seven brothers rode to Timor but the area is also home to large salt-water crocodiles. The crocodile in its various manifestations is a recurrent cultural theme across East Timor (and West Timor); it appears as the origin ancestor of local rulers, the creator of Timor itself or a powerful spirit deity that provides bounty and fertility in exchange for sacrifice and worship (McWilliam, 2003).

From Kai Sahe Luli, the journey of the crocodile king and his sons continues to the sacred mountain Baha Liurai (lit. mountain of the king) making several critical stop-off points along the way. The journey takes place through water channels connecting a number of named springs – Loi Bai, Kabu Rea, Liho Bui that trace a path from the coast to the sacred mountain of Baha Liurai (Mountain of the King). Today these points mark significant sacred or *luli* sites where ancestral and non-human presence is strongly felt and communicative rituals are regularly performed.

On arrival to the land of Babulo, the ‘seven brothers’ (*Mane Hitu*)<sup>7</sup> used the sacred powers of the crocodile-king – the power of the sea and the sky – to organise and lead the community they found there (Amaral 2001). However, they did not know how to cultivate the land. The brothers observed

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<sup>6</sup> This narrative is a composite of various versions of a Daralari origin myth I documented in Babulo. One version I was urged to consult by the elders was recorded and documented by the niece of one of the elders as part of her undergraduate thesis on oral traditions, sections of which are reproduced below (see Amaral, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that in Naueti language the literal translation of *Mane Hitu* – which is Tetun language - is *Anana Kailima-resi-kairua*. However, I never heard the seven brothers referred to in this way. One can’t help but speculate if the origin myth was influenced by outsiders.

local people planting seeds in the ground and harvesting crops but they had no tools and no seeds. To overcome this problem the youngest brother decided to sacrifice himself for his siblings and parents.<sup>8</sup> The youngest brother asked his older brothers to kill him and bury him in the centre of a field they had prepared for planting. After a period of time had passed the field was full of corn and a variety of other crops.

The sacrificial act of the youngest brother establishes a visceral connection to the land and opens the exchange cycle between ancestors and the living. Through his death the youngest brother is considered to be the ‘origin’ or source of cultivated crops. Life, conceived as fertility and bounty, is secured through death, in the form of ritual sacrifice. The sacrifice of the youngest brother is an unsolicited ‘gift’, he was not asked or forced by his brothers or anyone else to sacrifice himself, and in doing so places his descendants and those who live off their land under permanent obligation (see Godelier, 1999: 171–175).

One would expect this narrative of origin to provide sufficient ‘cosmological authenticity’ to Daralari claims to emplaced authority (see Weiner 1992). In fact the story may carry another layer of symbolic meaning which has many parallels with other origin stories collected along the southern coast of East Timor (see Palmer 2015b). The seven brothers carry with them the power of the sea. More than this, they embody this power. Water derived from the seas and oceans – represented by the youngest brother in this narrative – is believed to be the ‘blood’ or ‘energy’ of the earth (Palmer 2015). The sun draws the water out of the earth and in the process gives life. Through the action of the water, earth and sun are united in a cycle of creative action. Water then returns to the ocean (cf. Palmer 2015b, 47). In later Daralari narratives, the ancestors return their powers of creation to the sea. The cycle renews itself through the ritual work of Source of the Land. This then is the ‘sacred’ origin of the Daralari Source of the Land’s authority, it relates not only to the origin of crops, but (potentially) the origin of all things.

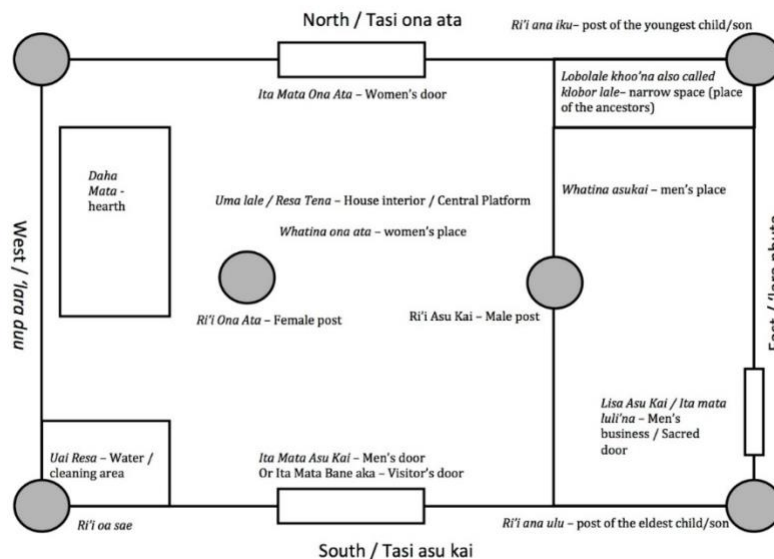
### **Symbolic representations of ritual authority**

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<sup>8</sup> Similar stories are found in Flores, Alor and other parts of Eastern Indonesia. Oftentimes rather than a younger brother it is a sister who is sacrificed.

Daralari origin narratives go on to describe how the eldest brother and two younger siblings remained in Babulo and built a house on Baha Liurai.<sup>9</sup> They called this house the white house (N: *uma buta*) and stored the power of the sea in it. Later they built another house, the black house (N: *uma ita*) in which they lived and placed the symbols of the king – the hat, rattan cane, special garments and swords. The ‘spiritual’ white house and the ‘temporal’ black house are the material and spiritual concretisation of the dual nature of the power and authority of the source of the land.

Located further up the side of Baha Liurai, previous White House and Black House structures were destroyed at the time of the Indonesian invasion. Smaller, more modest structures were built as temporary repositories of sacred objects during the occupation. However, as early as mid-2000, rebuilding began at the current site of Uato Soba. The new location was chosen specifically for its accessibility and visibility. As the headman of the *uma karibela* put it to me, ‘So that those passing through would know they were on sacred land’. The principal white house is oriented in such a way that the men’s door and room face south, towards the sea, to enable the ancestors to enter and take their place in the house.



<sup>9</sup> The remaining brothers branch out the domain to the kingdoms of Uaitame, Laga, Laivai and Irabi, Uani Uma, Builo and Iliomar. Most of these locations are located east of the domain.

Since 2011 the white house (N: *uma buta*), the black house (N: *uma ita*), and the ‘ironwood’ house (N: *uma kaibelak*) the house of the senior Daralari lineage have all been rebuilt in much grander style and with greater decorative and architectural details some of which is intended to reaffirm the sacred origins of the ancestors and the sea.

Photo of posts of *uma kaibelak* filled with coral.

In Babulo, every origin house contains ‘precious things’, objects of value, which may be transferred, and some also contain sacred objects which cannot. What distinguishes these objects from others is their special treatment. Sacred objects are generally kept out of sight, securely stored in old palm-leaf baskets, wrapped in cloth and placed in the darkest recesses of ancestral houses, which in some cases are also subject to prohibitions that ‘set them apart’ from other dwellings. If these objects are ever brought out for display, or used in the context of ritual, they may well remain totally hidden or partially concealed. Sacred objects are treated with respect and fear. They are revered, but not ‘adored’ or ‘worshipped’. They are named objects endowed with a force that links them to an ancestral past and requires that they be passed down from one generation to the next.

Daralari elders are keen to point out that they do not worship *uato no kai* (literally, the rock and the tree), but rather insist that even prior to the arrival of the first Catholic missionaries they believed in a divine entity called Ula ’Lara (Moon Sun). Although this divinity is now frequently equated with the concept of Aman Maromak, the term Catholic missionaries chose to describe the Christian God, the nature of the divinity of Ula ’Lara remains unclear. With reference to Makassae and Fataluku equivalents, *Uru Watu* and *Uru Vacu*, De Araujo suggests that this divinity is in essence the ‘force’ or ‘spirit’ that ‘clings’ to sacred objects and makes them inalienable (De Araujo 2013, 44; Mauss 1990, 44). Not all sacred objects, however, are endowed with the same force or spiritual potency (cf. Bovensiepen 2014b). The Daralari Source of the Land retain for themselves the ‘most sacred’ and spiritually potent object, the origins of which are a closely guarded secret.



The secrecy surrounding its origins is part of what sets this object apart and imbues it with spiritual potency. Addressed as ‘the great one, the longest one’ (N: *heba oli, nara oli*), ‘the great king’ (N: *heba oli liurai*) or ‘the hidden stone’ (N: *maka oni*), this object embodies the power of the sea and is stored in the White House (N: *Uma Buta*), the seat of ritual power. This object is comparable to the named heirlooms sought by the people of Tanimbar, eastern Indonesia, ‘acquired by the ancestors through actions that transcend the social order;’ it has become ‘a sign of the powers that lie before, beyond and outside and even against society but also the sign of the powers that underlie and constitute the very basis of its possibility.’ (McKinnon 1991, 62).

### **Inalienable gifts and the distribution/dispersal of power**

Godelier makes a distinction between inalienable things that are alienated (gift objects) and inalienable things that are unalienated (sacred objects). The distinction between ‘gift objects’ and ‘sacred objects’ is critical to his argument that sacred objects are ‘a source of power within and over society’ (Godelier 2002, 31; 1999). Sacred objects are presented as having been given to particular groups or individuals to look after. They may be used in their own interests or on behalf of ‘society’. They can bring benefits but also inflict harm. Godelier argues that strategies of giving and keeping play distinct yet complementary roles in the ‘production and reproduction of hierarchies among individuals, groups and even societies’ within gift-exchange based economies (1999, 33). He goes further to suggest that sacred objects, in these circumstances, operate on analogy with gold held in a bank insofar as they guarantee the value of the gift objects in circulation. In the case of Babulo, I would argue that the exchange of certain gift objects has operated as a means of integrating or incorporating subsidiary and in-migrant groups representing a potential threat into the established social order. However, these gift objects do not simply operate as mere representations or ‘substitutes’ (see Godelier 1999, 149) of sacred objects held by origin groups but carry with them some part of their source effectively drawing the recipients into a relationship of permanent obligation to the founder-ancestors and their descendants.

Paradoxically, I would argue, by sharing power, origin groups have been able to increase the symbolic value of objects in their possession that represent the sacred source of their power. Nevertheless, this strategy has not been without its risks. One way in which dispersal serves to

strengthen the origin operates most evidently within the sphere of agnatic exchanges as a means of integrating various parts into a whole. All clan, lineage and sub-lineage houses store some items, which are believed to have once belonged to their forebears. Houses form part of larger groupings called *baha* (lit: mountain or settlement) and are typically classified as *kaka* (elder) and *wari* (younger) in relation to one another, the eldest house being most closely related to the common ancestors. The transmission and distribution of ancestral sacra within a clan or lineage group reflects this differentiation. Each time a new lineage or sub-lineage house is established some part of the group's common legacy is transmitted to the members of the new house. The eldest house retains ancestral sacra of greater symbolic value to that stored in 'younger' houses. The transmission of these objects serves to affirm the identity of a new house by acknowledging the ties that bind it to older houses and the ancestors.

The Daralari Lords of the Land claim that in the past their ancestors held both ritual authority and jural power over the land and people of their domain. However, they acknowledge that at some stage in their history, their forebears began to 'retreat into darkness', delegating specific tasks to members of other lineages and sub-lineages and immigrant groups.<sup>10</sup> Ostensibly, Daralari elders state that this 'retreat' was a conscious decision in order to preserve the secrets of their land from 'outsiders' – in particular, the colonial authorities and the Catholic Church. However, they also acknowledge that the delegation of tasks, distribution of ancestral sacra and allocation of land to other groups was also a means of appeasing subsidiary lineage houses and in-migrant groups that represented a potential threat to their authority.

Daralari narratives of origin describe how, early on, the ancestors created two *kai ua* (T: wooden canes, T: rota) *Kaburai* and *Asurate*. They delegated the task to monitor the use of land and natural resources (*osi hai, bosa wai*: guard the fields and the paddies) to a lineage house which is known by the name of the rota *Kaburai*. The other rota *Asurate* was given to another lineage house with the task to 'assist' the king (Lords of the Land). This lineage house eventually split into two, both houses retain the name of the rota but are distinguished as *Uma Asurate Renu* (helpers of the people) and *Uma Asurate Liurai* (helpers of the king). The function of the headman of the house of *Kaburai* is practical - to monitor land use and access to natural resources, including the

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<sup>10</sup> The darkness (*namadegu lale*) represents the spiritual domain inhabited by the ancestors and nature spirits.

application of seasonal prohibitions on the harvesting of various products, collecting tributes for collective ceremonies and / or exacting fines for the infringement of prohibitions. Representatives of the houses of Asurate Renu and Asurate Liurai assist the Kaburai and the Lords of the Land in matters relating to land management and perform specific tasks in the course of communal rituals.

The lineages of the Kaburai, Asurate Renu and Asurate Liurai have been incorporated Daralari genealogy and form part of Baha Daralari but these links are assumed or prescriptive rather than demonstrated. The granting of titles and symbols of office to these houses was and continues to be [re]enacted within the framework of affinal relations. In 2007, the lineage of *Asurate Renu* rebuilt their ancestral house as part of a process of reconnection with their ancestral past and land. An important part of the house ceremony was the placement of objects deemed sacred to members of the lineage group, including the *kai ua* (cane) granted by the ancestors of the Daralari Lords of the Land, into their special place (*klobor* in Naueti, *klot oan* in Tetun. Place of the ancestors) within the house. The original (or possibly another copy) *kai ua* was partially destroyed (or possibly lost - there are conflicting stories) sometime in the 50s or 60s and it was not until the 1990s that a replacement was made using parts of the original. At this time, the sacred lineage house, which had been destroyed in the course of the Indonesian invasion, had not yet been rebuilt and therefore the replacement *kai ua* could not be re-instated within the house. The symbolism surrounding the re-presentation of the *kai ua* was that of a daughter being 'given' in marriage. Along with the *kai ua*, other typically 'feminine' goods such as traditional cloth, rice, pigs as well as betel nut and leaves were given to the house of Asurate Renu by the Daralari Lords of the Land.

The gift of the *kai ua* (or in this case the restoration of the original gift) establishes (or reconfirms) the exchange relationship between the Daralari Lords of the Land and the house of Asurate Renu. As in a real marriage exchange, this relationship is asymmetrically weighted. Like a daughter given in marriage, the *kai ua* carries the life-giving qualities bestowed on the descendants of the founder-ancestors. The *kai ua* cannot be returned or exchanged. To the houses in which they reside, they are sacred objects. However, their symbolic value is always relative to that of their source.

An altogether more complex set of arrangements governs relations between the Daralari Lords of the Land and two groups, which have come to represent secular power and spiritual authority

within the Daralari domain. The delegation of authority to these groups and dualistic structures of authority created in the process reflect common patterns and themes observed throughout Austronesian societies (Fox 1996). However, what is significant is that in Daralari narratives of origin, during the process of delegating specific powers to these groups the emphasis is placed on the locations where the objects were placed to be ‘watched after’ by ritual specialists called *makaer luki* (keepers of the sacra) rather than the specific groups who received them. I would suggest that these objects are therefore primarily bound to sites of significance within Daralari origin narratives and secondarily to those appointed as their custodians.

According to local narratives, the *Kaburai* asked the ancestors of the present-day Lords of the Land to grant his house something that those under his jurisdiction could ‘fear’. As a result, some garments belonging to the ancestors were placed in the sacred house at Burlalu and a *makaer luki*, was appointed as keeper of the sacra and ritual specialist to work with the *Kaburai* to ‘watch over’ the sacred objects and preside over rituals associated with the rice fields of Babulo (*ia ini ei osi, la bosa wai la Babulo*). Relations between the Daralari Lords of the Land and the keepers of the house at Burlalu have always been tense as they vie for ritual control over the domain. The house itself is located close to the spring of Kabu Rea and in some versions of the Daralari origin story, the ancestral crocodile king first settled on the site of the sacred house of Burlalu. Historically, the Lords of the Land have tried to keep the power of the *makaer luki* at Burlalu in check through the offices of the *Maioro* who operated as a messenger between the Lords of the Land and the *makaer luki*. Since independence, these tensions have re-emerged as the Daralari Lords of the Land seek to reaffirm their claims to over-arching ritual and political authority.

In 2007, during the course of a ritual performed to ‘inform’ and ‘request permission’ to the ancestors and water spirits to commence drilling the foundations of a bridge across Bee Bui River, there was a public altercation between a group of Daralari elders and representatives from the sacred house at Burlalu over who should perform the ritual. The son of the *makaer luki* argued that the ancestors had delegated the task of performing such rituals to the ritual specialists from Burlalu. The Daralari elders remonstrated by reminding him that their status was dependent of the gifts granted by the ancestors to whose descendants they are indebted and owe respect. A natural event appeared to vindicate the Source of the Land’s position. Just as the ears of the sacrificial pig and

buffalo were being driven into the spot where the main supporting pillar of the bridge was going to be erected, a massive windstorm blew along the course of the river from the sea. As the storm blew lifting up sand and dust, the Liurai Source of the Land steadfastly made his invocations to the ancestors while several of the dignitaries present for the event, including the sub-district Administrator and village chiefs from Babulo and Afaloicai, ran for cover by the banks of the river. On either side of the river it remained calm. After the ritual had been performed and while the sacrificial meat was being butchered for distribution among the houses of the Daralari origin group, those present discussed the significance of the storm. There was a general consensus that the storm was a sign from the '*tasi nain*' (N: owner/master/lord of the sea), but they could not decide whether this boded well for the construction project or not. Later, the *Liurai* Source of the Land took me to one side and explained that it was their (Daralari) '*Avo Tasi*' (Tetun for grandfather / spirit ancestor of the sea) who had come to see what they were doing in the river and given his approval.

In a house at Borusoba, a hat, representing the symbol of office of those whose role it is to guard the people of Babulo was placed. The sacred house at Borusoba is now associated with one of the principal in-migrant groups settled within the domain of the Daralari Lords of the Land. Today this group, originally known as the Burmeta, is divided into two lineages broadly corresponding to present day hamlets of Aha Bu'u (descendants of Maugae) and Kota Nisi or Kai Du (descendants of Nokogamu). Daralari describe the descendants of Burmeta as *asuwain* (warriors) from the Matebian region who stopped and camped on land close to Baha Liurai on their way to offer vassalage to the kingdom of Luca. Rather than let these warriors join forces with their strong neighbour, the Daralari ancestors offered the Burmeta some land on which to settle and in exchange asked them to protect the borders of their domain. To the Burmeta the Daralari ancestors gave the title of prescriptive *ana bo'ona, ana tadana* (the eldest and wisest son). This group was designated the task to *lai reinu, lai rea* (guard the people, guard the land), to rule over the people and protect the borders of the domain. The hat stored in the sacred house at Borusoba is their symbol of office. However, as with the garments in the sacred house at Burlalu, the ancestors are believed to have appointed a ritual specialist to ensure that the Burmeta did not try to harness the power independently of the Lords of the Land.

The Burmeta became known as the gate-keepers (*ita mata, kai hene, door and gate*) between the traditional 'inner' community and 'outsiders', in particular the colonial authorities. The Portuguese granted the title of Tenente Coronel to the head of the Burmeta clan and traditionally chefe suco (village headmen) were chosen from this group. Members of this group also possess a *rota* (T: cane, rattan stick). This rattan stick serves as a symbol of office to *ukun* or rule over the people of Babulo but it is tied to another source of authority based in Viqueque and through Viqueque, I would suggest, to the colonial administration.

The account of the incorporation of the Burmeta involves 'installing the outsider inside' a pattern typically found in many Austronesian societies and beyond (Fox 1996, Sahlins 2008). The Burmeta may well be described as 'stranger-kings' who came from outside and entered into a compact with the Daralari Lords of the Land. As warriors, the Burmeta were a potential threat to Daralari continuity. However, this potentially life-taking relationship was transformed into a life-giving one through gift exchange. Sahlins views the relationship between indigenous insiders and 'stranger-king' outsiders as conceptually akin to those between affines (2008, 196). If existence (encoded in the incest taboo) involves a dependence on external sources, then stranger-kings share the same life-giving properties of wife-givers and consequently command a position of superiority in relation to indigenous insiders (Sahlins 2008). While the Burmeta are socially superior within the sphere of secular power in Babulo, this power is kept in check within the spiritual domain of the Daralari Lords of the Land where power and authority is relative to origin (See Fox 1996, Vischer 2009).

From the point of view of the Daralari Lords of the Land, the delegation of tasks to subsidiary and in-migrants groups, accompanied by the granting of symbols of office and/or land, operated as a deliberate strategy of gift-giving aimed at creating bonds of interdependence between givers and receivers. This resonates with Godelier's notion of *keeping-for-giving* and *giving-for-keeping* insofar as these gift-objects, even when transformed into sacred objects by the recipients, are symbolically less potent than those that remain in the hands of the Daralari Lords of the Land (1999). I would suggest that by describing this process of devolution as a 'retreat into darkness' the Daralari Lords of the Land are in fact seeking to reaffirm their connection to the ancestors who

inhabit this space and, therefore, their ‘religious monopoly’ over the means to access and handle the life-giving and life-controlling powers at the source of life – the sea.

### **The encompassing role of Luca**

While historians and anthropologists have written extensively about the great western kingdom of We-Hali (Therik 2004; Francillon 1967; Schulte Nordholt 1971; Hägerdal 2012; Gunn 1999; Soares 2003) and its relation to other major ritual centres, less has been written about Luca as a pre-colonial centre of ritual and political power (see Barnes, Hagerdal and Palmer 2017). Although the political significance of Luca has long declined, the symbolic meanings and its encoding in ritual form remain central to many mythic narratives across the region. In many narratives it is Luca’s power to communicate with the sea (and, through this, it is claimed its capacity to access the wealth of the underworld) remains a recurring theme (Hicks 2004: 66, Palmer 2015: 39-66). Palmer has eloquently described how emanating from the source at Luca, people and water spread out across the region, settling in new places and inter-marrying. She argues that it was *sacra* (such as betel nut and gold) and sacred (*lulik*) waters drawn from the springs of Luca that gave its emissaries the right to (re)create new centres of power (ibid), which nevertheless – as in the more localised cases of dispersal found in Babulo – remained subordinate to the central source of life.

Traces of Luca can be found throughout the landscape of south-eastern Timor Leste including Babulo and further east towards Uato-Carabau Iliomar and beyond. These traces are often linked to specific water sources, rivers, springs or lagoons and their respective spirit guardians eels and crocodiles. Oral narratives from Babulo establish their relationship to Luca through the mediation of the kingdom of Vessoru (We’/water Soru/Tied or Drawing together of Water). The kingdom of Vessoru is said to have encompassed much of the south-eastern coastline, possibly stretching as far west as Beasu, to Iliomar in the east (Da Silva 2004). Through its relationship with Vessoru, Babulo was connected to Luca, and possibly the ritual centre of Wehali, by a tributary system of ritualized harvest offerings (Belo 2013; Therik 2004; Forman 1978).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Parallel systems involved the distribution of symbols of power/office including rattan sticks (T: *rota*, N: *kai ua*) which may or may not have been linked to Portuguese colonial strategies of indirect rule. Forman proposes that in the eighteenth century the Portuguese sought to expand their tribute relations through a system of ‘telescoping authority’, symbolically represented by the conferral of a staff or ‘sceptre’ (Forman 1977, Gunter 2008, 41).

Vestiges of this relationship with Vessoru and Luca remain to this day in the form of material objects, personal and house names, oral histories, and genealogical links. Members of the senior houses of Aha Bu'u (Burmeta/village chiefs) and Daralari (Source of the Land) are related to the former rulers of Luca, and there are two houses in the hamlet of Beli (ancestral sibling house to Daralari) that are directly linked to Luca through oral histories. The house of Uma Timor (Mou Kai, Uani Kai) 'received' representatives from Luca who came to collect tribute. The house of Uma Malae (Kai Bira, Kar(a) Soru) was the *kusu selu* (saddle house) and resting place for representatives from Luca. One informant also suggested that the red-and-black cloth that distinguishes women from the high-ranking core origin groups of Babulo (Daralari and Beli), called *krabi wa'e mae*, was also symbolic of the relationship with Luca. *Wa'e* means to cradle something protectively in one's arms like a baby, and *mae* means red, symbolizing blood and fertility (see also Hamilton and Barkmann 2014).

[Photo of women wearing *krabi wa'e mae*]

Josh Trindade, of Aha Bu'u, suggested to that the woven cloth figuratively represented the protective and encompassing nature of relations between Luca and Babulo. Senior houses of the Daralari origin group and the house of the former *liurai* of Babulo, from Aha Bu'u, are both related to the Luca *liurai* family of Clementino dos Reis Amaral through marriage—although members of these houses cannot recall how far back these alliances date.

Yet, these vestiges of knowledge of a primarily political alliance between the chiefdom of Babulo and Luca, by way of the kingdom of Vessoru, are intertwined with oral accounts that suggest a deeper level of relations and resonate with other histories collected on the southern coast and in the Baucau-Viqueque area, where Luca's relationship with local populations is secured through the medium of water and consolidated through marriage (Palmer 2015).

According to one narrative the people of Vessoru were descendants of a 'younger brother' of Luca who came to the area in search of land. At the time of their arrival the founder-ancestors of the domain, the *Mane Hitu* (seven brothers) were at war with a neighbouring kingdom called Builó



(located in present-day Ossorua). The ancestors asked the leaders of Vessoru to help broker a lasting peace with their enemy and granted them some land on which to settle in recognition of their role as peacemakers. Elders from Babulo claim that this land, which is located between two rivers, Bee Lia and Bee Saketo, was never fully relinquished to the people of Vessoru, but access was secured by virtue of a marriage. One of the female ancestors of the domain was betrothed to the *dom* of Vessoru. She was expressly tasked with watching over two springs, *bee matan Saketo* and *bee matan Lobuto*, thus becoming the custodian of the water (t: *bee nain*, n: *wai bu'u*). This role has been passed down from the mother to her sons and their descendants ever since.

This, however, was no ordinary betrothal and marriage. In oral histories from both Babulo and Vessoru, the ‘younger brother’ of Luca who becomes the *dom* (Portuguese title given to local rulers) of Vessoru, is the ‘king of the underworld’ (*liurai rai okos*) and the Beli/Daralari female ancestor is the ‘eldest sister’ (sometimes daughter) of the Mane Hitu founder-ancestors. The current *dom* of Vessoru, who inherited the title from his father, who died in 2004, recorded the history thus:

Nai Mesak (the sister or female descendant of the Seven Brothers/Mane Hitu) goes to fetch water at the spring of Bee Lia. At the spring Nai Mesak collects water and then returns home. Once home, she realizes she has left her hairpin (*ulu suku*) at the spring; so Nai Mesak returns to the spring to look for her hairpin. At the spring she looks everywhere, but cannot find it. Suddenly, a green-yellow fish (*ikan modok*) appears and asks Nai Mesak, ‘What are you looking for?’, to which Nai Mesak replies: ‘I am looking for my hairpin’. The yellowish fish says, ‘Your hairpin disappeared in the water’. Then Nai Mesak disappears into the underworld; she does not die, but instead marries a *liurai* (king)—the king of the underworld.

Nai Mesak’s servant looks for her all day, but cannot find her. That night her servant dreams that Nai Mesak has married the king of the underworld. In her dream, the servant looks for Nai Mesak and finds her at the side of the king of the underworld as his queen. The king of the underworld tells the servant: ‘Your king and Nai Mesak cannot return. So go and tell your *liurai* (ruler/king) to make a buffalo enclosure’. The servant returns to tell the *liurai*. With great sadness, the *liurai* and his servants do as the king of the underworld has asked. They work for seven days, then one

night at around nine o'clock a buffalo call emerges from the spring, followed by red, black, and striped (*makerek*, 'colourful') buffaloes, one after another. The last one to come out of the spring carries a golden disc (*belak*), glass beads (*morten*), and a sword (*surik*) attached to its horns. The *liurai* sees that this is enough (exchange goods for his sister) and with a wooden stick he stops the flow. After the buffalo emerged from Bee Lia, the *liurai* prepared an enclosure called Tapalu. Now people live there.

This history recorded by the *dom* of Vessoru is replete with motifs we find time and time again oral narratives from the south-eastern coast of Timor-Leste – Seven Brothers, a watery underworld which is also the source of generative power and wealth and the inter-action between human and non-human actors mediated through a cultural object in this instance a hairpin (see Hicks 2007). Drawing on the work of Mauss and Hubert on gifts given in ritual sacrifice and the relationship between gods and human beings, Hicks (2007), suggests that material artefacts that intrude from the quotidian world to the realm of the spirit may demonstrate a potential for human action and a capacity to re-order relationships of subordination and superiority between the human and the divine. Read from a Daralari perspective this opens up the possibility for a reversal of relations between Luca and Babulo. (MORE HERE)

## **Conclusion**

What can this discussion bring to our 'hot pot'? Well, I hope to some extent to have offered a glimpse of the localised complexity of cosmological orders that draw on particular meaning of the sea as a source of generative power (and maybe of powerful outsiders) but also how we might think about the distribution or dispersal of power within and between small and larger politico-rituals domains through the medium of water. Water that either flows from the source or water that ripples out from the centre where the further from the centre we get, the less concrete or apparent the links to the centre become.

As I finish writing this paper I have learnt of a new publication by US historian based in Indonesia and Singapore, Douglas Kammen, entitled 'Cina Timor'. While this book focuses on the role that

ethnic Chinese played in the development of Portuguese Timor and the making of modern Timor-Leste, it also explore the diverse origins of ethnic Chinese in Portuguese Timor – early Hokkien-speaking pioneers whose offspring engaged in trade both with and within the colonial state, Hakka-speaking agriculturalists from the Pearl River Delta and Meixian regions of Guangdong, Macanese civil servants in the colonial administration, and Cantonese convicts sent to serve out their sentences on Timor’s distant shores (Kammen and Chen 2019). I am also reminded to the discovery in 2014 of an ancient Dong Son bronze drum – an icon of the Dong Son culture of the ancient Vietnamese people (700 B.C. – 100 AD) – not the first but the most intact of its kind found on in Timor-Leste. I wonder what new insights these publications and discoveries will provide to the connections we seek to uncover throughout the region.