

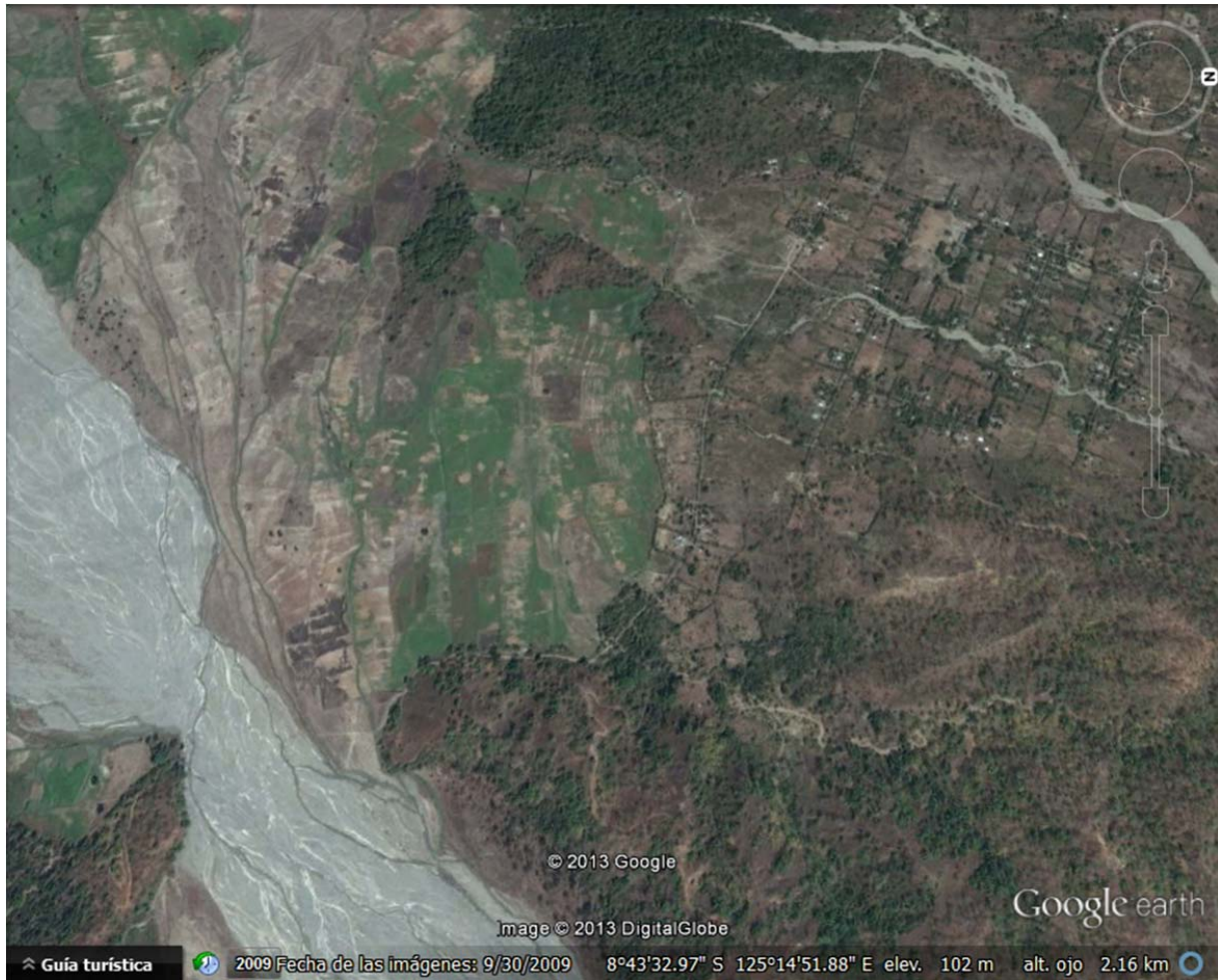
The politics of ritual. Traditional authorities and social discourses in the *nahe biti* ritual in *Faulara* (Liquiçá district), Timor-Leste.

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Abstract. This paper describes a particular stage of the ritual cycle related with the production of rice, called *nahe biti*, and the actors who take part on it in the hamlet of *Faulara* (District of Liquiçá –Timor Leste). Local narratives and discourses related with the *nahe biti* and the position of the ritual leader, the *rai na'in kaer bua malus* are also described. The paper analyzes the different social positions with respect to the power sourced by the access to the ritual practice and shows how rather than a mechanical obedience to a set of static principles, the ritual brings along a constant negotiation between the different actors, who struggle to impose their views of the different narratives that provide legitimacy to the ritual power, discursively shaping a more favorable scenario for themselves. These discourses and strategies have to be understood as immersed not only in the occurrences of the local community but also as part of the wider political economy and the current changes Timor Leste is living.

Contents

Introduction.....	2
Ethnographical setting.....	3
About the <i>Nahe Biti</i>	6
The politics of ritual	13
Inheriting of the position.....	13
Narrative of inheritance	13
Actual process of inheritance.....	16
After the cutting of a tree.....	17
Conclusion	19
Bibliography	20



Introduction

This paper describes a particular stage of the ritual cycle related with the production of rice, called *nahe biti*, and the actors who take part on it in the hamlet of *Faulara* (District of Liquiçá -Timor Leste). It also account for the sources of legitimacy of the main ritual leader, the *rai na' in kaer bua malus* and the disputes settled among three figures with authority to perform rituals. By doing so we analyze the different positions with respect to the ritual power and the various strategies developed by the different actors both to gain access to the power sourced by the ritual practice or to de-authorize to those who have it in order to shape a most favourable scene for themselves. This complex game is played by all the members of the community in the domains of the mythical narrative, the ritual practice and the everyday discourse.

Ethnographical setting

Faulara is the name used by most of the people of the district of Liquiçá¹ to refer to the *aldeia* [hamlet] of Lepa. It is the only non-mountainous part of the *suku* Leotelá, Liquiçá sub-district. It is located in an alluvial plain² formed in the downstream of the Laueli³ riverbank and borders on Maubara district (*suku* Lisadila in the plains and *suku* Vatubou in the mountains) and Ermera district (Hatulia sub-district, *suku* Aculau).

People in *Faulara* are mainly peasants, existing but a few formal remunerated jobs, consisting on teachers of the primary school and agriculture extensionist (both from the state and NGOs). There are some other small remunerated activities provided by government and AID institutions such as the the 3 US \$ / per day and person.

The place is an important location of agricultural production and one of the few places in Liquiçá where wet-rice production is possible, due to the permanent source of water from the Laueli river.⁶ Even though it could be technically possible, most of the people don't cultivate more than one harvest in a year. After the rice season is over, farmers start preparing the rice fields to cultivate maize on them, developing an agricultural diversification pattern that has been deemed as a food security strategy common in many peasant societies (Martínez González & Gárate Castro 1993). Cassava is also cultivated, usually within the house gardens (*kintal*), not in the rice fields. Seasonal fruits such as pineapples, mangoes or bananas are used as cash crops. Small teak plantations were used for timber both for personal needs and as an eventual source of income if needed.

Another important economic activity is livestock rearing. Cattle, poultry, pigs and goats are the most common ones. Some households may sell some of their animals when facing financial or food supply problems,⁷ but they are mainly stored for special occasions and

¹ The name is composed of two Tokodede words: *fau* (rubber tree) and *lara* (place) meaning 'the place of the rubber trees'. As we were told in several interviews while making the folk history of the place, the name came to be after some colonial agricultural firm promoted the plantation of this particular kind of tree in the area. We couldn't confirm this very plantation in historical sources, but the presence of the *Sociedade Agrícola Patria e Trabalho – S.A.P.T.* (in neighboring *suku* Fatubessi, in the Hatulia sub-district, Ermera) as well as the *Empresa Agrícola Perseverança* (in the very same *suku* Leotelá) makes the oral source believable. The S.A.P.T was, according to some sources, the one that started the production of rubber (Martinho 1948) and the only one to keep doing it (Clarence-Smith 1992).

² See map: East Timor Agricultural and Land Use. Timor-Leste. *Geological Formation of Timor-Leste*. http://timoragri.fhost.com.au/ta500/ta559_geo_formation.jpg

³ The *Laueli* is one of the three main tributaries of Loes river, besides the *Bebai* (source in Atambua, West Timor) and the *Marobo* (source in Bobonaro district). Its source is located in the neighboring district of Ermera.

⁶ Mello, Costa, and Matos (2010) state: "this last *suco* [Leotela] lost this ability due to the changes in the Loes River bed, and rice production shifted to Raimate village in Asulau *suco*, Ermera district. In Guico and Lissadila there is still some rice production". We didn't witness that kind of inability during our fieldwork in *Faulara* (from 2008 until 2012, discontinuately).

⁷ In many cases, this was seen as the least desirable way to get some income. The price of the animals dropped even to their half during the rainy season (the worse months famine months: November and December. See Seeds of

important events during the life cycle of the household (rites of passage such as marriage or death, as well as other ritual or ceremonial events).

Currently, there is not electric supply, despite among those few who can afford a solar panel installation. Water and sanitation are deficient, especially during the rainy season when the water pipes get filled with sediments. Drinkable water is accessible in three springs flowing down from the mountain, one of which didn't get dry during the dry season and is considered *lulik* (sacred, taboo).

Being a small settlement, there are not many mentions in the historical sources of Timor-Leste about *Faulara*. People there have their own oral history in which they claim that the place was a *suku*, called *Laue-li-Lau*, and was dependent on the military post of Boebau⁸ during the Portuguese time. They claim that the *suku* was integrated into Leotelá by decision of the Portuguese. In their account, they say that the decision was taken in order to re-populate the area which population decimated due to an epidemic caused by a skin disease. Afterwards, it is said among the elders that the Portuguese started to promote the repopulation of the area by inviting people from neighbouring areas of Liquiçá to be settled in *Faulara*, creating what today is formally known as Lepa. No historical sources were found confirming the veracity of this account.

Present day *Faulara* is composed of 159 households with a total population of 859 – according with the 'village book' (*livro de aldeia*) custodied and updated by the chief of village (data from 2009)- or 128 households with a total population of 824 according to the 2010 census (NSD & UNFPA 2011). Most of them, and however the narrative pattern described above, arrived to *Faulara* in 1996/1997, with the official opening of a transmigration settlement created by the Indonesian government (CAVR, 2005: 116-117). Before the construction of the *transmigrasi* housing, the population of *Faulara* were considered to be but few of them in local accounts.

During the last stage of Portuguese colonization, the Plans of Development (*Planes de Fomento*) for the period 1953-1979 marked the Loes river as one of the targeted locations to boost agricultural development, specifically the III Plan of Development for 1968-1973 (Presidência do Conselho 1967). Meanwhile, the *Sociedade Agrícola Patria e Trabalho* (S.A.P.T.) was constructing one of its agricultural centers in the neighbouring area of *suku Asulau* in 1967 (Da Conceição e Sousa 1967), at the other side of the river. Just a couple of households claimed to have moved to *Faulara* at that time. These activities made some

Life, 2007)... Cattle was normally excluded from this, being goats and pigs the ones normally sold. The only animals which price didn't drop during this time were the fighting roosters.

⁸ Boebau was a military post created in June 1896 (Duarte, 1944: 37), shortly after governor Celestino da Silva promoted the new administrative division of Portuguese Timor in "military commands" (Roque 2012). It was shortlived being integrated to Liquiçá in 1934 (Belo 2011: 215). Its ruins are still standing in the mountainous village of Manati, *suku* Leotelá. Before being a post, it is mentioned in historical records that go back to the XVI century as being a small indigenous kingdom (Belo 2011).

people settling in Faulara, but not more than a couple of households currently living there claimed to have moved at that time.

During the occupation campaign of East Timor by the Indonesian army, the area of Liquiçá was taken over in 1979. After that occurrence some policy for reconstruction began in the hamlet and nearby places. Works for agricultural development started in the mid-eighties, dragging some people to settle in the area. In 1981 CRS (Catholic Relief Services) and USAID established the East Timor Agricultural Development Project (ETDAEP), being transferred to Timorese control later on under the name of ETADEP Foundation.⁹ The river banks of Asulau Saré first and Faulara secondly were cleared of a cane-like grass (*saccharum spontaneum*) for making the place available to irrigated rice cultivation. Cattle were distributed among the settlers to be used for ploughing muddy paddy fields (USAID 1987). In 1985, according to the accounts of the local inhabitants gathered in several interviews conducted in Faulara, the works for the irrigation system began.

People coming to live to Faulara were mostly 'local transmigrants'¹⁰ from the Liquiçá district itself. As we were told, some Indonesian settlers came to live there as well, but they left the country in 1999 leaving none of them there nowadays. The following group in numbers are the descendants of Búnak-speaking people from Bobonaro district. They are the second, third or fourth generation born in Liquiçá. They claim to have come to Liquiçá long ago for a set of different reasons. Some claim to have been forced to move by the Japanese, others said to come as merchants to the posto Boebau and others have come to work as hired labor in the fields of the S.A.P.T. There is a minority of settlers that claimed to be originally from Ermera, Baucau, Aileu, Manatuto, or Suai but being most of them born in Liquiçá.

Due to this heterogeneous population, the public language in Faulara is normally Tetum, being other languages such as Tokodede, Mambai or even Búnak used in the household domain. Nonetheless it's quite common finding people knowing all those languages and shifting from one language to other without difficulty. Bahasa Indonesia is widely known and Portuguese were understood by social elites, not really well spoken but in the case of a handful of people.

As we have seen before, Faulara was not an important settlement until the last days of the Indonesian occupation. Many people without previous knowledge of the social structure of the place moved in and made their living there. One of the activities they started was the cultivation of wet-rice in the paddy fields. For the process of rice production in Timor-Leste –just like almost any kind of agricultural activity- not only technical steps are deemed necessary, but also ritual practices are deemed necessary in the process. One of those is the *nahe bitu* ritual that will be described in this paper, by which the rice is put through

⁹ Yayasan ETADEP is the oldest Local NGO in East Timor.

¹⁰ Called *Alokasi Penempatan Penduduk Daerah Transmigrasi* (APPDT) in Indonesian (Otten 1986).

ritual action in order to change its status from *moruk* (dangerous for human consumption, poisonous, bitter) to *midar* (harmless for human consumption, delicious, sweet).

It's not our objective in this paper to make an exhaustive analysis of the the concepts and actors linked to the ritual action, something that we've done with to some length elsewhere¹¹, however it is necessary to clarify for the further understanding of the ethnographic description in this paper to clarify that by using the category *rai-na'in*, we refer to the traditional authority that has precedence over the land in the social hierarchy of a particular place at a particular time. It means as well the lineage group (including the dead ancestors) that this person belongs to, and the non-human beings (ontologically different from humans), which are believed to exist in there (sometimes called *rai-fukun*¹² as well).

About the *Nahe Biti*

The concept of *nahe biti* as we'll be using it in the present paper needs further explanation in order to prevent the confusion with different accounts of the term that can be found in the anthropological literature of Timor-Leste.

The main study dealing with this concept is that of Babo-Soares (2004)¹⁶, who argues that the promotion of reconciliation for national-building process could be done in a more effective and efficient way by introducing some local recognized processes or institutions. More specifically, he argues that the introduction of local ways of justice within the formal justice system would make it work better without undermining it, being the *nahe biti* the example used in his paper for the sake of the argument. In his work, he states that:

The East Timorese use the term *nahe biti*, which can be translated literally as stretching or laying down the mat as a mean to facilitate consensus, or reconciliation, among them. Conceptually, this term finds its philosophical basis in the way the locals view their world. (*Nahe biti* is understood widely in East Timor, not only as a process but also as a means to resolve differences.) It is the usual way of referring to a gathering in which people are invited to sit on a mat provided specifically for that occasion. The East Timorese distinguish between *biti boot* (large mat) and *biti kiik* (small mat). Apart from their literal meanings, the former refers to a venue used to settle wider kinship (lineage, kin and clan) matters and the latter refers to a venue where more narrowly defined family matters are discussed and settled. Both

¹¹ See Fidalgo Castro, 2012.

¹² *Rai-fukun* was used sometimes as a reference to the bond between people and those non-human beings.

¹⁶ Originally presented in the conference *Road to Reconciliation*, 11- 12 April 2001, Bergen, Norway (Ospina and Hohe 2001: 9)

are venues to discuss and settle issues among the interested parties through consensus. However, this is regarded only as part of an all-inclusive process and not as the end of the process itself. Matters that are discussed and settled on the mat (*biti*) should not be brought into the community as they could lead to disharmony. (Babo-Soares, 2004: 21)

This notion of the *nahe biti* as a measure of reconciliation or as an institution of the customary justice system has been widely accepted by the academic community and as such has been echoed by many scholars (Carroll-Bell 2012; Cummins & Michael Leach 2012; Hohe & Nixon 2003; Hohe 2003; Kent 2012; Loch & Prueller 2011; McWilliam 2008; Nixon 2012; Schroeter Simião 2011).

As most of the ethnographic accounts mentioned above describe it, *nahe biti* literally means 'stretching, lying down or unrolling the mat'. This expression, composed of the words *nahe* + *biti*, needs some deeper explanation. *Nahe* is defined in the *Disionáriu Nasionál ba Tetun Ofisial* (Hull et al. 2005) as: 'Verb. Open something that is closed or rolled to put it on the top of something flat like a table or the ground. Eg. People stretch the mat in the ground to sleep at night.'¹⁷ We've also recorded the use of *nahe* during our fieldwork in other daily activities such as *nahe semente*, referring to 'spreading concrete' in some construction-related activities, etc. *Biti* is defined as: 'Noun. Something rolled that people stretch in the ground or in the top of a *hadak*¹⁸ in order to sit or sleep.'¹⁹ In some sources *biti* are described as the beds of the native people (Barros Duarte, 1975: 17; Castro, 1867: 322), a function that is still important up to this date for many Timorese. In the context we are dealing with, *biti* is referred to a traditional artifact which is present in many ceremonies and rituals, as well as in daily life activities. It is normally weaved out of vegetal threads, mainly from palm-like tree, being the ones made of pandanus leaves the most appreciated. As we've been told by our informants, it was part of the traditional etiquette when arriving in a house as a guest to be invited to have a sit in the woven mat (*biti*), where offerings of betel leaves and areca nuts would follow. In present daily life this etiquette is no longer observed as most of the people have chairs in their houses, and the offerings ideally include tobacco and coffee or tea and something to eat besides the betel and areca. Sitting in a *biti* is still widely observed when performing rituals, though. This is the case of the *biti lagana luli*, which is a specific woven mat among the *tokodede* of Liquiçá for the wife takers²⁰ group to sit when arriving to the wife-givers²¹ group sacred house (*uma lulik*) (Lekede'e

¹⁷ Our translation. Cf. **Nahe**. VERBU *Loke buat ruma ne'ebé taka ka lulun hela hodi tau iha belak ruma nia leten hanesan meza ka rai*. EZ. *Ema nahe biti iha rai atubele toba kalan*.

¹⁸ Small construction normally made of bamboo flooring and covered with palm leaves. It's slightly elevated above the ground, and used to rest.

¹⁹ Our translation. Cf. **Biti**. SUBSTANTIVU *Lulun ne'ebé ema nahe iha rai ka hadak leten hodi tuur ka toba bá*.

²⁰ *Mane-heu* in Tokodede, *mane-foun* or *fetosaa* in Tetun.

²¹ *Inama* in Tokodede, *umane* or *uma mane* in Tetun.

Study Group 2006). In one marriage ritual described by Barros Duarte (1979: 395, *passim*) the union is symbolized by the metaphorical gesture of the couple sitting together in a weaving mat: *Ha'ac emi rua biti ida ona* (That the two of you are one only *biti* already). In other account in the island of Ataúro, Barros Duarte (1990), points out the existence of different kinds of *biti* either by its manufacturing material or its uses, one of them exclusively used for some rituals.²²

Even though the *nahe biti* is widely recognized by academics as being an institution related to the traditional justice system, the expression by itself is just a rhetoric figure. Following Leach's idea on relationships among symbols within a cultural system (1998 [1976]), we can point out that this expression (*nahe biti*) is an metonymy by which the act of 'stretching the mat' is semantically associated with 'reconciliation'. Another interesting metonymic relation is the one promoted by the ASDT (Democratic Association of East Timor) in which *nahe biti* is regarded as a translation of 'democracy' into local terms (Trinidade, 2008: 19), something that has been referred by Cummins & Leach (2012: 93-94). These are some of the meanings we can find linked to the *nahe biti* in Timor-Leste, however not the only ones. Some other meanings include its use in everyday life: stretching the mat to rest or sleep, or –as in our case– the use of the *nahe biti* as the name for a ritual related with the production of rice.

In this paper we are referring to the *nahe biti* in its acception as a small but important ritual performed during the harvest of the wet rice. It is normally celebrated between June and July in Faulara, just before starting to thresh the rice stalks to separate the grain.²³ Although it is deemed in Faulara as the most important ritual related with the agricultural production, it's not the only one associated with the cultivation of rice. As Shepherd & McWilliam pointed out, "ceremonial activity accompanies all major stages of rice production, with sacrifices and commensality before opening the new fields, prior to planting and when the rice is growing vigorously. Pre- and postharvest rituals are common, and some groups may include sacrificial activity to protect the stored grain from spoiling or to ensure that the threshing process does not reduce the harvest yield" (Shepherd & McWilliam, 2011: 196). In an interview with one of the two *rai-na'in kaer bua-malus*, the ritual leader with the authority to perform the *nahe biti* they considered the following as the rituals related with the cultivation of rice: *tula karau lutu*, *rusa hare fini*, *fase karau-ain*, *silu hare kain*, *nahe biti* and *sobu tenda*.

²² Cf. ESTEIRA, S. *Biti*; - de pândano: *biti hirik-rong*; - de folha de coqueiro: *biti noe-rong*; de folha da gamuteira: *biti hi'ring*; -sagrada usada no estidolo de Bakumau e Lêbu-Hmôru: *sekglês*.

²³ The threshing process is done both by mechanical (*baku hare*) or traditional means. The traditional one is called *sama hare* (foot threshing). For the first one a person that owns a machine would rent it to the owners of the rice paddies for a variable amount of money and/or a part of the harvest (in various cases I witnessed the renting was paid in rice). The *sama hare* (foot threshing) is still being done, but to a lesser extent.

The *nahe biti* is one of the many Timorese rituals that deal with the ethics of reciprocity between humans and other agents (Traube 1986, 2011). In this case it is performed in order to observe the reciprocity between humans and the Laulei river. The inhabitants of Faulara consider that as humans use the banks of the river to produce rice, they need to give the river something in return for the rice yields provided as it is conceptualized as the non-human agency that makes life possible (and it is considered having human attributes) and thus conceptualized as a gift. The ceremony is carried out with the purpose of establishing a communication channel with the river in order to be able to observe the due reciprocity with it, keeping thus the ideal equilibrium between the realms of humans and non humans (Pena Castro 2010). The *nahe biti* is one of the many rituals that are, in a broader way, classified by some Timorese with the name of *fó-han rai-lulik* (feeding the sacred land).

The communication with the river cannot be established by the owners of the rice paddies by themselves, for they are not recognized by the river as legitimized interlocutors. This Legitimization rests upon the linages considered *rai-na'in*, and it is built upon a mythic-historical event as it happens in many other settings in Timor Leste (McWilliams, 2005). In this mythic-historical episode, a lineage called *Lauei* gave a woman of their own house away (*Dau-Roma*) to the river.²⁵ This giving away is conceptualized as a marriage/sacrifice. By this action, the *Lauei* lineage created an alliance by marriage with the *Lauei* river itself, which in the narration is referred to with the name of *Blea-Kasa*. Thus, the *Lauei* lineage established itself through this event as the legitimized channel of communication with the river based on their wife-giver/wife taker relationship. As it happens with the *fetosaa* (wife-giver)-*umane* (wife taker) alliance, where the first is subordinated to the willingness and needs of the second, through this marriage they position themselves as hierarchically superior to the river²⁶ and thus holding the right of summoning it.

This mythic-historical event is widely acknowledged by most of the people in Faulara. In the words of the former *xefe de suku* -not a member of any *rai-na'in* lineage-:

²⁵ Contrary to some other Timorese mythic-historical accounts, they didn't claim to be the original people of Faulara, a topic they avoided, but having arrived generations ago from a place they called *Bee-Sai-Bee Tama / Luka-Vikeke*, using a similar system of geographical reference as the one studied among the *Atoni Pah Meta* by Andrew McWilliam (2006[1997]).

²⁶ In some parts of Timor-Leste, as in many other parts of Eastern Indonesia, the wife-giver group is deemed to be hierarchically superior to its wife-takers (Hicks, 2010: 117; Traube, 1986: 81).

João: *ah... ami halo natar, ami... buat ida nahe biti ne'e... ne'e sei uza fahi ida... [..]ne'e representante katak umane... sei fó fali tais ida ho kabae ida tara hanesan ne'ebá dadauk [...]. Ne'e hanesan... fó-agradesementu ba abó Dau-Roma, tanba nia ba tuur iha uma lisan Laueli... mane foun mane ne'e kan... naran Blea Kasa. [...] Entaun to'o loron ami tenki halo natar, nia naran ami labele haluha. [...] Ami sei halo... serimonia-oan ida hanesan ne'e... representa [...] kambatik ida ho tais ida ne'e... katak ne'e abó Dau-Roma nia lolon mak ne'e*

João: Ah... when we cultivate the rice paddies... we... this thing called *nahe biti*... we'd use [sacrificed] one pig... as a gift representing the wife-givers... and we'd give one *tais* and one *kabae* as well, like that one. This is... our gratitude to *abó Dau-Roma*, as she married the *uma lisan Laueli*... the *mane foun*'s name was... *Blea-Kasa*. [...] Thus, when working in the rice paddies, we cannot forget her name. [...] We'll do... one small ceremony like this one... this *kambatik* and this *tais* represents... that this is the body of *abó Dau-Roma*.

The only context where this episode was disregarded by the people living in Faulara was recorded in indirect accounts, but we never witnessed anybody publicly doing it. Even in the case of those that didn't use the services of the *rai-na'in kaer bua malus* to perform the *nahe biti* (or some other rituals), their argument was rooted in other reasons –as we'll see– rather than disregarding the mythic-historical event as a whole. In one interview, one of the *rai-na'in* blamed the Christian substitution of the traditional belief system.

Mau-Soko: *la fiar. Sira la fiar tanba buat ida be... hanesan... agora ne'e modelu ita sarani mak barak, sarani barak ona ne'e, be... balu dehan hanoin de'it Maromak. Kona-ba kultura-adat ne'e lalika hanoin, lalika bolu rai-na'in.*

Mau-Soko: don't believe. The don't believe cause... it's like... now we are mostly baptized, there is many baptized people now... some people say that we have to think only in *Maromak*. It's not necessary to think of the *Kultura-adat*, it's not necessary to summon the *rai-na'in*.

The preparation of all needed for the performance of the *nahe biti* is accomplished by the people that cultivate the rice paddies, normally their owners (households).²⁷ Just after finishing the gathering of all the rice stalks and before starting to thrush them, they had to “summon the *rai-na'in*” (*bolu rai-na'in*). The *rai-na'in* will ask them to prepare all the goods needed to perform the ritual, which normally included a pig or a piglet to be sacrificed (*fahi*), some kind of wine (*tua*), betel leaves and areca nuts in some quantity (*bua-malus*),

²⁷ Some paddies though were cultivated in agreements between different households (normally with relations such a *fetosaa-umane* or *maun-alin*), in which all the expenditures related to the production of rice were shared equally by both of them, including the ritual ones. This form of collaboration was called *lisuk*. Even though it was supposed to be an equal sharing of all the inputs and outputs of the production, it was frequent to hear one of the parts complaining about the non-observance of the agreement by the other part (normally the actual owner of the paddy).

one *kambatik* or/and one *kabaia*,²⁸ and money²⁹ (*osan*). Then they will set a day in which the ritual will be performed. The household that requires the services of the *rai-na'in* will normally have to wait for him until he attends other *nahe biti* scheduled before he can attend their own..

When the *rai-na'in kaer bua malus* arrives, he starts giving instructions to arrange properly all the elements on the mat, or arranging them himself. The mat used is ideally made out of vegetal threads, but the use of modern plastic mats is common. On the mat, these elements will be placed: a bundle of rice stalks, dishes,³⁰ and plastic cups or glasses. Besides this some handfuls of rice stalks will be tied up in cross-like forms called *biko*, making three of them.

The number of dishes varies from one ritual to another, for it depends on the people attending. Three of them are reserved to the *rai-fukun* and the ancestors, normally the traditional ones -called *luhu*- weaved out of vegetable threads. In all the dishes, betel leaves and areca nuts are distributed equally, usually 2 or 3 betel leaves and 2 or 3 areca nuts, depending on their size. Another dish is set apart, full of uncooked clean rice (*foos*). The liquor bottle (*tua*) is opened and the plastic cups and/or glasses are filled. Money is introduced in one of the *luhu*.

Then the *rai-na'in kaer bua-malus* takes its *keke*³¹ out and starts the traditional prayer (*hamulak*). The *hamulak* is used to invoke the ancestors (*bei'ala*) and the *rai-fukun*, that show up after the pronunciation of their names (*temi sira-nia naran*) and are believed to be embodied in the three cross-like figures (*biko*) mentioned before. As we were told, one of the figures represents *Dau-Roma*, the ancestor given in marriage/sacrifice by the Laueli lineage. It is told that the purpose of this third one was to serve as a *seguransa* (security) for the protection of the rice yield until the end of the harvest. Once they become present, the *rai-na'in kaer bua-malus* offers betel and areca to them, which is used as the opening element of the ritual. By using this symbolic communicator he (as wife giver) greets and welcomes them (his wife-takers) when arriving to the rice paddy. Then, the pig (*fahi*), money (*osan*) and liquor (*tuak*) are presented as an offering in return of their delivery of the rice yield, which is considered to be possible thanks to them.

There is then a moment of pause in which the *rai-na'in kaer bua malus* mediates with the *rai-fukun* and the ancestors to see if they accept the offerings given by the peasants. If they accept (and normally they do, cause at this point the negotiation for the ritual is already

²⁸ *Kambatik* is a piece of clothing for women, worn as a skirt, with colorful designs. *Kabaia* is a shirt used as women's clothing as well. We were said that a *tais* could be given as well, though we never witnessed such thing. Normally only one piece of woman's clothing was used, mainly the *kambatik*.

²⁹ The quantity varies as well, but the reference we were given was 5 US dollars.

³⁰ some of them need to be *luhu*

³¹ Traditional silver bracelet.

agreed upon), they start with the sacrifice of the pig. Before sacrificing it, the *rai-na'in kaer bua malus* sprinkles some of the uncooked clean rice over the pig's body. Then he rubs the animal's body with his *keke*. After that, he instructs to sacrifice the animal which is killed over the bundle of rice stalks, for it's believed that the blood of the pig must touch them. Some blood is spilled on the three *biko* as well.³² It is said that this blood calms the *rai-fukun* down (*hamaus*), for they are being given the proper treatment as wife-takers. After killing the animal, they take the pig's spleen out for divination purposes (*halo urat*) (Barraud & Friedberg, 1996: 367 ; Barros Duarte, 1975: 13). If there were to be some problems pointed out during the reading of the spleen, further arrangements would be needed to solve them. Then the *rai-na'in kaer bua malus* spills some liquor in the three *biko*, giving the *rai-fukun* their share. After finishing the divination of the pig's spleen, the animal is taken to the fireplace where the preparation for its cooking starts. Some parts of the pig are reserved for the *rai-fukun* (*na'an lulik*, sacred meat) and the *rai-na'in kaer bua malus*. The last one takes his share to his house when the ritual is over. The cooking of the rice and the meat are to be done without adding any kind of flavouring, for it is believed to be the way the ancestors cooked their food. When the cooking is done, before starting to feast, the fireplace must be fed first for it is said that "it's the one cooking for us, so it should be fed first". Thus, offerings of betel leaves and areca nuts, rice and meat are placed in the three stones of the fireplace. Some liquor is poured on them as well. After this, the feast begins.

Finally, the *biko* figures are tied to the top of a wooden stick, which are driven into the ground in several places within the limits of the rice paddy. One of them, the one that serve as security/protection (*seguransa*), is tied to one stick surrounded by all the harvested the rice bundles. The *biko* will be kept there until the working in the paddy is finished, after taking the rice yield out of the field to dry it and store the unmilled grain.

When the event finishes, the *rai-na'in* takes his leave carrying with him the *na'an lulik*³⁴ (sacred meat) and the money. In some cases the *rai-na'in kaer bua malus* make arrangements with the peasants and ask for a small part of the yield of rice (normally one 35 kg. sack).

In order to get the complete the rice harvest, another ritual must be done. This one, called *sobu tenda*, is done with the purpose of letting the *rai-fukun* (or *rai-na'in*) know that "it is over" (*remata ona* or *hotu tiha ona*) and accordingly they must leave from the rice-paddy. It is believed that the spirits of the ancestors and the river arrive to the rice field with the *nahe biti* and that they stay there until the holders of the ritual let them know that it is over.

³² Pig is the normally compulsory animal given to the *fetosaa* (wife-taker, also called *mane-foun*) by their wife-givers in exchange of their gifts (buffaloes, goats...) in those parts of Timor-Leste where asymmetrical matrilineal cross-cousin marriage is practiced.

³⁴ In this case, the pig's jaw (*fahi nia hasan*).

Even though the *rai-na'in kaer bua malus* claimed that this ritual has to be done by him, most of the households did it by themselves by sacrificing a chicken.

The politics of ritual

Inheriting of the position

One of the important moments during the life of a *rai-na'in kaer bua malus* is when he actually gets to be the one wielding that position. This moment is a transition in which he stops being just a regular person, although entitled to potentially wield the position, to actually become a ritual specialist.

Within the *rai-na'in* lineages in Faulara, one male of the house is selected to be the one holding the position of ritual specialist, the one that conducts the *nahe biti* ritual. This position is known as *kaer bua-malus*: “wielding the betel and the areca”. Here, the betel leaves and areca nuts stand as a symbolic communicator used to set up a channel that allows to put a message across to the river. Being the person wielding the *bua-malus* is understood in this particular case as being the one entitled to perform this communication (another metonym). This position is passed down from one generation to the next one, being the retiring person the one that selects his successor. Ideally, the father passes the position to his elder son.

As an ideal rule, this is the system of inheritance that governs the passing over of the position. However, this consuetudinary model of inheritance doesn't work as a rule that social actors mechanically follow. It doesn't sort out the whole set of considerations, strategies and options of action taken by the social actors that experience a process of inheritance in practice. It is rather an ideal system of reference that the actors play with, not being a limitation but rather a model of reference for the actual practice of the process of inheritance (Couceiro Domínguez 1999).

In Faulara, as we'll see, the inheritance of the *kaer bua-malus* position was one of the main sources of conflict between two persons claiming to be the legitimate *rai-na'in kaer bua malus*: Mau-Soko and Mau-Pelu, whose histories will be described following.

Narrative of inheritance

One of the spheres where both Mau-Pelu and Mau-Soko discursively dealt with their legitimization was that of the mythic-historical narrative. Both of them recognized the same narrative. Where they argued was which one of them was entitled to actually perform as *rai-na'in*. Mau-Soko, member of the Laueli lineage (the one that offered the the

marriage/sacrifice to the river) roots his condition of *rai-na'in* in being a member of the Laueli lineage and accounts for Mau-Pelu's entitlement to be *rai-na'in* by an alliance of the two houses. In one interview with him he stated:

Mau-Soko: *ha[ne]sa[n]... ha'u-nia abón ne'e kan... hanesan... hola nia abó ne'e, hanesan buat ida ne'e folin ne'e la fó. Folin ne'e la fó. Agora... sira ba hatete iha sira-nia uma lisan be... Asumanu ne'e... sira ba hatete sira-nia familia maun ho alin, "ida ne'e ita ba ko'alia tanba umane kaer ida ha'u". Agora... Ba... sira-nia familia ne'ebá hatete ne'e: "Ó be... ba hakarak ema liurai nia oan ne'e! Ó riku hira iha ne'e? Povu hanesan ó... ó riku hira? Ah! Ó riku hira mak ó ba hakarak ema liurai nia oan?" Tanba ida ne'e, nia familia hotu lakohi, hodi haruka de'it mai, hatete ne'e fali... ami-nia abó ne'e hatete fali hanesan ne'e: "la buat ida... Na'i-Maromak fó kabem imi nain rua... hola malu ona... ó-nia familia bele lakohi, la buat ida. Imi nain rua bele hola malu mais... hela de'it iha ne'e. Mm." Ne'e mak hela de'it iha ne'e mak... haruka de'it to'o agora ne'e... abó ne'e hodi lori liurai ne'e, abó hodi haruka fali mane foun ne'e dehan: "Ó lori... hala'o be... ita-nia rai nia kultura ne'e, bua ho malus ne'e. Ema ida mai bolu ó ba, ba, tanba ha'u... ha'u lori liurai, ha'u hanoin Estado nian." Ida ne'e mak to'o agora ne'e nia sei kaer. Ah!*

Mau-Soko: it's like this.... My *abón*... when she married... we were not given the birdewealth [*folin*]. We were not given. Then... they went to inform their lineage Asumanu, they went to inform the elder and younger brothers: "let's go negotiate, because the wife-giver [umane] already caught me [*kaer*]". Then... their family there said this: "You... wanted to marry with this daughter of a *liurai*! Where is your wealth in here? A person of the *povu* like you... where is your wealth? Ah! Where is your wealth for you could aim to marry with the daughter of a *liurai*?" Because of this, nobody in his family accepted [the marriage] and my grandparent [abó], for them to come back, said to them: "It doesn't matter... *Na'i-Maromak* decided for the two of you to get married... marry then... although your family doesn't want to, it doesn't matter. You can marry, but you'll have to live here. Mm." That's how they came to live here... and were ordered until now... the grandfather that wielded the *liurai* ordered to his *mane foun* [them] the following: You'll wield... will wield... of the *kultura* of our land, the *bua-malus*. If a person summons you, you are entitled to go cause I wield *liurai* and take care of the *Estado* affairs." This is the cause why he still wields it until this day.

Mau-Soko didn't deslegitimize Mau-Pelu's right to held the position, rather saying that both of them were entitled to it. His claims were based on being a member of the lineage that started the relation with the earth/river in Faulara (by the sacrifice/marriage mentioned before) and thus, being the right essentially his dominion. He discursively created a hierarchical relation between the two *rai-na'in* lineages though: in other moment of the interview he states that he picked Mau-Pelu up as "his secretary" (*Ha'u foti nia hanesan sekretariu*), to help him out with the ritual tasks of the position. Mau-Soko describes in his statement the actual situation between them during the time we did fieldwork in Liquiçá: they both let the people decided (not without putting some preasure in that decision) which one of them should they summon to perform the rituals. For Mau-Soko, Mau-Pelu's right was based on the gift given by his lineage (Laueli) to them. He also accounts on the

existence of an unpaid debt (marriage prestations) between Mau-Pelu's lineage (*Asumanu*) and his own, putting him in the powerful position.

Mau-Pelu, the second claiming *rai-na'in*, was part of the *Asumanu* lineage, which was considered to be the second house to settle down in Faulara after the *Laue*li lineage did. Their lineages established a *fetosaa-umane* relationship in the past, being *Laue*li the wife-giver and *Asumanu* the wife-taker. In Mau-Pelu's recall of the events, he describes how the *Asumanu* lineage came to live to Faulara and why they got entitled to perform the *kaer bua-malus* position:

Mau-Pelu: *kaer bua malus ne'e ne'e... ne'e hanesan umane sira mak entrega fali mai ona.*

Alberto: *mmm*

Mau-Pelu: *uluk, tempu abo nian... sira xefe suku, xefe suku ida kraik ninian... sira hanesan ain, liman la to'o. Ain liman la to'o maka umane hodi entrega hela mai mais... tempu abó nian kedan ona.*

Alberto: *kleur ona eh?*

Mau-Pelu: *kleur ona*

Alberto: *entaun Ita-boot nia aman mos kaer bua-malus*

Mau-Pelu: *bua-malus*

Alberto: *Ita...*

Mau-Pelu: *abó mos kaer bua-malus*

Alberto: *bei'ala sira?*

Mau-Pelu: *kaer bua-malus hotu*

Alberto: *lisan sá... umane sá mak entrega ba Ita...*

Mau-Pelu: *umane husi Laue*li.

Alberto: *Laue*li

Mau-Pelu: *Laue*li

Alberto: *sira mak entrega ba Ita-boot atu kaer bua-malus ne'e*

Mau-Pelu: *kaer bua-malus ne'e*

Mau-Pelu: *wield the bua-malus... was given to us by our umane*

Alberto: *mmm*

Mau-Pelu: *in the past, in the time of the ancestors... they were chief of suku, the chief of one suku in the lowland ... then, their legs and hands were not enough. Because their legs and hands were not enough, they gave it to us but... ever since the time of the ancestors.*

Alberto: *long ago?*

Mau-Pelu: *long ago*

Alberto: *your father also wielded the bua-malus?*

Mau-Pelu: *he did [bua-malus]*

Alberto: *your...*

Mau-Pelu: *my grandfather wield it [bua-malus] as well*

Alberto: *your ancestors?*

Mau-Pelu: *the did as well*

Alberto: *what lineage... what wife-giver gave it to you...?*

Mau-Pelu: *our wife-giver from Laue*li

Alberto: *Laue*li

Mau-Pelu: *Laue*li

Alberto: *they did gave the bua-malus for you to wield it*

Mau-Pelu: *wield the bua-malus*

As we can see the event of the marriage was recognized by Mau-Pelu, confirming they came from *suku Asumanu* (mountainous part of *Liquiçá*) to marry a woman that was living in *Faulara*. He also recognized the fact of being entitled to wield the position of *rai-na'in kaer bua-malus* due to the handing over of it by his wife-giver. Both *Mau-Soko* & *Mau-Pelu*'s versions agree that the position was given by *Laue*li to *Asumanu* for one reason: *Laue*li did not have enough human resources to carry on with the *kaer bua-malus* position and other tasks at the same time. *Mau-Soko* brings this along by saying that *Laue*li took care of the '*Estadu*' (State) affairs and give the '*Kultura*' affairs to *Asumanu*, while *Mau-Pelu* only states that *Laue*li gave it to them because they didn't have enough capacity (*sira hanesan ain*,

liman la to'o) and thus gave it to them. Mau-Pelu avoided to recognize any particular asymmetrical relation between his lineage (Asumanu) and Mau-Soko's (Laueli) other than the wife-giver/wife-taker one, not recognizing to be a 'secretary' (*sekretariu*) of Mau-Soko when referring to the '*kultura* affairs' nor having to go under his authority in any case. He claimed to be the only authority for these affairs in Faulara.

He did say, in other moment of the interview, to be eager to give Mau-Soko back the position but following the 'correct procedure', a new ritual which price for Mau-Soko to pay he established in 10 tais and 10 pigs. Following Rappapot we could say that Mau-Pelu is defying Mau-Soko's influence and social bigness in Faulara, challenging him to test his support in the community; pushing him to demonstrate his wealth, or to prove if he is "influential enough and creditworthy enough to borrow what he needed or powerful enough to coerce others into providing them" (Rappaport 1999: 56-57).³⁵ This discursive position made Mau-Pelu root his legitimacy over Mau-Soko because he turned the offer down (*ha'u husu tais sanulu fahi sanulu mais nia la fó* – I've asked him for ten tais and the pig but he didn't gave them [to me]) even recognizing that Mau-Soko's lineage is the original source of legitimacy. Mau-Soko never mentioned this event to us and he just kept saying that both of them were legitimized as *rai-na'in* and that both of them could perform as such. Mau-Pelu though, claimed that only himself could perform as *rai-na'in* and that Mau-Soko was illegitimately trying to take it from him (*hadau*).

Actual process of inheritance

The inheritance of this position in recent times is all but clear. Before 1999 there was somebody else from the Laueli lineage who actually wielded the position, a person called *Mausari*. Because of his connections with the pro-indonesian militia (his only daughter was married to a member of *Besi Merah Putih*³⁶) he flew to West Timor and settled there, never returning to Timor-Leste. He was not considered to be pro-Indonesian himself but because of his age and the fact of his daughter being the only direct family he had left, he decided to stay with them. It is not clear how and if he actually passed the *kaer bua-malus* position on. The country was involved in a political turmoil and Faulara was not isolated from these occurrences.³⁷ Both Mau-Soko and Mau-Pelu avoided to mention who did Mausari passed the position to. When interviewing them, only Mau-Pelu mentioned Mausari's passing of the position in an indirect way; he claimed that the lulik objects that Mausari had were now in his possession (*sasan ha'u mak haloot*). He didn't say how did those lulik objects came to

³⁵ We don't have time to set if this amount of pigs and *tais* was considered excessive for other actors, but it is indeed a great number of animals which wouldn't be sacrificed even in bigger rituals.

³⁶ *Besi Merah Putih* ('red and white iron' in Indonesian) was the name of the pro-Indonesian militia from Liquiçá district and one of the bloodthirstiest.

³⁷ Faulara was one of the places in which pro-Independent supporters sought refuge within Liquiçá district after voting the referendum for independence (CAVR 2005: 115-116).

be in his power. Both of them claimed that their 'parents' hold the position before them and that they passed it on to them. The passing of the position by Mausari was referred mainly by third parties. There were those who claimed that it was fair for Mau-Pelu to carry on with the position because when Mausari was in Faulara, it was Mau-Pelu's family (his wife-taker) the one that took care of him, whereas his sons (his brother's sons, Mau-Soko among them) didn't look after him whatsoever (*nia oan sira badiu*³⁸). In the words of the former *xefe de suku*, João Campos: *sira mak hamoos nia mii, raut nia tee* (they were the ones who cleaned his pee and picked his poop up). This "nursing ideology" (Narotzky 1991) is a main feature for the legitimization of the production and reproduction of the social relations (Godelier 1989). In this case, taking care of the elderly was a source of legitimacy often mentioned by some people in Faulara.

Even if Mausari passed the position to any of them, none of them used that argument to provide legitimacy to their claims and rather used other means to get the acknowledgment of the people. Mau-Pelu even claimed that his dead father talked to him in a dream (*fó-mehi*) allowing him to continue with the task. This event of the dream is widely repeated among people using his services as yet another example of Mau-Pelu's legitimacy. In this dream his father told him: *kaer, Ó bele kaer mais lalika ko'alia* (you can't wield it [the betel and areca] but you don't need to talk [*hamulak*]). By this message of his death father, Mau-Pelu tries to add legitimacy to his claim and explains one of his main weaknesses when performing the *nahe biti* and other rituals: he doesn't know how to 'speak the words' as it is the duty of the one who *kaer* the *buá malus*. As they explained, Mau-Pelu's father died when he was still a child and he never taught him the art of his ritual position. To carry on with the position, as we were told, Mau-Pelu only had to make the offerings and prepare all the elements needed to perform the ritual and then, hand the talking over to his dead father who, in the 'other world', will talk in his behalf. This was one of the ways how Mau-Pelu tried to undermine Mau-Soko's authority when speaking, because he was known as the one who 'knew the words' and he used that as a proof of his legitimate claim of the position.

After the cutting of a tree

Not everybody agreed about this though. It was quite common for the people in Faulara to speculate about Mausari's fate in West Timor. Only some people claimed to have contacted the family.

The times that a particular person talked more emphatically against the *rai-na'in* was when the people of the house I was living with had an argument with Mau-Pelu caused by the cutting of a tree in the *ai-laran* (woods). Mau-Pelu claimed that the tree was his because the forest in which the tree was planted was his *kintal* (his house garden). Then he asked to the

³⁸ *Badiu* is a complicated word to translate. It is often translated as wanderer and, in this case, it refers to a person that wanders from one place to the other without taking care of the household business.

family for 100 US dollars or a big pig and one *tais* as a fine for cutting the tree. The family didn't agree privately with the claiming but after a couple of days of negotiation (in which I was used to put pressure on the *rai-na'in*'s side) the problem was settled with the promise of giving a piglet (to be given in a future occasion) and one *tais*. No money was given or promised.

This family was a strong supporter of Mau-Pelu's side against that of Mau-Soko. They claimed that Mau-Pelu's services in the *nahe biti* ritual worked well up to that day and that their harvest of rice was always successful. In 2009, while attending to their *nahe biti* ritual, they even claimed that during one rainy season the river was about to destroy their paddies and that Mau-Pelu avoided it by standing in front of it and throwing an egg to it; this is, using his ascendancy over the river. After the problem with the tree, the people in the household shifted their position and started to express their intentions of not summoning him anymore because he exploited them (*explora*), abusing his power as *rai-na'in*.

After the event the family talked with Mario da Silva about it. Mario is a social elite in the place. He speaks a bit of Portuguese and was one of the leader of the *frente clandestina* (civil supporters of the resistance against Indonesia) in Faulara. He constantly used all range of political legitimacy markers to reinforce his position (Silva 2008) and whereas he wasn't a formal authority of the traditional system nor of the modern state, he managed to be considered a moral example and a reference in the area. He was as well the person through which the agricultural aid of the state came through, allowing him to capitalize the distribution of money and other factors of production (tools, machinery, etc.). Among many other strategies, this made him and reference.

Although he often talked about the abuses of Mau-Pelu, he never spoke face to face against him but rather plotting against him in small gatherings of people. He came one day in the early morning and had breakfast with us. The family told him about the problem with the cutting of the tree. Then he started giving a speech about Mau-Pelu's –extended to his family as a whole- bad behaviour as *rai-na'in*. He said that he was also tired of them, that they were thieves often killing other people's animals for their daily consumption and that Mau-Pelu's elder brother was even caught stealing other person's fruits. He tried to delegitimize their condition of *rai-na'in* by saying that they were also *la'o rai* (incomers) once and that they were given the position by their umane *Lauali*. He compared the mythic-historical legitimization of the position with other narratives he knew from elsewhere in

Timor-Leste by saying: *será que sira nia abó tun mai husi lalehan iha rai ida ne'e. Lae!* (Perhaps their ancestors descended from heaven in this very land? No, they didn't!)³⁹.

By doing this, he is discoursevely making a hierarchy of the existing narratives, trying to set Mau-Pelu's arguments in an inferior position comparing it to other narratives he knew about. By doing this, Mario reduces the differences between the *la'o-rai* group (incomers) – his group- and those of Mau-Pelu and his family as *rai-na'in*, trying to undermine his legitimacy as a 'traditional' social hierarchy in Faulara.

Mario, by his strategy of delegitimation the power of Mau-Pelu became a defender of the poorest class of the hamlet. In this way he is also able to negotiate a better position for himself when carrying out rituals. The less the power of the ritual leaders, the better his position to manipulate the events to his favour. In this vein he defends that the only *rai-na'in* and the one with legitimacy is the one living in Atambua. As he is alive and given both Mau-Pelu and Mau-Soko are "robbers" he did not have other option than crossing the boundary to resolve the issue.

Conclusion

In this article we have tried to delineate a picture where some of the different positions in regard the the ritual authority are described. Contrary to what is commonly considered, the power of the ritual authorities is not static, but it is immersed in a complex game of interconnected political strategies played even by those having a subordinate position of class in society. Based on this notion of power (Foucault) as a complex fluid, the different domains of its legitimacy can be explored. First the myth and the different narratives, second the ritual performance, third the game of discourses that are articulated by the different actors. All occurring in a context of post-conflict and political instability. Following Rappaport, the power of the ritual comes from its very enactment (Rappaport, 2001) and it is in the performance where the social differences are not only shown but also uncontestably demonstrated (Bourdieu). By articulating the different strategies with which the different actors shape the best scene for themselves, the inhabitants of Faulara are not only showing how the flow of power operates, but also indicate their positions with respect to the ritual power. While those with access to the ritual power assert their legitimacy by activating it through the mythical narrative and in practice, those in a subordinated position with respect to the ritual power try to shape through contrasting discourses of legitimation and delegitimation the most favourable scene for their interests.

³⁹ In some narratives of Timor-Leste, the founding ancestor of some houses is believed to be a being that descended to the land from heaven. There are still some other narratives in which the founding ancestor is believed to have been born directly from the soil (*naklosu-mai husi rai*).

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