Chapter 11
Indigenous East-Timorese Practices of Building and Sustaining Peace

Sophia Close

Abstract Indigenous East Timorese peacebuilding practices, known as *tarabandu*, *nahe biti*, *juramentu*, *matak-malarin*, and *halerik*, are critical to transforming violence in Timor-Leste. These Indigenous peacebuilding practices are usually cheaper, more readily available and more flexible than liberal peacebuilding practices. The prioritisation of liberal peacebuilding over Indigenous peacebuilding systems by the Government and many international actors perpetuates cultural and structural violence in Indigenous communities in Timor-Leste. Despite these challenges, ordinary East Timorese continue to use and assert the importance of Indigenous peacebuilding practices to transform community violence, build relationships and maintain cultural rituals to bring the cosmos and the secular world into balance.

Keywords Timor-Leste · Indigenous · Self-determination · Peacebuilding · Cultural concepts

11.1 Introduction

After decades of international activism by Indigenous peoples, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (the Declaration) was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2007. The Declaration affirms the Indigenous right to self-determination and promotes the use of Indigenous knowledge and practices to sustainably implement this right.

In this chapter, against a background of historical violence in Timor-Leste, I draw on the work of East Timorese academics Trindade (2013), da Silva (2012)

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and Babo-Soares (2004) to examine ways that Indigenous East Timorese peace-building practices seek to achieve peace and self-determination. In the discussion I explain how the liberal peacebuilding model is fundamentally different from Indigenous peacebuilding, and subsequently assess the effectiveness of liberal peacebuilding in Timor-Leste.

The source material for this analysis was collected during my Ph.D research in Timor-Leste between 2009 and 2013. I used a 'listening' methodology to undertake my research with around 90 East Timorese and international development and peacebuilding practitioners. By citing my research participants, I provide space for my reader to more directly engage with the challenges East Timorese peoples are experiencing in transforming the ongoing complex violence in Timor-Leste. East Timorese peacebuilding practices are described using *tetum*, a hybrid language used as the vernacular in Timor-Leste. However there are many local language equivalents of each term that have specific applications.

11.2 History of Violence in Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste is a small territory in the Indonesian archipelago, approximately 19,000 km^2 in area, with a rich history of over 42,000 years of continuous human occupation and inter-island migration (O'Connor 2007; O'Connor et al. 2013). With a current population of 1.1 million, Timor-Leste has at least 16 distinct ethno-linguistic groups who share a common ancestry and distinct cultural, economic and political systems (Hull 1998; UNDP 2013). East Timorese believe land is sacred and anthropomorphised, and ritual and mythological sites interconnect nature and culture in indivisible relationships (Fox 2000; McWilliam 2007; Traube 1986).

For Indigenous East Timorese people the impacts of contact with colonial powers began in the 15-century. From 1511, the Portuguese attempted to distort Indigenous knowledge, governance and power systems in Timor-Leste (Ospina/ Hohe 2002). More recently Timor-Leste has experienced 24 years of violent foreign occupation by Indonesia from 1975 onwards. In 1999 East Timorese people exercised their right to self-determination in the UN-sponsored ballot and Timor-Leste became a sovereign state in 2002.

Portuguese colonialists used derogatory language and class hierarchies to subjugate and separate ethno-linguistic groups. However, the greatest repression of Indigenous knowledge systems, culture and governance occurred between 1975 and 1999, during the Indonesian occupation. At least 100,000 East Timorese were killed or died of famine, disease and malnutrition due to forced resettlement and arbitrary detention (Commission for Reception 2005; Cribb 2001). Massacres were systematically carried out by the Indonesian military, women were subjected to forced sterilisation, sex slavery and gang rape; and children were removed and relocated to Indonesian families (de Oliviera 2002; Rawnsley 2004; Martin 2001).

Since 1999, health, education, infrastructure and governance indicators have slowly improved but at least half of the population remain in severe poverty

(United Nations Development Program 2013). Dewhurst (2008) categorises Timor-Leste as experiencing "violent peace"; where continuing inequality and cultural violence create low-level actual and structural violence in communities and broader intra-state violence. Violent peace aligns with Colliers (2003) findings that around half of all post-conflict states have reoccurring violence within the ten years after the initial conflict ceases. Chand/Coffman (2008) and the World Bank (2011) also found that on average post-conflict countries take 15 and 30 years to transition out of fragility.

Pervasive internal asymmetries of power, nurtured by Portuguese colonialism and Indonesian occupation, are at the root of ongoing violence in Timor-Leste. These root causes of violence include: land, property and resource disputes; weak or corrupt governance and justice systems; elite democratisation; gendered power imbalances; poverty; food insecurity; limited access to education; economic insecurity; reliance on the resource sector; and inadequate infrastructure. Ongoing violence underscores the need to prioritise peacebuilding to achieve self-determination.

11.3 Differences Between Indigenous and Liberal Peacebuilding in Timor-Leste

I follow Lederach (1995), Brigg/Bleiker (2011), Macginty (2008), Richmond/ Mitchell (2011) and Richmond (2011, 2015) in their criticisms of liberal peacebuilding. Liberal peacebuilding is grounded in modernism and neo-liberalism, and focuses on economic interdependence and elite democratisation through democratic development, rule of law, market-based economic reforms and state security. As a theory and praxis it is secular, top-down and externally driven.

In Timor-Leste, liberal peacebuilding prioritises building formal state institutions and a formal justice system using police and courts, and top-down mediation of violence between elite powerbrokers (Newman et al. 2009: 4). It is promoted by the United Nations (UN) and many international bilateral, multilateral and non-government organisations including: the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the Australian, United States and New Zealand aid programmes.

In the past 20 years, liberal peace research and practice has increasingly acknowledged the importance of Indigenous approaches to peacebuilding and the role of culture in conflict transformation (Hunt 2008; Avruch 1991; Brigg 2008). However, Indigenous researchers Turner (2006) and Alfred (1999) agree that liberal peacebuilding has not truly engaged with or incorporated Indigenous knowledge systems, which are grounded in *both* secular and cosmological dimensions.

Indigenous scholars assert that the theoretical frameworks and tools of liberal peacebuilding processes are inadequate for transforming complex conflicts in Indigenous communities. The structural power of liberal peacebuilding limits the space for Indigenous approaches and reiterates colonial epistemologies that

perpetuate cultural and structural violence, and the dominance of non-Indigenous peacebuilding practices. These processes often idealise or co-opt Indigenous knowledge systems, placing Indigenous systems under extreme pressure to modernise (Turner 2006; Alfred/Wilmer 1997; Brigg 2008).

11.4   Links Between Indigenous Self-determination and East Timorese Peacebuilding

East Timorese peacebuilding processes are deeply ingrained in Indigenous East Timorese knowledge systems and have been practised in Timor-Leste for centuries to actively manage community violence (Babo-Soares 2004). East Timorese scholars such as Babo-Soares (2003, 2004), Trindade (2007, 2008, 2013), Cabral (2002), da Silva (2012), and international researchers including Brown (2009, 2012), Fitzpatrick/McWilliam (2013), Nixon (2013), Ospina/Hohe (2002), Tobias (2011) and Traube (1986) note that while Indigenous systems were oppressed and distorted under Portuguese colonialism and Indonesian occupation they are firmly in place, sanctioned by strong political and kinship systems, a self-sustaining subsistence economy, cultural practices and rituals. Seventy per cent of East Timorese people live in rural communities, where these practices continue to be prioritised.

Indigeneity in Timor-Leste is reflected in these strong, vibrant Indigenous knowledge systems, deeply linked to land, place and kinship networks. East Timorese peacebuilding is both a metaphysical and practical process aimed at bringing the cosmos and the secular world into balance. Babo-Soares (2003) describes the East Timorese concept of *tempu rai-diak* (Tetum: "the tranquil time") or *tempu beiala* (Tetum: "time of the ancestors") when the Indigenous social, political and economic systems were in place (generally prior to Portuguese colonialism). Trindade (2013) explains that *tempu rai-diak* refers to a time of balance and dualism between the secular (physical and material) and cosmological (the world of the spirits and ancestors) worlds where people are connected to *hun* (Tetum: "the roots of the tree; source"), meaning their ancestors, origins and history, and *rohan* (Tetum: "tips of the tree branches"), meaning the present or the future.

These complex peacebuilding systems are continuous, non-linear and multidimensional and connect multiple generations, lineages and clans, land, customary houses, the future, and the ancestors (Babo-Soares 2013). This cycle of balancing is also a process of reconciliation, where throughout a lifetime an individual aims to heal past mistakes and move to *tempu rai-diak* (McWilliam 2007). People and society become out of balance if the correct rituals and processes are not followed. Breaching these systems or creating imbalance can cause disaster, illness, violence, retribution or death and can only be rectified by following the correct ritual processes (McWilliam 2007; Trindade/Castro 2007: 24; Trindade 2013: 2–3). If the imbalance between the secular and cosmos is not addressed, violence will continue (Babo-Soares 2004).

The ultimate goal of Indigenous East Timorese peacebuilding is to achieve *tempu rai-diak* or *dame* and *hakmatek* (Tetum: "stability or quiet, a situation where conflict and disorder are absent") (Trindade/Castro 2007). These ideals are associated with *ukun rasik a'an* (Tetum: 'self-determination'), which is an East Timorese concept that holistically encompasses self-determination and concepts of sovereignty, self-sufficiency and independence (Babo-Soares 2004; Hunt 2008). *Ukun rasik a'an* is closely paralleled with *tempu rai-diak*, *dame* and *hakmatek* because it is also grounded in ethical concepts of balance and fairness. *Ukun rasik a'an* is also closely associated with empowerment and endorses holistic and integrated forms of governance that are responsive and inclusive. As one East Timorese academic explained: "We struggled very hard for independence; we want people to live in harmony, peace and prosperity" (TL).

11.5   Indigenous East Timorese Peacebuilding Practices

The following section details some of the most widely observed Indigenous East-Timorese peacebuilding practices used today. Separately they demonstrate tangible alternatives to liberal peacebuilding practices, together they contribute to building an understanding of Indigenous East Timorese knowledge systems, and their deep connection to land, place and kinship networks. Colonialism, Christianity, violent occupation and modernisation have significantly impacted how these practices take place. As a result, there are differences between and within communities of how these peacebuilding practices take place, the actors involved, and the level or types of violence to which they are applied.

11.5.1   Tarabandu

Indigenous ancestors set rules and prohibitions known as *tarabandu* (Tetum: "to hang up or suspend"; often a piece of cloth; prohibition; customary law or morals). If *tarabandu* are transgressed, the ancestors in the spiritual world will be angry, resulting in implications for the physical world including conflict, starvation, disease or war (Trindade/Castro 2007: 17–18). An East Timorese researcher described this living system to me in these words: "We believe that trees, they are not just trees, but that they are something, and that there are spirits that have been living there for ages. So we are not allowed to just cut them" (TJ).

Tarabandu is a customary legal process of agreement-making within the community to regulate behaviour and relationships between people, and between people, natural resources and economic decisions. *Tarabandu* are used today to place limitations on shifting agriculture, controlling natural resource harvest, determining fencing boundaries and maintenance or deterring theft, prohibitions on pre-marital sex or killing of particular animals (Meitzner Yoder 2007; McWilliam

et al. 2014; Palmer 2007). *Tarabandu* are authorised by the *lia-nain* (Tetum: "owner of words, spokesperson, responsible for ritual authority"), who pronounces the prohibition to the community, animal sacrifice and a shared feast. The agreement is usually symbolised by placing a distinctive cloth or sign in a prominent place to inform and remind the community of the decision and punishment for transgression and now, by creating a written document held by state authorities (Meitzner Yoder 2007). An East Timorese peacebuilder described how the *tarabandu* process works to create harmony and balance.

All the good people in this community have to follow this *tarabandu* process.

For example, all the community, especially the youth and men, they cannot fight each other. If youth fight, they have a penalty, they have to pay $1000, or $100, or give pigs or buffaloes. People do not want to pay a penalty, so when people are angry with each other, they think, "We have to stop it". If you have a paddy field, and my buffalo comes and eats something in your paddy field, then I have to pay you a penalty. You have to take care of your buffalo, so that it does not starve. Sometimes they write them down, but mostly people do not know how to write, so they just remember everything (TTG).

Brown/Gusmão (2009: 67) describe *tarabandu* as "dynamic and adaptable" empowering communities to "resolve problems and meet needs". *Tarabandu* work best in remote rural locations, with older and uneducated citizens, where local government and authorities enforce the decision, and when communities are not economically pressured to transgress the prohibition. For example, in Oecusse, supported by the Government, by 2004 there were 402 *tarabandu* in place across 12 *sukus* (Tetum: "local level government areas"), ranging from small areas encompassing sacred rocks and water to entire mountainsides (Meitzner Yoder 2007: 45–46).

11.5.2 **Nahe Biti**

An important cultural practice of seeking peace, resolving differences and creating a stable social order is called *nahe biti* (Tetum: "stretching or laying down the mat as a means to facilitate consensus, truth-telling or reconciliation"). *Nahe biti* is a series of complex ideas and processes that can be used for both wider kinship matters and smaller family-group conflict management, distinguished by *biti bo'ot* (Tetum: "large mat") and *biti kiik* (Tetum: "small mat"). Minor disagreements between members of the same family are usually resolved by the head of the family unit within their *uma lulik* (Tetum: "sacred house"), and larger or violent conflicts involving multiple families, such as divorce, theft or land disputes may need to involve leaders from outside the *uma lulik* especially the *Xefe de Aldeia* and *Xefe de Suco* (Tetum: "Chief of the Aldeia sub-village or Suco village") (The Asia Foundation 2004; Trindade 2006: 12).

Using a customary *heda* (Tetum: dried palm leaf) woven mat to sit on while the discussion takes place as a venue, is only one part of a much more complex process where each step must be fulfilled for a successful outcome (Babo-Soares 2004). The

process is grounded in community participation, including extensive preparation, willingness on both sides to commit to the process, voluntary acceptance of culpability for past wrongs, and compromise to achieve a harmonious solution. Babo-Soares (2004: 24) explains that the five stages in weaving a *biti* are linked to the process of *nahe biti*: the first stage, preparing to plait the *biti* is likened to the process of contacting all the key parties to the conflict; the second, selection of the *heda*, translates to seeking agreement and willingness from all parties to meet and arranging the logistics; the third step is ensuring the *heda* matches each other, akin to the process of setting the parameters of the process including the recommendations for legal prosecution; the fourth step is the plaiting of the *heda*, which is the complex process of mediating compromise and consensus, creating a balanced or win-win solution; the final step is the completion of the *biti*, which is accomplished by ritual ceremonies such as *juramentu* (described below).

Nahe biti is an active peacebuilding process grounded in Indigenous authority that facilitates participants to resolve their fear and intolerance. It creates a safe space, geographically defined by the mat, where conflicting parties can seek common ground and talk through complex conflicts, achieved reintegration and acceptance of wrongdoers and seek shared outcomes. While each *uma lulik* has slight differences in this process according to their differing customs, *nahe biti* is a Timor-Leste-wide conflict management tool.

11.5.3 Juramentu

The practise of *nahe biti* includes a ritual ceremony to conclude and legitimate the process, usually before the *uma lulik* where a *juramentu* (Tetum: "binding oath, blood oath or oath of loyalty") is used to seal the agreement and bind all parties to the agreement (Babo-Soares 2004: 21–28; Trindade/Castro 2007: 23–26). The *juramentu* ritual is a symbolic 'death' of conflict and exchange of blood to bind the conflicting parties together as 'blood brothers'. It is usually carried out by mixing the blood of a sacrificed animal with local palm wine and the mixture is drunk by both parties. Often *juramentu* is concluded by chewing of *mamah buah malus* (Tetum: "betel nut") that has been sanctified during the ceremony to symbolise the normalising of relationships (Ospina/Hohe 2002: 46; Wallis 2014: 123). These physical ritual connections parallel the new spiritual relationships created concurrently where the ancestors of each party are also engaged to maintain the peace to ensure a *juramentu* can be enforced inter-generationally (Trindade 2006; Trindade/Castro 2007: 20, 25). An East Timorese development practitioner explained.

Sacrifice has been made for a purpose to gain independence. Whenever sacrifices must be made they must be paid back. You make a sacrifice to the ancestor spirits in order to retain their help. It is not a passive expectation, it has been written in terms of exchange and reciprocity. It is a two-way process (TTI).

11.5.4 **Matak-malirin** *and* **Halerik**

At the conclusion of Indigenous peacebuilding rituals participants hope to be provided with *matak-malirin* (Tetum-terik: newly green or sprouting; cool"), dualistic symbols of good health and productive life force (Kehi/Palmer 2012: 447). *Matak-malirin* can be physically represented with harvested food and water in a pot that is called *matak inan malirin inan* (Tetum: "mother of greenness and coolness"). The food and water received in these rituals are a metaphysical representation of peace, prosperity and protection from bad luck and are exchanged during ceremonies to signal the harmonious and inter-connected relationships between visible and invisible life forces (Trindade 2013).

Trindade (2013: 3–4) explains that when East Timorese do not have *tempu rai-diak* or *matak-malirin* they will undertake *halerik* (Tetum: "the singing or chanting of the suffering"). *Halerik* represents *ema kbi'it laek* (Tetum: "the voice of the powerless"), where those who are experiencing suffering express their problems to *ema bo'ot* (Tetum: "the powerful"]. The act of *halerik* is a non-violent form of protest; through articulating their experiences, the sufferer gains strength and purpose. *Halerik* has numerous practical applications; it was used during Indonesian occupation by the resistance and clandestine networks to express desires for independence and self-determination, and is now used by civil society to protest and draw Government attention to socio-economic disparities.

11.6   Indigenous East Timorese Peacebuilding in Practice

Evidence from Babo-Soares (2004), Brown (2009), da Silva (2012), Hohe/Nixon (2003), Meitzer Yoder (2007), McWilliam (2007), and Palmer (2015) demonstrate that Indigenous peacebuilding practices such as *tarabandu*, *nahe biti*, *juramentu*, *matak-malarin*, and *halerik* have been used to create consensus to facilitate the balance between *hun* and *rohan* and transform community-level violence into peaceful social relations in Timor-Leste over thousands of years.

Many East Timorese are critical of liberal peacebuilding processes. For example, Trindade/Castro (2007: 2) noted that: "Recent government-sponsored dialogue and peace-making initiatives by international actors present in East Timor have shown little impact on the sentiments and root causes underlying the eruption of violence". A senior East Timorese peacebuilder gave an example of how ineffective liberal peacebuilding had been during the intra-state conflict in 2006–08. She emphasised the need for slower, more contextual, localised peacebuilding.

During the crisis [in 2006] they tried to do the traditional conflict resolution. It is called *nahe biti bo'ot*, where you put down the mat; everyone sits down together to find a solution. I think it [*nahe biti bo'ot*] was more of a spectacle; it did not really address the underlying issues. I don't think it could have. I think we need a much

longer time to do it, logistically, the money and the time. Patience. There are still a lot of unresolved disagreements (TTK).

An East Timorese peacebuilder further elaborated that *nahe biti* practised at a national level, without the correct rituals and participants for each local context, was not perceived to have the requisite cultural meanings or correct balance between secular and cosmological power.

International experiences and the elite Timorese interests, they ignore our culture. One example, in 2006…we wanted *nahe biti bo'ot*, but they completely used *malae* (Tetum: 'foreigner') way, very international way, and ignored local ownership. So in that way it was not working (TTR).

The use of a modernised version of *nahe biti* to resolve the violence in 2006–08 is an example of how Indigenous peacebuilding practices can be co-opted by elites, Governments or international actors. In Timor-Leste many communities rejected this distorted version of *nahe biti*, which mirrored liberal peacebuilding practices focused on elite-level mediation that excluded important conflict actors, and did not aim to transform the root causes of violence.

While recognising their importance at a community level, McWilliam et al. (2014) and Grenfell et al. (2009) question the effectiveness of East Timorese peacebuilding practices. They argue that it is less clear whether Indigenous peacebuilding can be used to transform the current more widespread and deep-rooted peace and security challenges. They note that significant gaps in knowledge and procedural steps used may cause the overall process to be ineffective. This is an important critique but should not diminish the effectiveness of Indigenous peacebuilding methods at a community or inter-group level.

In turn, liberal peacebuilding efforts have also not been well understood or supported by communities, which have limited their effectiveness. For example, a senior East Timorese peacebuilder stated that communities were not accepting the outcomes of the formal justice system as retribution for past crimes: "They [people who had fought in militias] went to jail for five years and the community still would not accept them, so they had to go back to the refugee camp" (TTK). An East Timorese development practitioner elaborated thus.

People were coming in here to teach conflict resolution. But we already have conflict resolution methods in place that we have used for maybe thousands of years, to resolve issues between individuals and families or between tribes. It's just confusing. All this new conflict resolution methods from outside are not always working because people don't believe in it. They are not familiar with the process. The result is very very minimal (TG).

11.7 Conclusion

The post-1999 resurgence of *tarabandu*, *nahe biti*, *juramentu*, *matak-malarin*, and *halerik* practices has become critical to the resilience of Indigenous knowledge systems in Timor-Leste and for reducing violence. Use of these Indigenous

peacebuilding processes is also fundamental to building and sustaining Indigenous East Timorese self-determination or *ukun rasik a'an*. While Indigenous peacebuilding is supported by the majority of East Timorese people, the liberal peacebuilding model focused on state formation, democracy, market-based economic reforms and state security is endorsed by East Timorese elites and international development and peacebuilding organisations.

However, ongoing and significant intra-state violence indicates that the current prioritisation of liberal peacebuilding is failing to transform the root causes of violence in Timor-Leste because these practices do not appropriately value or empower Indigenous knowledge systems. Elite co-option of Indigenous peacebuilding practices has also been unsuccessful. Despite significant asymmetries of power, ordinary East Timorese continue to use and assert the importance of Indigenous peacebuilding practices to transform community violence, build relationships and maintain cultural rituals to bring the cosmos and the secular world into balance.

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