

HOUSING THE NATION

Elizabeth G. Traube
Wesleyan University

My assignment, which I received with some trepidation, is to provide you, in 15 minutes or less, with a cultural perspective on East Timor. Not the least of my problems is the striking diversity of East Timor, whose local populations speak some seventeen languages, belonging to two different language families, and remain deeply attached to distinctive, historically shaped cultural traditions. Indeed, viewed from historical, cultural, and linguistic perspectives, as James Fox observes, “Timor is not one place but many.”¹ The very complexity of its traditions, Fox continues, has led to various attempts to simplify Timor’s diversity.

Nation-formation is often thought of as a politically potent simplification of cultural diversity. The creation of a national culture is commonly viewed as a top-down process in which nationalist elites mold an ethnically heterogeneous population into a unified, homogeneous whole, by implanting a common language and set of beliefs through the school system and other state-controlled cultural institutions. But on East Timor (and I suspect wherever national independence has been achieved through a protracted collective struggle) official, state-led nationalism is only part of the story. I have been looking at processes of popular nationalism, nationalism from below, where local groups use preexisting cultural forms to imagine the nation.

In East Timor today, culture both divides and unites the local peoples, or rather, local groups continue to draw on their cultural traditions both to assert distinctive local identities and to imagine themselves as members of a national community, that is, to identify themselves as East Timorese. Inevitably, this means that different groups imagine the nation in varying ways; nor are any of these local perspectives identical with the official nationalism promoted by state elites. What is broadly shared among East Timorese are a set of cultural categories, interpretive resources that individuals and groups put to a wide variety of uses, within localities as well as across them. Rather than

simplifying this diversity, I will discuss certain activities that put culture in action in one locality, the district of Aileu, in the mountains some 20 miles south of Dili.

Aileu is part of the zone of the Mambai people, the single largest language group in East Timor.ⁱⁱ I first conducted ethnographic research there during what turned out to be the final years of Portuguese colonial rule, from early 1973 through November 1974. I returned to Aileu in November 2000, after an absence of twenty-four years. The traces of the devastation wrought in 1999 were all too evident. Many people, my own family among them, were living in charred, gutted houses that had been burned by the militias. House-repairs were underway, but rebuilding a domicile is a private undertaking. By contrast, rebuilding ancestral origin houses is a collective, traditional affair. It mobilizes an array of social groups, combines technical with ceremonial activities, and is part of a complex, contested process of negotiating local and national identities. Across Aileu, people were launching projects of this sort.

The house is a cultural category, part of a set of ideas that Mambai hold about origins, relatedness, and obligation. A widely held mythology of common origins that Mambai take pride in preserving represents all living creatures as descended from Father Heaven and Mother Earth, who unite on the peak of Tat Mai Lau, the mountain of origins, at the center of the world. Father Heaven removes the power of speech from his firstborn, the trees and grasses, so that they may be used to construct the a house, where Mother Earth gives birth to the ancestors of humanity. At first the ancestors cluster together in the Lone House. Human history begins with their dispersal from the mountaintop and their migrations across the land. Each of the male ancestors takes a share of the primordial patrimony, cuts a slip from the house pillar, and sets off for the outside, where after a period of wandering he “plants” a new house. Mambai represent themselves as descended from those who remained behind near the origin lands, at the center of ordered space, while others scattered to the four quarters of the land, or roamed across the seas, to found such lands as Portugal, America, Australia, Indonesia. No one teller, Mambai concede, is able to reconstruct the entirety of these branching ancestral paths. It is, however, a cultural premise, encoded in the botanic idiom of house-

formation, that all houses are ultimately traceable to one common source or “trunk,” which is to say that all peoples, by their ultimate origins, are “people of one house”. From the Portuguese, to the Indonesians, to UNTAET, foreigners have been incorporated into this scheme as returning emigrants, who are judged according to whether they fulfil or deny their obligations to their source.ⁱⁱⁱ

The house is also a fundamental social unit that is materialized in a physical structure. Mambai belong through the male line to named, clan-like groups that they refer to as “houses” (*fada*). House-members live in widely dispersed garden-homes, but their ideal unity is materially embodied in their ancestral origin house, located in the village of origins (*ria*), where the founding ancestor is believed to have settled in the past. The ancestor is regarded as the source of a body of distinctive ritual observances (*lisa*) and of a set of heirlooms, named swords, spears, and ornaments, which are kept inside the house. He is also associated with the sacred rocks and trees that visibly distinguish origin villages from mere residences.^{iv} During non-ceremonial time, origin villages stand empty, save for appointed custodians who look after the house and sacra. On ritual occasions or “gatherings” (*saun-hun*), house-members are expected to do just that: to reunite at the “house and origin village,” if not in person than by sending gifts of agricultural produce. Over the course of any one year, origin villages fill for for agricultural rituals, funerals, and post-funerary rituals. A primary occasion for mobilizing the group is the periodic rebuilding of its origin-house.

House-building ceremonies also activate a variety of relations between different origin houses. In the segmentary model of house formation, to which I have already alluded, houses are divided and subdivided over the generations by wandering younger brothers. Houses related through their male ancestors are categorized as “elder brother and younger brother.” Formally, they are one house, and junior “branch” houses may be expected to assist at rites performed by a senior “trunk”. All houses, moreover, are linked in lasting marital alliances to houses that give women to or take women from their own, and both wife-givers and wife-takers have ritual roles to play. Marital obligations, in particular, bear on Catholics as well as on pagans; thus a Catholic may more easily

evade ties to his own origin house than he may ignore the summons to a house ceremony or a funeral sponsored by a maritally allied house-group.

For many Mambai Catholics, moreover, obligations to the church and to one's origin house are not mutually exclusive. I suspect that such fluid, dual allegiances are especially common among members of certain ritually pre-eminent houses. For houses and origin villages are also the units of small traditional communities or polities. These polities, which appear to have been well established in precolonial times, have shown a remarkable capacity to endure by adapting to new circumstances, such as the Portuguese colonial presence.

Mambai adaptation to colonial rule was both ideological and pragmatic. Ideologically, as I have noted, the Portuguese were incorporated into a mythology of common origins and represented as a returning younger line, who assume their rightful role as defenders of order. Pragmatically, local Mambai chiefs solidified their own positions by making alliances with the Portuguese over the colonial period. The Portuguese distributed coveted regalia and titles of office, *regulo* and *Dom*, supplemented by a graded system of military patents, from colonel to lieutenant. What eluded the Portuguese is that the chiefly houses they recognized represent only one pole in a system based on an opposition between political power and ritual or spiritual authority.

In Mambai political philosophy, the regulation of human affairs and the ritual preservation of cosmic balance are complementary functions, vested in different origin villages. Colonially recognized political executives are associated with mobility, the outside, and celestial light: they tirelessly patrol their territory, and their rule is likened to "the beaming moon and the shining day" that illuminate the realm. Their counterparts, the spiritual authorities of the realm, are associated with immobility, the inside, and darkness. Symbolically, they sit fixed in place, at the dark center of the realm, where they mediate between the human world and the life-giving cosmic powers. Represented as "old mother/old father" to the community which ideally unites for their rituals, they are also known as "Lord Rock and Tree" and as "the Dark Lord" or "Colonel of the Night"

(*Koronei Hoda*). Among members of ritual centers a further premise of considerable importance is that their own ancestors were the original founders of the polity, who later delegated political power to its present holders. In this construction, the ritual authorities are the ultimate legitimizers of power, entitled to deference and respect as founders of the polity. Political chiefs, however, while respectful of the guardians “of rock and tree,” do not necessarily accept their claim to precedence, and the the relationship has long been a site of tension and contestation.

In rebuilding origin houses, Mambai are also recreating social statuses and relationships that have been dislocated by war; or rather, they are attempting to do so. For house ceremonies are as much tests as enactments of status, and their outcome cannot be predicted in advance.^v At the highest level of the house system, in the supreme ritual centers of the local communities, house ceremonies are a reassertion of status claims that faced extraordinary pressures during the years of war, occupation, and resistance.

Consider the case of Hohul and Raimaus: these are two origin villages, paired centers of ritual authority, with which I had become closely associated during my first field research. Indeed, I spent the better part of 1974 participating in their house-building rites. As it turned out, it was fortunate that these had been performed, for the houses were soon to be in extraordinary demand. When the Indonesians invaded in December 1975, the Aileu population abandoned their homes and fled into the hills.^{vi} Over the next year, thousands of people, village members and non-members, pagans and Catholics alike, found refuge in Hohul and Raimaus. Perched high on mountaintops, commanding a view of the territory below, and widely believed to have protective powers, the ritual centers were shelters for the uprooted population during the first brutal year of the invasion.

They were also magnets for an assortment of local challengers. The war precipitated a series of charismatic movements whose leaders claimed divine status rather than the mediating, priestly power of traditional ritual figures. In 1976, one self-styled “son of God” arrived at Raimaus with his followers and demanded entry to Hohul.^{vii} While Hohul deliberated, the prophet led his followers southward, to a sacred spring,

where he proposed to open a “doorway” to the land across the sea and call in a great American force that would drive out the Indonesians. When the force failed to appear, Hohul decisively rejected the prophet, who was subsequently killed by a Fretilin force that had been sent to disarm his followers.

In 1977 both Raimaus and Hohul were destroyed by saturation bombing, which burned the houses and drove the population further into the hills. The priests saved what they could of the hosue sacra, and the village rocks and trees endured. After the population surrendered in 1979 and returned to their homes, temporary houses were erected in Hohul and Raimaus and the priests resumed the yearly rituals on a reduced scale. From time to time, people would come with offerings to their “old mother/old father”. Among them were Falantil, who would come down from the hills with gifts of forest produce and ask the priests for “areca and betel,” a technique of divination used to determine who would or would not survive an upcoming raid.

Not until the early 1990s were they able to rebuild the houses destroyed in 1977. In Hohul, Indonesian authorities assisted at the climactic rite of the house ceremony, when a water buffalo, portrayed as a voluntary sacrifice, ascends the narrow stairs and enters the most sacred of the Hohul houses. The Bupati’s presence at the rite appears to have been one of a series of efforts to enlist the prestige of Hohul and Raimaus in the legitimation of Indonesian rule. According to my informants, much of the pressure brought to bear on them in this regard was exerted by their own political chiefs, members of the traditional ruling house, who after the surrender had assumed positions in the Indonesian administration.^{viii} The list of grievances against the chiefs includes specific charges, such as that they seized sacred objects from the ritual centers and handed them over to the Indonesians, to the more general accusation, that while many Hohul members risked their lives in the resistance, the chiefs collaborated with the Indonesians and profited from the occupation they served.

The chiefs are also directly or indirectly implicated in the second destruction of the ritual centers. Over the summer of 1999 the chiefs established a militia. It is widely

acknowledged that they did so under duress from the Indonesian military, though whether this constitutes an excuse is still debated. While intimidation was the military's preferred instrument for manipulating the vote, there were also scattered appeals to hearts and minds. As one such, in August 1999 the local chiefs forced Raimaus priests to perform a "blood brother ceremony" with the Bupati as a demonstration of support for autonomy, Hohul refused to comply. After the referendum, the militias burned both Hohul and Raimaus, in what is generally regarded as retribution for Hohul's refusal and Raimaus' putative failure to secure the victory for autonomy^{ix}

In principle, Hohul and to a lesser extent Raimaus could represent themselves as martyrs in the cause of independence, but the charred house pillars can also be read as indices of diminished power. That both origin villages were destroyed not once but twice does not go unremarked in rival ritual centers and lends a certain urgency to their reconstruction. Raimaus, the weaker of the two villages, had only entered the planning phase as of last summer. Hohul, however, had begun mobilizing its more extensive network of kin and tributaries by early 2001 to rebuild two of its four houses. When I returned last summer, the great house pillars had been erected, and the walls of the God House were touches were being ornately carved. The collection of thatch grass was underway, and the grass would later be ceremonially brought into the village by members of the realm. After the thatching is completed, buffalo sacrifices will be performed to steady the house columns or "strike the earth" (*bob raia*). Next summer when the roof ornaments are mounted there will be additional sacrifices to dedicate the houses to Father Heaven.

A variety of status relations will be put to the test in the unfolding process, as Hohul seeks to consolidate its membership and re-present itself to the world. To the participants, the construction of sacred origin houses is not a distraction from nation formation but integral to it. The ceremony of independence performed on May 20th "raised the nation," but for the national flag to shade and shelter the land, it must be ritually steadied and stabilized, anchored and rooted in the earth. Hohul's particular claim to be the anchor of the nation is not uncontested. In other origin villages, other house-

groups were advancing similar claims. From the local perspective, Hohul is attempting to reassert a precedence that it may never regain.

Particular status claims aside, the profound association of the house with unity imbues all house-building ceremonies with a political charge. In such ceremonies Mambai see a badly needed counter-force to the perceived divisiveness of party politics. Anxiety over the proliferation of political parties had been a major theme in the months leading up to the election of a constitutional assembly in August 2001. Party formation was widely evaluated in negative terms, as an index of a growing split between political elites on the coast, who were competing for position and status (literally, “searching for chairs”), and “the people,” those who had suffered for the nation, and who now want unity rather than division. Such attitudes should not be taken as expressions of some fundamentally anti-democratic cultural tendency. Mambai understand that democracy requires freedom to express different views. For years, they have been forced to conceal their allegiances and desires, and one need only attend a local political meeting to sense the palpable pleasure and pride they take in self-assertion. What concerns them, however, is that disputants argue from a prior commitment to a basic commonality, something understood to have been lacking in 1975, when party division proved lethal indeed. Such commonality, literally a common framework or ground, is precisely what origin houses embody and is part of what the houses ceremonies are intended to recreate.

One final point. When the prophet I spoke of failed to open the mountain doorway to the lands overseas, what he invalidated was his own authority, not the mythology of common origins that he had invoked. In 1999, Mambai trust in UNAMET was reinforced by their traditional understanding of the kinship between the Malaia, or overseas foreigners, and the East Timorese “people of the land”. At the same time, they understood all too well that “people of the sea” have a mobility rarely available to “people of the land.” Those with passports and money, it was often ruefully observed, can board airplanes and fly away from hardships that those who stay behind have no choice but to endure. Remarkably, I think, when people spoke to me of UNAMET, it was always with gratitude for what the mission had helped them achieve, and never with

resentment over its having abandoned them at the end. When the UN returned as UNTAET, they were welcomed again; and in the mountains, at least, regarded with appreciation and respect. But in Mambai understanding, UNTAET only did what the international community is obligated to do, merely honored responsibilities that had long remained unfulfilled. One can only hope that in the years to come the international community will honor what Mambai regard as a moral claim, by continuing to provide the material assistance that East Timor desperately needs.

ⁱ “Tracing the Path, Recounting the Past,” p.1. In *Out of the Ashes*, Fox, J.J. and D. Soares, eds. Adelaide, Crawford House Publishing, 2000.

ⁱⁱ Besides Aileu, the Mambai zone includes the districts of Ermera and Ainaro, as well as parts of Likisa, Dili, and Manufahi.

ⁱⁱⁱ Many people identified the Indonesians as descended from the blacksmith, Au Sa, whose share of the patrimony was the “nail and the hammer, the bellows and the forge.” Like their progenitor, people explained, the Indonesians combined technological power with an antisocial disposition that bespoke a radical insularity. Au Sa, in this construction, is represented as some one who withdraws from social intercourse rather than engaging in the socially productive regime of hospitality. He “fears the horse’s whinny and the bridle’s jingle,” sounds that announce an approaching guest.

^{iv} In some origin narratives, the ancestor is transformed into a rock or tree at his death; more often, the rocks and trees are represented as sacra that he brought with him from his own birthplace.

^v See Shelley Errington, *Meaning and Power in a Southeast Asian Realm*, Princeton University Press, 1989.

^{vi} Most of the local chiefs had publicly given their support to Fretilin well before the UDT coup. Aileu was the site of the Portuguese military training center, and when the coup began, Timorese soldiers in the Portuguese colonial army turned over the garrison’s arsenal of weapons to Fretilin. Local residents joined in to help turn back a UDT force advancing from neighboring Ermera. As a result of the district’s highly visible association with Fretilin, the population was at particular risk during the invasion. According to my informants, the villa was empty when the Indonesians arrived. The majority of the population remained in hiding for the next three years, when an intensive Indonesian campaign forced them to surrender.

^{vii} Mambai origin houses are oriented along a south-north axis, with the door on the north. House imagery provides one model for the relationship of the two origin villages. Raimaus, on the north, is represented as the “door” through which one gains access to Hohul.

^{viii} In 1975 the Dom of Aileun had joined Fretilin. I was told that he remained a loyal Fretilin supporter until his death. After the surrender, his brother and nephew served in the Indonesian administration.

^{ix} Although the chiefs established the militia and are held by some Hohul people to be directly responsible for the destruction of their origin village, it is also acknowledged that some Hohul members participated in the militias. A woman married to an elder brother of Hohul’s leading priests, whose husband had close ties to the Indonesian military, led the militias to the two origin centers and urged them on.