

# Safeguarding the critically endangered cultural heritage of the Fataluku people: an e-inventory of intangible cultural elements

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[http://manyhands.org.au/our\\_activities/2013\\_projects/research\\_project\\_preservation\\_of\\_endangered\\_forms\\_of\\_fataluku\\_cultural\\_expr](http://manyhands.org.au/our_activities/2013_projects/research_project_preservation_of_endangered_forms_of_fataluku_cultural_expr)

The protection and celebration of cultural practices are vital for all people, but particularly those whose ways of life have been damaged by colonization, as has occurred in Timor-Leste for five centuries. This article introduces an e-inventory of forms of cultural expression of the Fataluku people of eastern Timor-Leste which are considered by their protagonists to be critically endangered. These 30 elements from across UNESCO's five domains of cultural expression are documented and available online in video, photo and text. Statistics offered by YouTube indicate pleasingly large numbers of people accessing this material, from within and outside Timor. The potential of new technology to contribute to transmission and distribution of cultural information is evident.

*Every nation has a culture that underpins the way of life. According to the traditions of Lautem, our culture enables us to have strong unity and friendship. If we lose our culture, we lose our identity. All the information we have collected in this project informs us about the original culture of our ancestors.*

Sr Justino Valentim, Senior Researcher, 1954-2014

This article reports on the development of an e-inventory of the cultural heritage of the Fataluku people of far eastern Timor-Leste and its uptake. This resource includes 30 elements of Fataluku intangible cultural expression that are considered critically

endangered, across UNESCO's five domains. The article begins with a brief introduction to Timorese people and culture, and Fataluku culture specifically, and an overview of the data collection methods for the research. A short description of all the elements documented in the resource is provided, followed by a summary of data analytics indicating how often, where and by whom the inventory is being viewed. The final section discusses use being made of this data by the inventory owners, the Fataluku people, and future possibilities recommended.



Photo 1: Community members in Suku Rasa, Aldeia Mau-lo'o, sub-district Lospalos, celebrate the inauguration of an Uma Lulik, (traditional house) with a oron tafa (rice pounding) ceremony.

### **The significance of culture in post-colonial Timor-Leste and the Fataluku culture**

Cultural practices are vital for the sustainment of a good quality of life, in which values can be expressed and wellbeing promoted. This is particularly important for nations who have been impacted by the damaging external forces of colonisation. The people of Timor-Leste have been subject to the most extreme forms of colonisation over centuries. The ongoing effects of this colonisation are causal of, and intensified by, reduced cultural expression and loss of traditional social structures. The passing on of a generation of elders who previously held and shared traditional cultural knowledge affects continuity of these practices (Barnes, 2011; Yampolsky 2012).

Forces of globalisation also contribute to diminution of customary forms of cultural expression. As Timor's media industry and public cultural production are still under-developed, influences from overseas, particularly Indonesia, are very significant (Sloman, 2009). The anchorage of extended family is reduced through high levels of relocation to the city for education and employment, especially by the younger generation (Scambary, 2012). This dislocation is

compounded in many rural areas with the loss of a large percentage of young people to overseas guest work opportunities.

While the survival of customary cultural forms in Timor-Leste is increasingly at risk, their practice has not ceased altogether. A "resurgence of custom" has occurred since independence from Indonesia was won in 1999 (Hicks, 2007). Timorese culture has offered an abiding source of identity and stability throughout the nation's turbulent history and into the present day (Brandao, 2011). Culture and traditional practices still provide the primary means of conflict resolution and peace building in most communities (Brandao, 2011). Cultural expression is evident in artefacts still produced by hand across Timor (Tatoli ba Kultura, 2012). Hand weaving of *tais* is a particularly vibrant practice, with unique symbols for cultural groups incorporated into products throughout the country. *Tais* fabrics are used ubiquitously for traditional clothing and costumes, and as items of great significance given in exchanges at most important ceremonies. Traditional music played on a range of locally made instruments, accompanied by related

dance forms, also continue to play a strong role in cultural life (Dunlop, 2012).

Fataluku has not been a written language until recent times, with its proponents sharing knowledge between each other and through generations orally. However, there has been documentation about the culture, mostly by people from other nations. These include Australian anthropologist King's (1961) recount of lively performance culture involving music and dance, as well as highly developed carving practices. Gomes' PhD thesis (1972) provides a detailed account in Portuguese of Fataluku cultural practices including rituals and sacred objects. Australian researcher McWilliam (2007) provides a more recent documentation of significant cultural practices including mythology and sacred houses that are central to the spirituality, identity and governance systems of the Fataluku people.

#### **The project, the method, partners and research team**

The Government of Timor-Leste ratified the International Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2015, in recognition of the need to support, safeguard and celebrate the nation's unique cultural heritage. However, no national cultural institutions have yet been established to facilitate the safeguarding, storage or presentation of Timor's cultural heritage. One community cultural centre has been established with the support of Australian-based NGO Many Hands International (MHI). Sited in the regional town of Lospalos, the Lautem Cultural Centre is in the heartlands of Fataluku culture, one of Timor's cultural groups that has survived more intact than other cultural groups, partly because of the distance from the capital city. Fataluku is the largest language and cultural group in the Municipality of Lautem, with 69% (48.910 people) being Fataluku speakers.

This research project sought to assist the maintenance of Fataluku cultural heritage through documentation of elements of Fataluku culture that may be endangered. The project was initiated to collect material for the community museum planned for the Lautem Cultural Centre. While this facility is still in the planning stage, an interim solution was required for the sharing of material collected with community members, researchers and others.

The project was initiated by MHI, undertaken in partnership with the State Secretariat of Culture (Government of Timor-Leste) and supported by the Lautem Municipality; Department of Education, Lautem Municipality; Council for Fataluku Culture and UNESCO Jakarta. The research team comprised six native Fataluku speakers. Lead researcher Justino Valentim, recognized as a national hero of the resistance and cultural leader of Lospalos, had been involved in researching and recording Fataluku culture since Timor's independence in 1999. The team were provided with training and supervision by MHI's Directors, including project planning and management, research design and techniques, identification of intangible cultural heritage elements and recruitment and interviewing skills. Timor's first female film-maker and editor Bety dos Reis provided training in film-making and editing.

MHI's research team sought permission to undertake research in each Administrative Post in Lautem from relevant administrators. The team then approached community leaders for permission to research, and assistance in recruiting cultural knowledge holders. Participants were asked for permission to record and share information, and their recommendations for the level of public access allowed was noted and followed.



Photo 2: Oi-oilu performed by Henrique Lopes, in aldeia Malahara

### Research – participants, locations and the inventory

Data was gathered mostly in interviews with individuals and groups of cultural knowledge holders. Material was recorded in writing, video and photos, with some artefacts also given to the researchers for safe-keeping. Information was provided by 64 male and 84 female research participants who were identified by local leaders or self-identified as cultural knowledge holders. Efforts were made to gather information in all *suku* (villages) and *aldeia* (communities) in sub-districts Lospalos, Lautem and Tutuala, with elements eventually identified in 15 *suku* in 23 *aldeia*.

Participants were invited to share information about endangered cultural heritage elements including elements they believed were important to record and practices they were involved in. Questions were based on the UNESCO requirements for recording intangible cultural heritage, comprising:

- Name of element;
- Community to which it is related;
- Geographic location;
- Elements with which it is associated (tangible and intangible);
- Speech level involved;
- Perceived origin;
- People involved: names, ages, gender, tribe, social status, professional category;
- Other participants (knowledge holders);
- Access: access issues for this element;
- Modes of transmission;
- Viability of the element: threats to enactment and transmission;
- Availability of associated tangible elements and resources;
- Viability of associated tangible and intangible elements;
- Safeguarding measures in place.

Information was gathered in Fataluku language and recorded in writing and in photos and video.

### Digitisation and the e-inventory

Material collected was edited into short videos which were uploaded onto YouTube. These videos were then inserted into dedicated pages of MHI's website, along with accompanying photos and text, and translations into one or more other languages. At the time of writing, a project is underway to move this material to established gallery platform OMEKA to increase engagement and access to the resource.

The e-inventory contains 30 elements of Fataluku cultural expression across UNESCO's five cultural heritage domains. A short summary is provided below, with detail including description, photos and videos available on the e-inventory (Many Hands International, 2017).

### Oral traditions and expressions

*Vaihoho* are traditional poems either spoken or sung, often in call and response format. When sung, they are performed a capella by choirs of varying sizes. A range of *vaihoho* were documented in this research,

including *oron tafa* rice husking songs; *lipal vaihoho nu*, a bride price song; *iha-rala vaihoho*, songs about love; and *vaihoho iharala*, songs about orphans left after war.

### Performing arts

Several wind instruments were found. The *oil-oil*, a bamboo flute, that can be played double, (i.e. with two instruments at once) or singly. The *keko*, bamboo trumpet, has a cone made of *akadiru* (sugar palm) leaf. The *fara-fara* is like the *keko*, but with a mouth-piece of a small dried palm leaf reed. The *moto me'n-me'n* is most similar to an oboe, distinguished by a thin bamboo whistle fitted inside a longer, wider length of bamboo. *Pepuru*, a jaw harp, is made of thinly cut bamboo and blown using the mouth as a resonator, while the other hand pulls at a piece of string to create a note. *Puhu-puhu*, a conch-shell trumpet, is played by blowing into a hole at the pointed end of the shell. Only one percussion instrument was documented, *kakal*, a wooden xylophone, consisting of three horizontally suspended pieces of pokura wood.



Photo 3: Pepuru performed by Maria da Conceição, in aldeia Nanafoe

### Social practices, rituals and festive events

Rituals documented include: *ueutana aia leleira*, to call rain; *lipal fa'i*, surrounding traditional weddings; *orontafa*, for collective rice husking; *le masule*, for cleansing and inaugurating traditional houses; *nololo*, a welcome ritual conducted at ceremonies; and *lonia nalaka*, traditional magic rituals for healing and predicting future events.

### Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe

*Rata-lolo*, fables or traditional creation stories, are used to pass on important history, values and land knowledge. *Rata-lolo* are often told in the home, from parent to child, telling of the origins of Timor Leste, natural phenomenon, human behaviour and customs of the local community. Thirteen *rata-lolo* were documented.

### Traditional craftsmanship

A range of hunting techniques were documented, predominantly performed by men. Traps, *hiil*, are used to catch a range of animals: *pai ho vaka hiil*, snare traps, catch wild deer and pigs; bamboo *cua hiil fa'i*, trap mice; and *roso hina*, basket-like traps woven from palm leaves, catch fish at sea. *Coro*, bamboo spears, are used for hunting larger animals such as deer, pig and buffalo. *Fe-fa'i*, bow and arrow, are used for hunting wild animals and spearing fish. *Tutufa*, bamboo blow pipe are used to hunt birds, cuscus, civets, small pigs and bats.

Different types of *nian fa'i*, palm leaf woven artefacts were documented. These include *leu hina*, storage baskets; *pari pari hina*, woven fans; *neru moko hina* and *leu hina*, baskets for tossing grain; *meci leu moko hina*, baskets for catching sea worms; *rai soko hina*, baskets for carrying food; and *ulu halivan hina*, a small woven palm leaf container for the umbilical cord.

*Puhu fa'i*, pottery, made by hand with clay and white sand, and fired on an outdoor bonfire was documented. These pots are used to store and cook food. Other handicrafts observed were *ililaka sese*, a wooden spinning top; and *ke'u ke'u fa'i*, jewellery and

accessories carved from turtle shell. *Sisiran sile*, textiles made from *anukai ii*, handspun cotton, were also documented. *Cain fa'i*, traditional forms of fire making, involves hitting flint stones against metal or stone to create a spark. Traditional medicine, *ete asa fa'i*, is made from forest products to cure various illnesses.

*Lee ia valu*, or sacred houses, are built on pillars of tree logs with thatched roofs, and detailed with ornate carvings and paintings representing a clan group's motifs. Of all the elements identified, *lee ia valu* is one that has been observed to be increasing since independence.

This report is not yet a comprehensive documentation of all Fataluku cultural elements. Some rituals could not be recorded as they only occur only at specific times, or required co-ordination of large groups, such as dances. Several practices were considered *tei*, or sacred, and could either not be recorded or presented in the public resource.

## **Discussion**

### **Challenges regarding cultural heritage practices**

Almost all of the 30 elements documented were considered by their proponents to be endangered. Many elements were not practiced regularly and were not being deliberately shared with, or learned by, the younger generation. The average age of cultural heritage holders was 59, and some elements had only one or two active proponents. This is particularly concerning, given that average life expectancy in Timor is 67 years (World Bank, 2015), and, as Yampolsky notes (2012), some cultural elements are not passed on until the next generation reaches middle age.

Knowledge holders reported limitations to the transmission of cultural elements. These include the perception amongst people of various ages, especially the young, that traditional culture and customs are out-dated or irrelevant, and that school consumes the time that young people might otherwise spend learning cultural practices. The diminishing supply of

forest-product materials needed for instrument making, crafts, building, and rituals was also noted as very significant.

#### **Ongoing community engagement with the resource**

The active engagement of community members with this resource is vital if it is to be of value to them. MHI actively seeks to continue relationships with knowledge holders and the wider community through a variety of strategies. Efforts to gather additional material continue by MHI, as funding and other opportunities allow. MHI also continues its engagement with the Timorese government to support initiatives for the safeguarding and sharing of cultural heritage, such as the museum proposed as part of the Lautem Cultural Centre. A process of revisiting all knowledge contributors is planned as soon as materials are available on the new web platform translated into Timor's national language Tetun. An evaluation will be undertaken then to understand how useful community members perceive this resource and what they might wish to happen to it.

#### **New opportunity provided by on-line resource**

While formal institutional support for cultural maintenance and safeguarding is currently limited, new technology provides a unique opportunity for the sharing of Fataluku culture. While the facility of YouTube enables sharing of the material, the associated data analysis provides valuable information

about viewing and viewers. Over the first nine months of the on-line publication, without any significant marketing strategies, the material was viewed more than 28.000 times. This is a very large number considering that Fataluku only number 48.000, and that very few people have access to computers or internet in schools, homes or other facilities. However, mobile phone use is very high, with internet access from phones becoming ever more affordable, enabling high use of social media. 66% of viewers of the resource are in the UK, indicating the likelihood that young people working overseas far from families and culture are the primary viewers.

#### **Conclusion**

This research project located and documented 30 elements of the culture of the Fataluku people of far eastern Timor-Leste. With most cultural knowledge holders reporting that the practices were critically endangered, an urgent need to increase their transmission was identified. Initiatives in which the older generation can share their unique cultural practices, and the younger generation encouraged to value and learn about them might be considered most vital. The easy access to the material enabled by new technology such as YouTube, and new opportunities for distribution provided by social media indicates a significant positive impact, with huge numbers of viewers finding and distributing the material independently of the project organisers.

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#### **Photos**

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