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Handling of crises in Makili (Atauro): Old and new challenges to a model of alliances

Atauro's history is marked by droughts, famines and inter- and intra-island conflicts. The paper explores these various crises and examines the alliances that the local society of Makili, in the south-east of the island, had established in response to them: ancestral alliances with various elements of nature, generating solidarity between humans and non-humans; matrimonial alliances, sanctioned by the circulation of bridewealth binding the houses forming the local society. Despite the threats that modernity poses to these ancient alliances and notwithstanding new difficulties imposed by modern transformations, the inhabitants are confident in the resilience and coherence of their crisis management system.

Crises. Non humans. Ancestrality. Atauro. Bride price.

Gestão de crises em Makili (Ataúro): Velhos e novos desafios para um modelo de alianças

A história de Ataúro é marcada por secas, fomes e conflitos inter- e intra-islândia. O artigo explora essas diversas crises e examina as alianças que a sociedade local de Makili, no sudeste da ilha, havia estabelecido em resposta a elas: alianças ancestrais com diversos elementos da natureza, gerando solidariedade entre humanos e não-humanos; alianças matrimoniais, sancionadas pela circulação de preços de noiva unindo as casas que formam a sociedade local. Apesar das ameaças que a modernidade representa para essas antigas alianças, e apesar dos novos desafios impostos pelas transformações modernas, as populações estão confiantes na resiliência e na coerência de seu sistema de gestão de crises.

Crise. Não-humanos. Ancestralidade. Ataúro. Preço da noiva.

Jestaun krize nian iha Makili (Ataúru): Dezafiu tuan no foun ba modelu aliansa

Istória Ataúru nian todan ho rai-maran bainhira udan-laek, hamlaha no konflitu iha sira-nia leet nu'udar rai-rohan ki'ik ida. Artigu ida-ne'e sei ke'e kle'an krize oioin no lehat aliansa ne'ebé ema lokál hosi Makili, iha parte sudeste, hatán ba lia hirak-hotu: aliansa hori bei'ala sira hamutuk ho sasán rai-nian, hodi kesi malu sira ne'ebé nu'udar ema ho sira seluk ne'ebé la'ós ema; aliansa kaben nian, ho mahon hosi barlake hodi hafolin feto no halo uma hamutuk hanesan hola parte iha comunidade lokál. Maski lisan antigu hirak

ne'e hetan susar hosi moris modernu nian, populasaun fiar metin katak sira sei buras-hikas no hakat liu krize hotu-hotu.

Krize. Sira seluk ne'ebé la'ós ema. Iha bei'ala nia tempu. Ataúru. Barlake.

2 - Handling of crises in Makili (Atauro): Old and new challenges to a model of alliances

Gabriel Facal¹, Dominique Guillaud²

The island of Atauro presents particular socio-cultural features, inscribed in a linguistic background that is probably at the crossroad of the Austronesian and Papuan worlds, but which nevertheless have been under-studied. The island is also characterized by particular difficult conditions for human occupation, due to the variation in climatic conditions from one year to the next, the short rainy season and the scarcity of several resources including water and good arable land. These ecological difficulties were combined with social and political harshness, due to historical conflicts between Atauro's inhabitants and the surrounding islands or the mainland powers, and of the past competition between the island groups.

As a result of these difficult conditions, the theme of crises and the way they are handled by local populations reveals some local singularities when compared to studies carried out in East Timor on the relationship of human communities with their environment (see e.g. McWilliams 2011 on Fataluku; Bovensiepen 2011 on the spiritual geography of Laclubar district; etc.). In Atauro, the question of crises systematically brings out symbioses between bio-socialities confronted with the precarious environment. It also accounts for a complex and highly scalable social organization, transcribed in the territorial system, and designed to absorb the dynamics of conflicts within the social groups. Using the example of Makili, in the south-east of the island, our diachronic and territorial approach provides a better understanding of the risks that this society is facing, and of the available resources that it can count on to deal with these crises, until contemporary times. The data were collected by the two authors during several missions in Makili between July 2018 and December 2019 as part of the POPEI-Coll project³ with a view to discussing the restitution of results as desired by the population.

A. The polity of Makili in Atauro

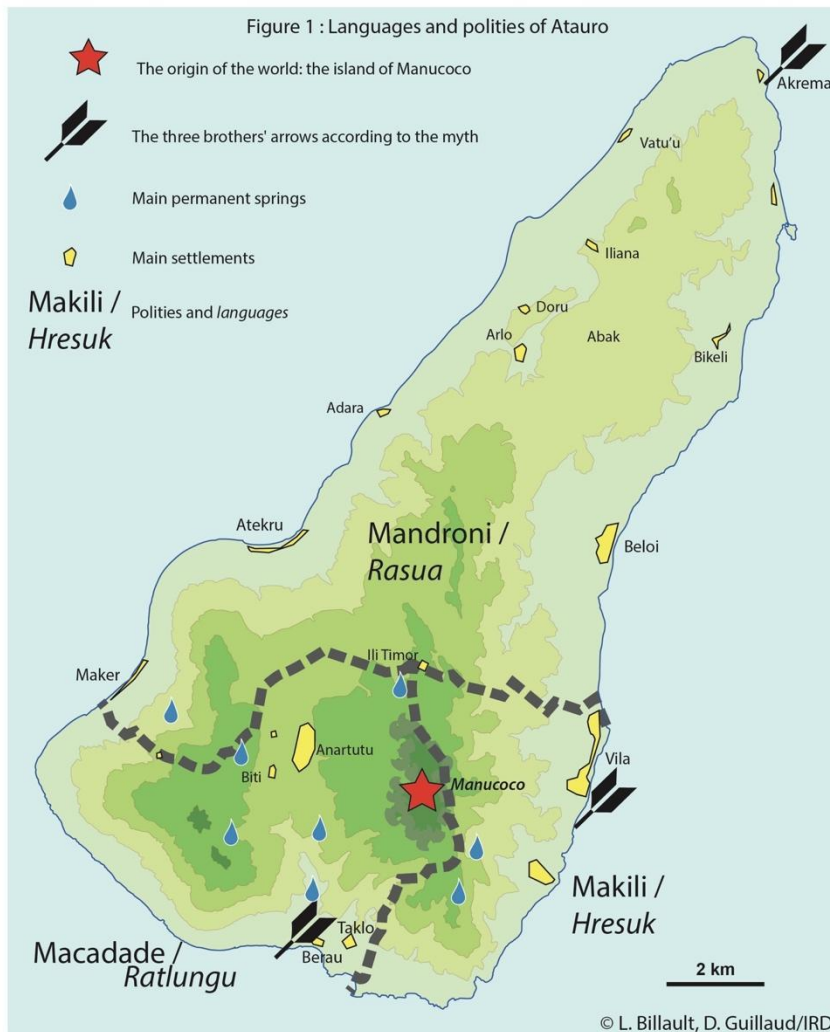
¹ UMR CASE, CNRS/EHESS.

² UMR PALOC, IRD/MNHN.

³ "Cultural Policies, Local Heritage and Collaborative Approaches in Eastern Insulindia", ANR-18-CE27-0020-02.

The island of Atauro is divided into three dialectal areas (figure 1): *ratlungu* is spoken in the south-western area, which corresponds to the current *suco* (district) of Macadade; *hresuk* is spoken in the *suco* of Makili and in Vila, and the rest of the island, corresponding to the *suco* of Biqueli and Beloi, speaks *rasua*. These three dialectal areas correspond more or less to three individualized political and cultural entities. Makili, on the south-eastern flank of the old Manucoco volcano, is organized around the alliance of twelve clans or *uma lisan*⁴. Macadade is home to seven *uma lisan* spread from the south coast to the highlands. The rest of the island is divided between a third political ensemble, Mandroni, composed of seven *uma lisan* originally located in the north-central part of the island, whereas each hamlet on the coast presents a combination of *uma* of various origins, which do not seem to form between them a structured political grouping.

⁴ Pannell (2006: 221) gives an efficient definition of the *uma*: “The term *Uma* has two basic levels of signification. On the one hand, *Uma* signifies a physical structure or dwelling. On the other hand, it denotes a group of related individuals who recognize a common ancestor, or group of ancestors, and share a common ancestral name.” French researchers in Timor, among them Berthe and Clamagirand, favored a translation of *uma* by “house”, and are followed in this by most of the contemporary authors. Hicks (1990:15) for his part, among the Tetun of Carabalau, describes the descent groups as “clans” for the original groups, and “lineage” for their more recent segments. Useful reference will be made to the analyses of Barraud (2015), who reviewed the different dimensions of the house and its approaches by different authors. This text is not, however, the place to enter further into this type of discussion, and we shall use the term “*uma*” or “*uma lisan*” to refer generally to the group of descendants referring to the same ancestry on the same territory, and “house” to refer to their segments and corresponding habitats.



The origin of these polities is summed up in a well-known narrative: at the beginnings of times there was only the small island of Manucoco, limited to the summit of the volcano, where three brothers, standing back to back, shot an arrow in an opposite direction. Where their arrow fell, the sea dried up, and Atauro emerged (Guillaud 2019). Then the brothers set out to search for their arrow and discovered beings and things that gave birth to the present *uma*. The polity of Mandroni is attached to the eldest of the brothers, that of Makili to the middle one and that of Macadade to the youngest. In each ensemble, the *uma lisan* are bonded together by alliances and by the sharing of resources, illustrating Barraud's (2015: 233) remark on the importance of the relational aspect between the houses, rather than their individual character.

Makili is composed of twelve *uma lisan*, distributed into fifty-six currently identified customary houses, consisting of mother-houses (*ruma lela'it*, literally: "houses of the customary master") and their ramifications (*ruma-nan*). All these houses are also

designed as *ruma tua-meti*⁵, a term that refers to both the physical structure of the house and its status position. Some houses are difficult to identify as several may be clustered together or may gradually disappear. They can therefore present an indeterminate status, sometimes for several years, before the memory of the initial house fades away, or their new identity is affirmed.

In Makili, the system of alliance and the division of territory between the *uma lisan* reveals the principle of crisis prevention and resolution. Past and present crisis seemed linked to the scarcity of environmental resources, which generated territorial conflicts within or outside the *uma*. In reverse, territorial conflicts hampered access to resources.

B. Past crises in Makili: a knock-on effect between scarcity of resources and territorial conflicts

Several types of narratives highlight the population's difficulties in dealing with different kinds of environmental crises, such as droughts and famines. In this economy of survival, the scarcity of resources triggered land conflicts, which were often resolved through a certain flexibility between the different categories of land-rights, but they could also take on a geopolitical dimension and break out into local wars.

The diachronic approach, based on the foundational stories of *umas* and the narratives linked to places, reveals an evolution in the nature of crises⁶. A first period (or modality) suggests enemies from nearby islands such as Alor, Kisar, Wetar, but also from more distant places related to the slave trade such as Buton and Makassar. The island is presented in this context as united against the raids carried out by enemies, some in "large boats with two or three sails", and mentions a system of watchmen houses installed at strategic points. The occupants of the boats would kill or abduct the inhabitants, but it is also mentioned that they would steal goats, collect swallow nests, and engage in trade. In this first period, the populations were settled far from the coasts, which were considered

⁵ *Tua* is the palm wine and *meti* the fish, two items that can be stored in these houses to be shared during social events.

⁶ The oral tradition of Akrema can give an idea of the extent of such crises. The local history is divided into three "periods", each ending with the virtual extermination of the population. The first period sees an epidemic where "people died with wounds on their bodies, and they were not buried; only a few survived" (smallpox?). Such an epidemic is unlikely to have spared the other regions of the island, although its memory is not present in Makili. The following periods in Akrema's history are similar to the ones identified in Makili, described hereafter.

dangerous, in places whose difficult access bears witness to this insecurity. *Uma*'s narratives and site visits attest of a harsh environment where water and access to coastal food were major constraints. Macadade's inhabitants indicate that in these times of piracy, all groups on Atauro were united in their struggle against the common enemy; internal conflicts on the island could have arisen thereafter. It is possible that external trade, even if perceived as deception by the islanders, led to the reorganization of local trade patterns (locals giving dried fish and other items like wax in exchange for metal and various objects such as guns or gongs) and transformed the geopolitics of the island.

Initially, there may have been very local conflicts between *umas* over the control of resources and power. In a second phase, the current polities of Makili, Macadade and Mandroni, each based on an alliance of *umas*, seem to have taken shape, establishing between them a lasting rivalry focused on limits and boundaries. Such crises could have been related to unequal access to resources: water, because perennial springs are scarce; food, linked to access to land, to forests and to coastal areas (fishing and collecting); raw materials such as bamboos, wood for boats, constructions etc.

In a third phase, actors from outside Atauro intervened on the island. The Portuguese, then present in the Dili area, entrusted their allies of Hera⁷ and Manatuto, who also appeared to be engaged in plunder and abductions, with the control of the island and the collection of taxes. The refusal of Macadade to pay this tribute was invoked as the pretext for a war where Makili and Mandroni (enlisted by Portugal and its allies?), defeated Macadade's warriors.

During these various phases of conflict, which also induced periods of food shortage, strongholds such as those of Heuknan and Domalok in Makili were built for refuge. The agricultural tax (*finta*) on food imposed by Portugal and the forced labour of the 20th century caused part of the island's population, especially men of working age, to flee to neighbouring islands (they subsequently returned).

⁷ Spillett (1999: 232) mentions that (probably around the 18th century) Atauro was part of the kingdom of Hera; moreover, Makili is the name of one of the two noble houses of the kingdom of Hera.

Mobility has thus always been a solution to crises. Makili received refugees driven out of various areas of the island⁸; and some branches of local clans also left the village to find elsewhere resources that locally were beginning to be scarce (such as wine palms).

C. The modalities of crisis resolution: ancestry and alliance

In response to these past crises, of which the examples cited here give only a very limited overview, mechanisms to maintain the cohesion of society were in place. They involved different types of alliances to create social bonds, alliances with non-humans—who represented the environment placed thus under control—, and between humans—that ensured the cohesion between *umas*.

1 - *Allies in times of crisis: the founding ancestors*

Narratives state that after the brothers' arrows had dried up the island of Atauro, some non-humans (animals and elements of the environment) became women and men who were the founders of some *uma lisan*, while simultaneously humans forged alliances with these entities. The non-humans are represented by various entities (shell, snake, bird, turtle, shark, field mouse, whale, pig, mango, cloud, and star) and matrixes (caves, giant clams, burrows, sky, the underwater realm...). Alliances with such entities seem to refer mainly to relations between the upstream/mountainous and downstream/maritime worlds, but also between the underground or underwater universe and the celestial world, and symbolize a fruitful complementarity between the resources from these different realms. Such alliances enabled Makili to survive food shortages and droughts but also to cope with numerous internal and external conflicts, e.g. the dangerous animals carved on *uma Hataur's* flying pirogue allowed it to avenge a murder by the people of Hera. Makili was also populated by hybrid beings, such as the winged man Ilibalek, and by outsiders, who brought with them their technical knowledge and material culture, such as blacksmithing and pottery. The same kind of alliances also typifies Macadade's *umas*.

These apical ancestors, the ultimate references of the narrative shared between the houses, are at the core of their solidarity. They refer to resources that are echoed in the names of the houses, often the same as the toponyms of their location, for example

⁸ This concerns the *umas* Hnua Le'en, founded by people from Macadade; Hatu Dalas, founded by brothers from Macadade; Tetoha, founded by a native of Arlo.

Ah'le'en: "under the mango tree"; Oprato: "the bamboo tree"; Noklete: "the leaning coconut tree", etc.

Generally speaking in the region, the authors have paid little attention to the meaning of these alliances between humans and non-humans. Van Wouden (1968: 39, 74) relegated them to totemism. Barnes (2011: 39) sees them as the unfolding of the takeover of nature by the ancestors, "setting the precedent for interactions with (...) the original 'owners' or guardians who inhabited the earth", or as the expression of a hidden dimension in which these first occupants would live. Kaartinen (2009) aptly invites us to examine the link between these myths of origin and the places they mention. And in fact, just as much as they evoke the alliances between the different environments of the island or the resources that these environments provide, these accounts of foundation and alliance between humans and non-humans are systematically based on toponyms that the narrators mention without hesitation. As such, they are also the territorial registers of the *umas*, and reassert the transmission of the lands and resources within various territories. Bovensiepen (2011: 50) in Laclubar explained how the spirits of the earth created human beings and raised animals, how some humans were born from the earth and others from stones; she evoked the concept of *lulik* as encompassing all of these processes and connected it, interestingly, to the notion of autochthony, since the inhabitants of Laclubar were supposed to have emerged from the landscapes. In this sense, Atauro's founding narratives can also be read as the collective construction of autochthony. The omnipresent reference to non-humans in these narratives is both an identity and a territorial construction (referring to Fox's 2006 concept of "topogeny", an identity based on a combination of places), founding the *uma*'s legitimacy on nature, and allowing them customary control of the resources.

2 - House-to-house solidarity based on bridewealth debts

Another mode of solidarity between houses lies in the matrimonial system (*sekngarin krauk*), which occupies a central place in Makili's social organization. Alliance is proscribed between people of the same *uma*, encouraging their branching out while at the same time strengthening links between them. This openness of the system contrasts with the model of women givers-receivers (*umane-fetosaun* system) that arranges a matrimonial circulation in a fixed sense, widespread across East Timor. In Makili, at the heart of the

alliance is the bridewealth (*belis*), generally consisting of about sixty items, the exact number of which is defined by the bride's parents. These items are valiant spears (*osa lolon*), textiles / *tais* (*kngohi*) and machetes (*suri*).

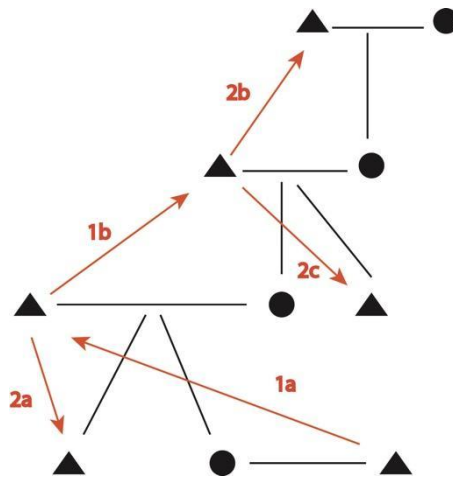


Figure 2 : Example of the bride price circulation

Arrows indicate the circulation of the bride price. 1: primary sharing; 2: secondary circulation of *belis*; a-b-c: order of circulation

The *belis* is present in several sequences of the alliance. Its exact price is set at the time of the wedding proposal (*hresuk tete*). On the day of the wedding ceremony (*krauk sekngarin*), six items of the *belis* are given by the husband to his wife's family. These items mark the buying of the rights on the bride's descendance. Once displayed and appraised by the guests, the items are shared equally between the father of the bride (*ina ama*) (1a) and the in-laws of the father of the bride (*utalin*) (1b). The father keeps the *belis* items for one of his sons, the bride's brother (2a). The in-laws of the bride's father can do likewise: pay a debt to the father of the father-in-law's wife (2b) or marry one of his male members (2c). Thereafter, the groom's family will provide other items of the *belis* whenever the in-laws consider it necessary (opening of a house, inauguration of a boat, clearing of a field, funeral).

The payment of the *belis* may extend over several decades or even generations, with the groom's or bride's children or grandchildren taking over if it has not been fully paid during their lifetime. When the last item of the *belis* is brought to the in-laws, the debt is said to be paid off (*terik talikik*). Such settlement must be preceded by an exceptional sequence of *pipainga'an*, a grand event during which a spouse who has accumulated sufficient wealth will give a large part of the *belis* to his in-laws.

For some, such as Fidalgo Castro (2015: 264), ritual exchange is to be seen as an instrument of credit and savings, and as a network of solidarity that goes beyond the immediate protagonists of the exchange and is understood at the level of the whole group, and on the span of several generations. Similarly, in the case examined here, without assuming any social determinisms nor functionalism, the ongoing ritual construction is to be read as a means of consolidating the social edifice in a context of scarcity of resources and of open competition for access to them.

According to this reading, the discontinuation of ritualized exchanges linked to alliance in a good part of Atauro (except for Makili for the moment) would be a sign of a loosening of the social cohesion.

A final point is that the main component elements of the *belis* (iron and textiles) originate from exchanges with populations from outside the island⁹. Coupled with their high symbolic value (spears/arrows and machetes as linked to war, textiles as hallmarks of identity and prestige), these elements express concern for peace stability, sustained by both exogenous commerce and internal capitalization-distribution.

D. Current crises – Scarcity of resources or renewal of the system?

The changes of modern times have eased some of the constraints of island life, and transformed or channeled old conflicts within the island and with the outside world. But they have also brought new crises to which today's society is trying to respond, raising questions about its dynamics and resilience.

1 - Land crises

We have not yet had the opportunity to explore the impact of the cadaster launched in 2016 by the government, nor the position of the population *vis-à-vis* this endeavor. The government cadaster is based on the users' rights, and does not have the capacity (nor the aim) to register the various interlocking land rights that form the customary system. There is as yet no sale of land in Makili. While the *uma* has an inalienable appropriation of its territory, its sub-groups (or even those of another *uma*) also take over the territory and tend to become autonomous over time, blurring the original territorial map (see Figure 3). At the land-use level, the blurring is no less significant, because the theoretical use of the

⁹ According to the respondents, iron came from the sky, or was exchanged with the neighboring Indonesian islands; textiles came from different regions of mainland Timor.

uma's land by its members has shifted towards a situation where multiple “borrowers” cultivate the land of another *uma* on a long-term basis.

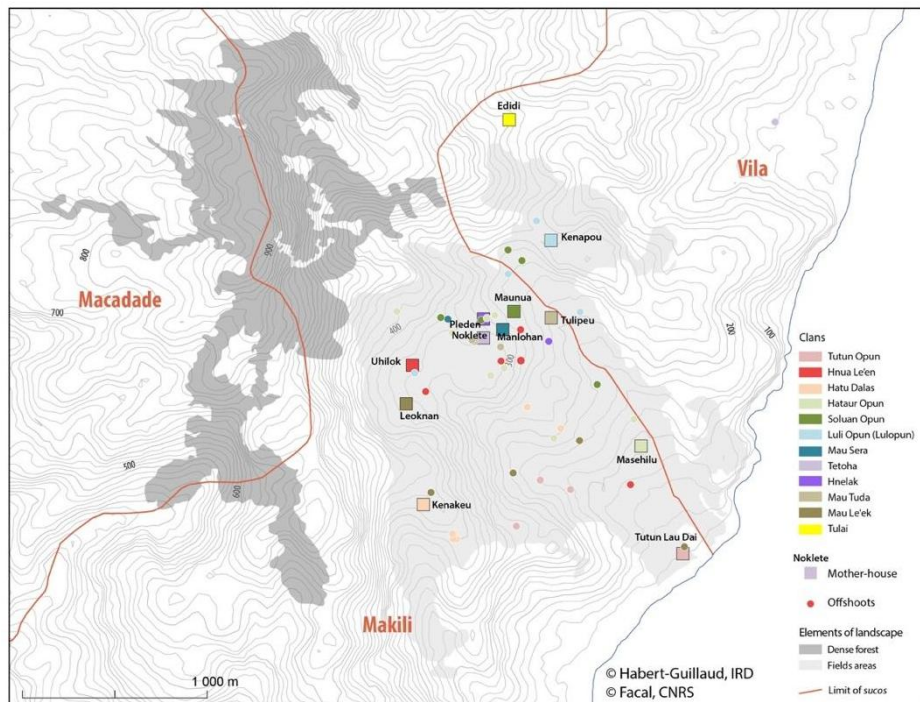


Figure 3: Houses and their offshoots in Makili

The *belis* system is partly responsible for this. In the frequent case of a yet-to-pay bridewealth when the parents die, the children are still under their matrilineage although they have cultivated the land and stayed in the house from their patrilineage. The complexities of territory and alliance create a certain porosity in the land allotments, where norms of use overlap the *uma*'s appropriation. This *de facto* entanglement of rights involving different *umas* can also be read as an element of social cohesion. So far, the customary system has demonstrated its ability to settle land disputes, resorting ultimately on the arbitration of the ancestors. Moreover, the many customary tribunals that are set up to deal with questions of boundaries (as well as the gatherings to organize the different phases of a matrimony), are important moments of sociability during which knowledge about history and territory is expressed and passed on. However, this development increasingly questions the relevance of the *umas* as a benchmark for socio-spatial organization. The different regions of the island seem to be at different stages of this transformation.

2 - Modernity and the erosion of structural responses to crises

The ritual proliferation observed in East Timor is not particularly noticeable in Atauro, where rituals are on the whole declining. This revival elsewhere in East Timor has often been presented as a consequence of the political change brought about by independence after 24 years of repression and prohibition under the Indonesian regime¹⁰. However, Atauro would stand out in this scenario because customary rituals have become rarer or even have disappeared; and as Dana Rappoport (2020) points out, Atauro's many musical repertoires related to water rituals, navigation, and funerals are in danger of disappearing and are for many forgotten. The development of Pentecostalism in the island from 1978 onwards (Bicca 2011: 25) poses a threat to local cultures, even though Catholicism, more flexible towards local practices, remains firmly established in Makili. It might explain why the main mechanisms of social cohesion, such as the *belis*-based system, are still active in Makili, while in Macadade this system is extremely eroded¹¹ and has disappeared from the rest of the island. The demise of the *belis* system would pose a potential threat to the capitalization of bridewealth, and thus to the social cohesion within houses and families over the generations¹².

The survival of a land and social system based on oral knowledge and on the circulation and redistribution of bridewealth is thus increasingly questioned. In the mid-1980s, despite resistances, the Indonesians imposed the displacement of the original habitat towards the coast (Bicca 2011); the sacred houses were far away on the heights and the houses' memory, largely linked to places, tends to fade away. Finally, since independence, young people seem to show less interest in the culture of the elders, and schooling, as well as the prospect of studying in Dili, inexorably distances some of them from their elders' knowledge.

3 - What resilience in the context of modern crises?

¹⁰ This corresponds to McWilliam's (2011) interpretation, which insists on the redistributive character of exchanges linked to rituals and matrimonial services in a context of the collapse of the market economy that followed Indonesian colonization.

¹¹ Pentecostalism is indeed more present in Macadade than Makili, but Macadade's inhabitants also explained that their abandonment of *belis* was due to the availability of land in their territory, indicating that land shortages in Makili meant that the system of *belis* had to be maintained there. This avenue needs to be explored.

¹² See Kelly Silva (2018) for a perspective on bridewealth competitive practices and definitions, in Dili.

While the notion of danger and insecurity has always been at the heart of Makili's narratives, a form of security or even comfort (electricity, basic necessities, goods from village grocery stores, support from the church, solar panels, opening of telephone and 3G networks) is emerging today. But while food shortages are partly alleviated, this new context creates new needs that the local production systems cannot fully satisfy. New uncertainties are also arising; these are notably linked to climate change, with the noticeable lengthening of the dry season, its irregularity and a significant decrease in the flow of springs (which many ascribe to the disruption of ancient ceremonies). Even though pipes have been installed by the Indonesians and the Church, several water supply networks have proved to be inoperative or are now obsolete.

In the wake of all these modern crises and attractions, the solution of mobility plays a key role, and the regularity of transport to Dili allows for occasional or seasonal work migration to the capital. The nearby administrative center at Vila is also an attractive place. It remains to be seen whether these mobilities provide lasting solutions to crises situations. In any case, they mark an important change in the local Christian society, which is beginning to import external organizational and political models, marking the transition from a restricted social space to a broader one.

The internal conflicts of past times find new expressions in the political arenas provided by the introduction of the electoral system and by the economic shifts that occur through public and private development projects within the island. These changes lead to the constitution of patron-client networks. It remains to be seen whether they provide local communities with more sovereignty or whether they compete with the *uma* system, through challenging modes of interpersonal interdependence and individual opportunities.

Conclusion

As a last remark, we would like to point out that there seems to be a discrepancy between the Makilians' vision of these transformations and ours. Indeed, as anthropologists adopting a comparative perspective, both in space between the social groups constituting Makili society, and in time through a diachronic perspective, we can assess the deep transformations that the local society has undergone. Today, the island finds itself on the verge of other disruptions that could be caused by tourism development projects, which some observers are alarmed about. In contrast, while acknowledging important historical

upheavals, such as climate change, Christianization, the Indonesian occupation, national integration and government development policies, the inhabitants focus on the forms of continuities in their social structure. These perceived continuities appear to be related to the fact that Makilians are confident in their system of resilience to crises, embedded in forms of social coherence and cohesion.

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