Estrutura Kultura Usitasae: Ethnographic notes on schools as sites of local elites' reproduction and communication in Oecusse, Timor-Leste[1]

Alexandre Jorge de Medeiros Fernandes[2]

Formal school education has been a common means for integrating individuals into broader political communities in Timor-Leste and elsewhere. The state school system in Timor-Leste extends across much of the territory. It is one of the arenas through which multiple state agents have sought to discipline social sensibilities and conduct, which may pose an administrative challenge to their overall goal of monopolizing and integrating political power.[3]

Between November 2016 and October 2017 I carried out field research in Usitasae, a small suku (several hamlets under a local administrative unit) in the municipality of Oecusse, the western exclave in the Indonesian part of the island. During fieldwork I analyzed educational practices involving children and adolescents in public schools. My attention focused on the uses some subjects made of the school's apparatus and events within the administrative organization. I noted that part of the teaching and

1 DOI: 10.48006/978-65-87289-07-6.29-54.

2. PhD Candidate in Social Anthropology at Universidade de Brasília. Email: lexmedeiros@gmail.com.

3. This chapter compiles 14-month's fieldwork in 2016 and 2017 for my PhD thesis. I am grateful to my University of Brasília´s colleagues – including Renata Nogueira da Silva, Carlos Oviedo, Ana Carolina Ramos and Alberto Fidalgo – for many fruitful discussions. I also thank Kelly Silva for comments on an earlier version of this chapter. I was supported by multiple science, technology and innovation research projects funded by the Brazilian state. It involved two academic internship projects, CAPES/AULP 54-2014 and CAPES 88881.172482/2018-18. CNPq provided funds for research by means of processes 45784/2014-7 and 310900/2018-2. Recognition is also due to the Federal District's Research Foundation (FAP-DF) for supporting the project 0193.001529/2016 and to Fundação Oriente for hosting me during my first days in Timor-Leste.

learning activities included institutional practices which were considered *kultura*:[4] multiple gift-like exchanges, dances, ritual speech and ancestor worship. Likewise, the houses of local elites, known as *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae*, occupied a prominent position in the school's administrative organization.

This analysis of the political and educational dynamics of the school apparatus in Usitasae seeks to understand how schools have become significant means for state formation and nation building in Timor-Leste. It draws from a particular perspective considering the role of schools in the construction of national-based relations and sensibilities. By this I mean not only producing cultural capital in the form of scholarly knowledge and communicating a nationalist discourse to the students, but also integrating local governance complexes into the national state apparatus (Silva 2014). In this sense, I also understand the state's schools as a means by which local elites have sought to communicate and reproduce themselves.

The ethnographic account in this chapter identifies some of the reasons why Timor-Leste's agrarian populations have welcomed the school system and sent their children to learn in its institutions. Much of the literature on schooling in East Asia has suggested that school systems have enjoyed a fair degree of acceptance because they have afforded some family groups access to a monetized economy. Schooling is considered to be a means through which these groups acquire titles and a set of skills and knowledge necessary for entering capitalist economies (Fife 1994; 1997;

4. In an article titled "Government of and through *kultura*", Kelly Silva discussed how *kultura* has been mobilized into processes of political centralization and monopolization. Government by *kultura* entails mobilizing local governance complexes, that is "heterogeneous apparatuses of regulation, control, exercise of agency and social reproduction of groups and individuals in the world, often appearing as multi-layered total social facts … Such complexes are made up of different agents and agencies: 1. Institutions structuring local modes of social organization, most notably the house; 2. Ritual knowledge and related techniques (sacrifice, mobilization of words with the purpose, for instance, of imposing ruling prohibitions, life cycle or conflict resolution rituals); 3. Positions of authority for mediating relations with state and church institutions, such as village chiefs or catechist teachers, as well as with spiritual forces or entities (ritual priests, witches, diviners), among others" (Silva 2014, 124–25).

Demerath 1999). Lynn Parker (2003) has also pointed out the same in her study of social changes in a small Balinese village in the context of the Bali Island's nationalization in Indonesia.

Like the political-administrative system, the distribution of schools during the Indonesian occupation and independent Timor-Leste was partly driven by their incorporation into local political structures. This becomes evident when one compares the Timorese experience with other colonial social contexts, such as Australia, whose school administration was not controlled by the communities. Ralph Folds (1987) noted that by the second half of the twentieth century schools in central Australia were largely rejected by aboriginal groups, even if there were plans to build bilingual schools, incorporate "aboriginal culture" into the school curricula, and place indigenous people in key positions at the school administration. For Folds, aboriginal groups' lack of control over schools at the local level has been a chief cause of school truancy and indigenous children's poor performance. Thus, in order to understand the formation and reproduction of schools and of the state in local contexts, a key aspect is the alliances between local groups mediated by bureaucracy, schools included.

This chapter is divided into three sections and final remarks. The first section presents an ethnographic account of my introduction to the field. This leads to a discussion of relations between houses in a suku and reflects on the importance of the house as a social institution fundamental for Timorese sociability. These points have been widely acknowledged by the anthropological literature on the area conventionally called eastern Indonesia. I then analyze relations between the houses in Usitasae, suggesting that a group formed by three of them enjoyed precedence over the others, thus making up a kind of local elite. The way the local elites incorporated me within the community indicated that they constantly sought to absorb and control multiple state-related artifacts and means of communication in order to bolster their own primacy in the local context.

The second section focuses on the school system as a technological complex whereby the local people incorporated state artifacts and techniques. I argue that schools granted local elites control over a range of elements: both non-human (calendars,

clothes, food, school yard) and human agents (teachers, parents and students, traditional authorities). I analyze in further detail one particular school celebration – the Arts and Culture Festival at suku Usitasae's central school – in order to underscore its ambiguous character. While officially the event was meant to build national sensibilities, extra-officially it also helped produce the precedence and significance of certain houses vis-à-vis the community at large. The latter goal was achieved mostly through preparation activities and the celebration's protocol: it involved animal sacrifice, mobilization of material resources from the students' parents, and speeches by spokespersons from traditional houses. In this sense, I claim that material and communication resources necessary for the effective operation of schools were often captured by local elites and pressed into the service of their own reproduction.

The third section's argument is that, in the long run, integrating houses within the state may lead to the weakening of their position. Wherever state-based means of production and communication are introduced, the tendency is for the strengthening of solidarity ties between staff and schoolmates, and weakening of kinship-based relations. As a consequence, the centrality of the house as the chief social institution guiding the conduct of community members is progressively undermined.

The concluding remarks underscore the materiality of government practices which provided local elites with a range of reproductive means (jobs in state bureaucracy, goods and money) and communication (school events, parent and teacher meetings). Control of such resources was shared between the state and the *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae*. Through the mediation of local elites, the state gained physical and moral presence in segments of the population otherwise outside its reach.

The search for the local elites' means of reproduction in Usitasae (or, how I entered the field)

Based on ethnographically defined areas, Timor-Leste is located in the part of the archipelago known as eastern Indonesia. One of its most salient ethnographic institutions is the house (or *ume*, in the area's Meto language). In anthropological literature,

houses are described as social groups based on ties between individuals understood in kinship terms. These groups are formed through relations of descent, common ancestors, and especially through practices of alliance and antagonism vis-à-vis other houses (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995). Moreover, houses are minimal exogamous units, that is, marriage between members is restricted. Specifically in eastern Indonesia, relations between houses are asymmetric (Schefold and Domenig 2004).

The Atoni pah meto (henceforth, Atoni) is a Meto-speaking linguistic group to which most people in Oecusse belong. Even though some studies have identified the house as the most important social institution for understanding local sociabilities, anthropologists who worked with the Atoni have described the house in different ways. In the first major scholarly study on these populations, *The political system of Atoni of Timor* (Schulte Nordhoult 1971) , the author treated the ume as a genealogical group. He concluded that this kin-based institution corresponds to a primeval dimension of social relations among the Atoni. The genealogical group would therefore provide a fundamental idiom for understanding political action in the villages and elsewhere (idem, 434).

Cunningham (1962), in turn, argued that the house operates as *ume kanaf* (house-name) for establishing affine matrimonial exchanges (weddings). Instead of classifying it as a genealogical group, Cunningham considered *ume kanaf* to be a "descent group" (Cunningham 1966) which, together with matrimonial exchanges, comprises a total phenomenon influencing multiple dimensions of sociality among the Atoni: symbolism in the architecture of residences (Cunningham 1964), political organization, child care and group belonging (Cunningham 1967).

McWilliam (2002), who studied the Atoni in West Timor during the 1980s and 1990s, reduced the house to a metaphoric idiom for making sense of nominated groups, thus underscoring the notion that these are ensembles of people held together by a common name.[5] For this author, the house is a signifier through

5. McWilliam argues that *kanaf* (name group) is a better term for making sense of such groupings. Compared with other ethno-linguistic groups in East Timor (Tétum, Ema or Bunak), building actual houses was not as significant and salient

which individuals recognize their social obligations and belonging, as well as an important source of rhetorical representations (McWilliam 2002, 225).

In this chapter, I understand the house as a social institution which assembles groups through different modalities of enlistment, in which I underscore descent and marriage alliances. In the village where I carried out research, there was a strong emphasis on individual attachment to the father's house, thus making the Atoni known for having a patrilineal bias.

During my time in the field, the house figured prominently as a social institution key for making sense of local sociabilities, a fact I quickly realized as I negotiated my own relations with field interlocutors. I was partly regarded as a useful tool for the education of children and adolescents belonging to the houses which I refer to as the suku's "elite". This became evident from the first time I set foot in Oecusse Town, the exclave's coastal capital city, in November 2016.[6] I went there to meet the family of Florindo, an unmarried, 29-year-old former novice at a Catholic religious order, who came from Usitasae.

Florindo encouraged me to move to the village where he was born to do my research, so I could help him get work done. Perhaps because he had first met me at the Resistance Museum in Dili, his interest was to build a museum in the region. He knew I was an anthropologist interested in *kultura* and he thought my expertise could support his project. I told him I could not commit to building a museum, as this would involve mobilizing a lot of time and money, but that I was interested in doing fieldwork there. Regardless of whether or not the project would materialize, he insisted on taking me to his village, as festivities involving rituals for the dead during All Souls' month were still under way.

Initially, I stayed in Nibin, Usitakeno as it was hard to find a truck to take us further upland to where Florindo wished to establish his museum. We were to take another truck the next day.

---

for the Atoni: they were not as central a foundation for their individual and social identities.

6. Even though the official name of the city is Pante Makassar, my interlocutors referred to it as Oecusse Town. Here I follow their way of referring to this place.

In Nibin, although it was possible to spot thatched houses, most were made of bricks and cement with zinc roofs, located by the main road. In the backyards stood conical granaries made of wood and straw, where people stored grains, such as maize and rice, after harvest. They were all connected to the electrical grid, a gratuitous and tax-free service (at the time of my fieldwork) implemented in 2015. Caritas, a Catholic development aid agency, had dug a series of wells in the area to provide the community with water. Toilets were situated outside the main house.

Florindo's older brother, Júlio, lived in Nibin. He was a third grade teacher in a local primary school and lived with his maternal grandfather, who was senile and needing care. In the same house was his young sister, his wife and youngest son, who she was still breastfeeding. He welcomed me enthusiastically, perhaps due to the novelty of my presence – few *kais muti* (white mister) visit the region. During this time we accompanied celebrations at the local cemetery, where we ate pork and rice prepared for the ancestors. In the evenings, Júlio, who had some basic knowledge of Portuguese, told me mythic stories and explained kinship relations. It was an exciting time for me, as I came into contact with some of an anthropologist's most classic materials: genealogies and myths. We stayed there for two days.

Gradually, some of the motivations behind Florindo's plan to build the museum became clearer. During conversations about *kultura*, Florindo and Júlio often talked about the house to which they belonged: Quefi. At first they asked me to register genealogic relations and alliances, and collect narratives justifying the centrality of the Quefi house, not just for that particular suku, but for the Oecusse region at large. Florindo suggested a few times that this material would enable them to seek resources from state agencies, thereby channeling income for himself and his house. He also recognized its potential for building ties with other Quefi houses scattered not just in Oecusse but also in the Indonesian province of Nusa Tenggara Timur, which makes up much of the island's western part. These houses were separated from each other over the long period of colonial conquest and occupation. I therefore realized that the house, as a social institution, lay at the center of all the information they conveyed to me.

Júlio and Florindo finally drove me by motorcycle to Puni, their native village in the neighboring suku of Usitasae. The houses and their layout were quite similar to the ones at Nibin: brick houses located on higher plateaus, as people grew vegetables in coastal areas. Most members of the Quefi house lived in Usitasae.

I met Angelo, Florindo and Júlio's father, who was a leader of the Quefi house as well as the *lia na'in* (traditional keeper of history and customs). While we smoke, drank coffee and ate sweet cookies, I recalled some of the stories his sons had told me. But Angelo, visibly upset, asked me to refrain from speaking about the group's narratives.[7] I then realized that I was not supposed to participate in discussions around *kultura*, probably because knowledge about the house's origins was part of a universe to which I should not have had access, or that his children should not have shared. Later Florindo apologized for the faux pas. After this embarrassing event, I felt I had to follow other avenues of gift-exchange in order to investigate that research site.

While the idea of constructing a *kultura* museum was left to one side, mainly as I did not feel comfortable with it, both Angelo and Florindo became excited about the assistance I could provide to Quefi house members to improve their Portuguese language skills. This did not necessarily involve formal Portuguese lessons: rather, it was about maintaining daily contact with a foreign language speaker, so that adults and children could practice. Therefore, the Portuguese language and its significance became the basis for my fieldwork more than documenting *kultura* per se. Portuguese was highly valued as an official state language. While I was in Dili, for instance, I heard from university students that exams for accessing civil-service jobs were all in Portuguese. Educational resources in schools were in both Portuguese and Tétum.

Florindo hoped that knowledge of Portuguese would empower members of his house. I therefore suggested that I could teach the language to the children and adolescents from the houses where the Quefi lived. Florindo liked the idea and often repeated that I should teach only those associated with the domestic units

7. Angelo was 55 years old and had learned Portuguese in a mission school during Portuguese colonial times.

belonging to the Quefi house. This meant that my classes, which took place in a warehouse, excluded the rest of the villagers.

While I negotiated the terms of my research – about what and with whom I would do it – the exclusivity Florindo had imposed on the teaching soon became the subject of debates between the houses at Usitasae. When Florindo accompanied me to the Tassaibeno School, the suku's main public school, the director Anastasia Eno seemed very pleased with the idea of having a Brazilian teacher in the school.[8] At first I understood her excitement was because teachers had more opportunities to speak Portuguese, and so could increase their linguistic capacities. However, Anastasia, married to José Quelo, also a teacher and chief of the Sila house, also wanted me to teach children and adolescents from their house. As the universe of students expanded to include the Sila house, Florindo suggested that my classes also welcomed children from the Caunan house. It gradually dawned on me that the knowledge capital I had to offer, the Portuguese language, continued to be mobilized according to the houses' institutional logics.

The Usitasae *Kultura* Structure

I later learned that the Quefi, Sila and Caunan houses were part of a group that wished to bolster their own influence in the community. They called themselves *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae* (Usitasae *Kultura* Structure). I asked the teachers to tell me more about the three houses.

In the Meto language, the Sila house was *Usif*, while the Quefi and Caunan were *Usif-Naif*. To explain these categories Florindo compared alliance relations between these houses to relations between a king – *usif* – and his guardians and soldiers, *Usif-Naif*. The Quefi house, a *Usif-Naif* house, was usually in charge of tasks involving political leadership and conflict resolution, the village's

8. Those living in Usitasae constantly asked me about my native language. My answer – Portuguese – was understood as a sign of quality. I believe they projected on Brazil a linguistic diversity similar to that of Timor-Leste and Indonesia, and were therefore surprised to know that most in Brazil spoke the national language as their native language.

public relations, including a major role in the performance of certain public sacrificial rituals. Some of these activities were shared with the Caunan house. The Sila house, in turn, was more removed from such worldly tasks, aside from its role in controlling the school. It was a higher authority, holding the position of women-giver to the Quefi house, while the Caunan house received women from the Quefi house. Anastasia told me this was a way of upholding what the literature refers to as the "flow of life" (Fox 1980). However, that was directly contested when I asked one of the Quefi about matrimonial exchanges between the houses in those terms. Angelo Quefi told me that Quefi women may marry whoever they wish. These controversies about who was a donor or recipient of women made me realize that though there were alliances between the houses, in practice they did not unfold without tension.

In spite of such controversies members agreed that the three houses enjoyed precedence over all other houses in the suku and had done since time immemorial. According to the houses' leaders, for instance, relations between the Sila and the Quefi houses had been a diarchy since colonial times and, to some extent, were so during the Indonesian occupation. The Quefi house in particular described the years of the Indonesian occupation as their moment of greatest political prosperity. Mateus, Angelo's late father, was released from prison by the Portuguese and later became the suku chief during that Indonesian period.[9]

The houses making up the *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae* stood in opposition to the houses of the *Estrutura Povo Usitasae* (Usitasae People Structure). In Meto this ensemble was called the *Tobe Nau* and was formed by four houses: *Liús, Lobo, Massin* and *Táun*. *Estrutura Kutura Usitasae* considered these houses to lack nobility and largely regarded them as latecomers to the Usitasae political community.

My introduction to political life in Usitasae was shaped by my interlocutors' search for capital to strengthen their houses, as well as

9. The landscape of Puni, Usitasae's main village, was partly shaped by these houses. Public buildings (the suku's administrative headquarters, the market place, the Binibu Branch School and the health center) were all adjacent to these houses' domestic units, their territorial base.

for weaving affinity relations with houses they considered to be noble.[10] I was not a *kais muti* associated with my interlocutors by filiation or alliance relations, which would have involved offering gifts in money and animals in exchange for women. There were times, however, when they deployed an idiom of kinship in order to make sense of such relations: sometimes, they would treat me as a member of the Quefi house, and members would call me brother, big-father, or son. My relations with them were sui generis: in exchange for an area to do my research and a place to live, I gave them symbolic and material capital (at first, a museum and, subsequently, Portuguese lessons). These gifts were mobilized towards building alliances between the *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae* houses.

Moreover, this institutional logic prompted many in Usitasae to procure productive and communicative means for reasserting their precedence over other houses. According to McWilliam (2002, 20), the Atoni classification categories seek to establish precedence, that is, to construct social hierarchies encompassing multiple groups, ordering them according to their respective origins. One such expression of precedence is evident in marriage alliances, whereby houses are classified as wife-givers and wife-takers, so that donor houses come first. In this sense, it can be argued that oppositions, such as *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae / Estrutura Povo Usitasae* (synonymous with the opposition *Usif / Tobe Nau*) and *Usif / Usif-Naif*, express some of the distinctions that are proper to the Usitasae political community.

10. My introduction to the field followed structural principles that, according to Schulter Nordhoult (1971), guided Atoni conduct and action. He surmised that the institutional logics by which these collectives acted was grounded in the following principles: i) a direct relation between territory and genealogical group (the house); ii) genealogical group exogamy and political community endogamy; iii) reciprocity marked by relations of subordination; iv) wife-giving houses are considered to be superior (*feto-mane* relations); v) senior brother superiority; vi) construction of affinity relations in order to sustain the house; vii) tendency to build multiple relations of affinity; viii) patrilineal bias; ix) hierarchical principle differentiating individuals according to precedence; x) existence of key power figures; xi) rituals specifically directed to these figures (Schulte Nordhoult 1971, 394–96).

Means of production derived from government of and through *kultura*

The anthropological literature on the Atoni has underscored a range of strategies through which the houses have sought to materially reproduce themselves. In Schulter Nordhoult's (1971) research during the 1940s in a context culturally similar to that in Oecusse, he found that these populations were essentially agricultural. The fundamental means by which they reproduced things and people in that context stemmed largely from material dimensions including domestic animals (pigs, roosters, goats, cows, buffalos) and vegetables (rice, maize, potato, yam, cassava, peanuts). These products formed the basis for exchanges within the community.[11] These were also exchanged as part of matrimonial alliances, whereby houses built ties with each other by means of total prestations. Cunningham (1962) added that marital ties were also incremented by the circulation of children. Schulter Nordhoult (1981, 50) suggested that during colonial times those populations' realities became mediated by commercial exchanges with mercantile ships, which traded metallic artifacts (knives, swords, coins) and cloth for sandalwood. By and large, the houses as social institutions drew on agricultural and pastoral activities as well as on matrimonial exchanges in order to reproduce goods and persons.

Colonial and postcolonial economic processes had deep transformational effects on people's lives. Materially, Usitasae and Oecusse have gone through substantial changes over the past eighty years: steep population growth; agriculture gained precedence over raising livestock; the market became a fundamental source of new foodstuffs, such as rice and industrialized products; time came to be organized according to the church and state calendars; and, last but not least, new artifacts became part of people's lives, such as motorcycles, trucks, electricity, cell phones, as well as bureaucratic apparatuses (schools, the suku administration).

11. See Schulter Nordhoult (1971), "The Economic Life" (chapter 3), for a description of Meto-speaking communities' techniques, crafts, livestock management, plant gathering and agriculture (rituals of agricultural fertility).

Therefore the state became a major social actor after independence in 2002 and new institutions introduced into the region (and across the whole country) caused changes in the reproduction dynamics to what is today called *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae*. When I asked Angelo about the changes since the country's independence was restored, he pointed to local political dynamics involving the *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae*. On the one hand, the Quefi house lost dominance over the suku leadership. After living through Portuguese colonialization and the Indonesian occupation, Mateus Quefi, Angelo´s father, died in 1999 of natural causes. During the aftermath of the violence surrounding 1999's independence vote, the position of suku chief remained officially vacant. Once the Timorese government reinstated local elections Angelo's intention to take up the post was frustrated by the fact that other houses in Usitasae prevailed in the elections, namely those involved in transporting and trading goods across the area. Angelo told me that the *Estrutura Povo* had taken over that position of power. His father's defeat in the elections was very humiliating for Florindo. Some Quefi told me on several occasions that this was the fault of "democracy", which introduced the free and secret vote.

State practices have posed multiple challenges for reproducing relations of precedence between these houses and the others. A pessimistic attitude, especially from the Quefi, seemed to stem from the state disrupting traditional ways of building relations of precedence. Yet, in terms of symbolic capital, they regarded being associated with me as a potential leverage for accessing certain goods (mastery over the Portuguese language, for instance) that could help uphold their position as *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae* in the context of local social relations.

In contrast with the Quefi, the Sila house in particular seemed to have benefited politically from independence. José Quelo, speaker for the Sila house and liurai, and his wife, Anastasia, were already school teachers at the moment of Indonesian withdrawal in 1999. As most of the teachers at the schools were Indonesian and returned to their native provinces, this couple became the chief authority over basic education schools in Usitasae. Later, however, the Timorese Ministry of Education required that direction and coordination positions in Usitasae schools became temporary, therefore regularly

incorporating new staff. In 2016 Anastasia succeeded José Quelo after his four years as head teacher of the Fundamental Education Tassaibeno Central School. Domingos Caunan, from the Caunan house, took the position of adjunct director. In spite of the state-imposed regulation for staffing changeover, the Sila deployed strategies to maintain control of the school administration. José Quelo, for instance, managed to have his wife elected to his position. The Quefi also mobilized the means to maintain their prestige in relation to the suku administration. In order to overcome constraints imposed by 'democracy', the Quefi occupied certain, non-elected positions. Angelo, for instance, became a member of the suku council. Multiple times during my field research he played a mediating role in conflict resolution across the villages. In exchange for his services, he would receive material resources such as money, alcoholic drinks and pieces of meat.

It occurred to me that my interlocutors were aware of the damaging effects that certain state-based social practices were having on relations of precedence for the houses belonging to the *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae*. *Democrasia*, which imposed staff changeover and free elections, could easily be understood as a challenge to the distinction between *kultura* and povo houses. On the other hand, the notion of *kultura*, also promoted by the Timorese state's central agencies, emerged as an avenue through which these houses could sustain their relevance in the local context of Usitasae.

The school as a stage for *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae houses*

The chief means by which the school helped reproduce structural relations supporting relations of precedence for *Estrutura Kultura* houses was control over the local administration. This gave them administrative powers over a range of school buildings, events and persons. The ensemble of school facilities at Usitasae encompassed spaces and individuals which overlapped with the territory (and population) that the *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae*

claimed to have under its control.[12] Usitasae only had public schools and there were five of them. These schools were hierarchically connected: one was the central school, and the other four were branches. The central school, called Tassaibeno, stood at the suku's geometric center. This school was located four kilometers from the central administration in Puni, and was the only one serving the so-called third cycle (that is, grades seven to nine). The branch schools offered only the first (grades one to four) and/or second cycle (grades five and six), and were located in villages farther from the center.

School branches were subordinate to the central school, which managed funds, distributed material resources, and played a leading role in pedagogic and disciplinary orientation. As a result, the entire teaching body at Usitasae reported to the central school's director. Another source of the director's influence (and consequently the Sila house, to which she belongs) was teacher recruitment. As most (temporary or permanent) teacher hiring involved volunteers, the school administration ended up appointing residents of suku Usitasae. Such recruitment tools were deployed to produce alliances with the *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae* houses: the school's adjunct director, for instance, was from the Caunan House.[13]

When students at branch schools completed the two first cycles of basic education, those who wished to continue their education usually moved to the central school. Therefore, the Tassaibeno School director had contact with most children and adolescents living in the suku, as they moved on to the third cycle. Adults

12. In Oecusse, as in other municipalities, the distribution of schools follows more or less the same rule: the more remote the region and the lower its population density, less likely it is to find schools serving higher levels of education. Secondary schools (technical training and regular education) are located in the municipality towns, and at the sub-municipality's head offices. Because Usitasae was not head of a sub-municipality, in 2017 it had no secondary school. The poor availability of higher-level schools in areas with low population density also concerns basic education schools (i.e., first to ninth grades). The public school system has the greatest network in the country, followed by private Catholic schools.

13. There was a debate about the permanent hiring of voluntary teachers under way in the Ministry of Education's policy-making arenas.

responsible for those students also interacted indirectly with the school, as most domestic unities in Usitasae included school-aged children and adolescents. Moreover, the control positions held by the *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae* houses in schools afforded them earnings that were above average in the suku, besides other benefits such as access to motorcycles and computers.[14]

Schools in Usitasae therefore operated as channels for communicating with virtually everyone in the suku. By controlling the school board, José Quelo and Anastasia Elo of the Sila House enjoyed significant articulation and mediation power. They also controlled the deployment and hiring of teachers, to a large extent. By borrowing the means of communication and production from the state, Sila House (and, to a lesser extent, its allies, Quefi and Caunan) was continuously mobilized for promoting the precedence of those houses in Usitasae.

The Arts and Culture festival

The way these groups mobilized schools for their own purposes became particularly evident during a series of events leading up to Timor-Leste's national exams. They were good examples of how these houses advanced their projects of power. The events included multiple communicative and material actions geared towards sustaining a distinction between the *Estrutura kultura Usitasae* and the *Estrutura Povo Usitasae*.

The events associated with the national exams began in August, after the 2017 parliamentary elections. The first relevant stage, which I followed closely, involved a parents-and-teachers meeting held at the start of the third trimester. On a Monday after the second trimester school examinations, at five o'clock in the afternoon, when the Tassaibeno Central School served the third cycle, the school director asked one of the teachers to ring the bell. Three strikes on the rim of a car wheel that hung from the school roof meant that students inside classrooms should go out in order

14. The Sila also enjoyed greater stability than they would have had from controlling the suku's main administration: they had the possibility of holding a regular office and were not likely to be substituted after elections.

to hear an announcement. All the students stood under the shade of the school's main tree, which made the gathering more pleasant. Anastasia requested that ninth graders remained while the others were dismissed. Each ninth-grade cohort was made up of around 45 adolescents, boys and girls from fourteen to eighteen years old.

Speaking in Tétum, Anastasia announced that a fundamental step for the conclusion of basic education was approaching: preparing for the national exams. These exams were vital so they could graduate and possibly move on to the subsequent stages of secondary and higher education. The exams were also important for the Tassaibeno School to maintain its position of prominence among basic-education schools in Oecusse. Finally, Anastasia announced that the school would hold a meeting with their parents and/or tutors the following Saturday morning; they were supposed to pass on the message. She then dismissed them, sending them back to their homes.

Five days later, on a Saturday morning, those responsible for the adolescents showed up for the meeting. Fathers, mothers and other relatives gathered inside one of the school's classrooms. They sat on chairs and the teachers stood in front of the black board. While the students from the other grades received their second trimester marks, the relatives waited for the arrival of the teachers to lead the meeting.

Aze, teacher of arts and culture, was in charge of conducting the meeting and taking care of the "protocol", that is, the document containing the meeting's plan and list of matters to be discussed. After reading it, he invited those present to join him in a Catholic prayer, directed by Domingos Caunan, a former Catholic Church priest. His prayer was followed by another one, led by the director Anastasia, who also introduced the staff and noted the presence of her husband, José Quelo, Usitasae's *liurai*, who was treated differently to the other teachers. But it was teacher Pedro, not part of the *Estrutura Kultura* but an ally of José Quelo, who was in charge of the meeting's main topic.[15] With 28 years as a teacher, Pedro had

15. Pedro arrived in Oecusse in 1990. A native of Manufahi, Pedro was transferred to the Pinibu Branch School through the Indonesian policy of teacher circulation. He married a woman from Oecusse and decided to settle there.

built a very close relationship to José Quelo over the many years they had worked together. During José Quelo's first term as director of the Tassaibeno School, Pedro held the position of adjunct director. When I was there, he was the school's Portuguese language teacher.

Pedro talked about three issues. The first concerned the importance of national exams; the second, how contributing to *kultura* would help students perform well; and third, how parents should support their children so they could be fully dedicated to preparing for the national exams. Speaking in Tétum, Pedro elaborated further on the latter's importance. He explained that the exams took place in every school in the country, and it was vital that the suku Usitasae was successful in this enterprise. These standardized tests occurred over a week, and all Timorese schools would be ranked according to the scores obtained. Pedro proudly noted that, of the public schools, the Tassaibeno School came first in Oecusse in 2016. The good performance resulted in the school director, Anastasia, going to a conference in Mozambique. He insisted that it was fundamental for the school to maintain its leading position.

Pedro then explained that parents should also contribute to the school's performance. One recommendation was to locate students closer to schools, so they could focus on their studies. This meant that these adolescents should gather in houses where they could spend the night studying. Relatives should reduce the students' family commitments so they would have time to prepare for the exams, and provide them with food and relief from domestic chores. Families living close to the school should host other students and organize study groups at night. Later on, Pedro explained to me that the preference for holding study groups close to the school also aimed at enhancing class attendance, as students missed class due to long commuting.

The second point referred to contributions to the ceremonial activities that would be carried out before classes start. Pedro considered it important to perform rituals for the benefit of *kultura* and the ancestors, so that students would be in good health during the exams. He explained that ritual procedures for the ancestors were important to make sure that students would attend the exams.

Without such rituals, they may become sick and fail the test. Thus, parents should help their children by arranging traditional attire for the "Arts and Culture Festival", and by contributing financially to the animal sacrifices the school would perform on the eve of festivities.

After the meeting the dynamics and ninth graders' efforts at the Tassaibeno School were directed towards national exams. In the domestic unit where I lived, two boys moved to houses closer to the school: Augustinho Quefi and Moisés Tout. Agustinho was part of the Quefi house and moved in with Angelo Quefi, a parallel patrilateral cousin, because his original domestic unit was very poor. Angelo and Júlio became closer to Augustinho because he was quite outstanding in the school context. They understood that this relation could be beneficial for their family. Moisés Tout had distant kinship ties with the Quefi house. He was part of the Tout house, a wife-giver in relation to the Eno house. Maria Eno, Angelo's wife, belonged to the latter. As Moisés Tout came from a remote village, he lived at Angelo Quefi's house. It is important to highlight that Moisés kept himself at arm's length from the domestic unit and did not feel part of it. He slept on his own in a shed and was always the last one to eat during meals. While Augustinho went to live with a friend and his parents, Moisés Tout shared a place with three other boys in an empty hut next to the school. They shared domestic tasks, such as cooking, and studied at night. Apparently, choices guiding the formation of study groups belonged to the students, who ended up strengthening ties with some of their schoolmates.[16]

While study groups were under way, ninth graders began rehearsing traditional Oecusse dances for the *kultura* festivities. Aze, the arts and culture teacher, led the practice, which took place in the school courtyard and adjacent areas. The dance, called bso'ot, consisted of intensive leg movements, whereby dancers stomped their heels on the ground in order to extract sound from their main instrument, a rattle tied to each leg. These rattles were made up of small spherical bells.

16. Being a man, I felt uncomfortable with (and had difficulties) gaining access to the female sororities.

One month before the national exams, held during the first week of September, students had to have a photograph taken. These black and white photos would be attached to their identification tags for the exams. They spent the entire Saturday morning waiting for the photographer, who was at suku Bobometo's central school. The following weekend there was another meeting of ninth graders concerning the national exams where teacher Pedro taught them how to fill in the exam answer sheets.

The Arts and Culture festival was held in early October, 2017. Originally scheduled on a Saturday, it was postponed because the leaders of the Quefi and Sila House, Angelo Quefi and José Quelo, were taking part in ritual festivities for celebrating matrimonial alliances between their two houses. The new time was on a Tuesday morning. First and second cycle students, who would normally be in class, were excused so they could watch the performances. Students from other third cycle grades also attended the ninth-grade presentations, with the community at large, especially those responsible for the performers.

Many stood awaiting the beginning of festivities, scheduled to start at 8 am, in the Tassaibeno School's central courtyard. Close to the trees that provided ample shade, women from the community began preparations for playing the metal gong and drums. The ninth-year students wore traditional attire with white shirts and traditional cloaks, string purses, swords and sheaths, and rattles tied to their legs. All the other students wore school uniforms, consisting of black shorts (for boys) and skirts (for girls), and shirts − yellow for first and second cycles, and white for the third cycle. They watched their schoolmates from less privileged spots in the shade.

An animal sacrifice ritual opened the celebration, belatedly, around eleven in the morning. Community leaders gathered around the pole to raise the Timorese flag: chiefs of villages and sukus, and heads of the *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae* houses. Teachers placed LA cigarettes, Bintang beer and a small basket with rice next to the pole. Squatting down with his eyes closed, Angelo Quefi voiced ritual words, seeking contact with the ancestors. At this moment, two parents brought him a pig and a rooster. After tossing some rice by the flagpole, Angelo sacrificed the two animals using a knife.

Photo 1: Ninth grader wearing traditional attire

Later, Angelo went over to the shadiest tree in the school grounds, followed by the leaders. Like the flagpole, the tree was also a site for offerings of cigarettes, beers and cooked rice. More people encircled this space than the sacrifice around the flagpole – students' parents and other teachers. I inquired about the reasons for two separate sacrifices, and Domingos Caunan, the adjunct director, explained: "the pig for the grandparents of the East Timorese flag is for the *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae* houses; the pig for the tree's grandparents is for the *Estrutura Povo*".

Soon after the second sacrifice the teacher responsible for the protocol introduced a Catholic prayer and a speech by director Anastasia. Using a microphone, Anastasia named all authorities present – the teachers, Angelo Quefi and, once again, her own husband – and turned to the adults and students. She noted the importance of developing Timor-Leste and of Timorese *kultura*. Anastasia then summoned the panel responsible for evaluating the

groups performing at the Arts and Culture Festival. The judges were both local teachers, and sat by the verandah of one of the school's two buildings.

Photo 2: Poster from October 4th, 2017– "Together, we will develop talents in Arts and Culture 'Bso'ot' E.B.C. Tassaibeno. Tassaibeno – 10-04-2017"

Then the presentations began. Overall, the ninth graders' bso'ot dance groups performed synchronized movements, accompanied by women playing instruments. Intermittently, following a usually male leader, they would stop and make gestures with the swords and sheaths. Afterwards, a boy and a girl approached the judges and offered them LA cigarettes, and areca and betel nuts. They reunited with the dance group and left, concluding the presentation. The judges evaluated the presentations by ranking the groups between zero and ten.

After the presentations, the authorities (suku chiefs and house representatives), teachers and the children of certain teachers ate the sacrificed animals for lunch. Everyone else returned to their homes as there was not enough to go round. Authorities from Dili came to invigilate the ninth graders' national exams several weeks later.

The impact of schools on nation building

Although this analysis focuses on the material and ideological reproduction of autochthonous social institutions, largely regarded as standing in opposition to nation- and state-building, it is possible to find in the ethnographic materials some of the effects that the houses' incorporation of bureaucratic means and school education have on the production of the Timorese nation-state. One of the most salient effects has been the role of schools as channels for communicating state ideas and values, such as development and democracy.

Other effects relate to the centralizing tendency that schools may gradually introduce in local communities. The lack of secondary and tertiary schools leads some houses to invest in the circulation of its members throughout networks formed by the nation-state: high school students go to the municipalities' capital cities, higher education students go to Dili. As this kind of expectation grows among students and their parents, the houses' human capital becomes increasingly oriented towards the state. Moreover, since the Indonesian occupation, paramount houses in Usitasae have employed the civil service − for teachers in particular − as means of material reproduction. This also leads to increasing reliance on the main administration, which becomes a source of regular income.[17]

One effect of nationalization – less obvious for those involved, especially houses belonging to the *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae* – concerns how schools are changing the previous dynamics of socialization. Schools have afforded and intensified new ways of building alliances between subjects. Friendship between José Quelo and Pedro, for instance, did not follow traditional descent or alliance relations. Their relationship developed over the long period of time they worked together, an experience that turned them into each other's confidants. In other words, they were close

17. I have not discussed these points, but ethnographic data related to the distribution of school lunches and recruitment of teachers corroborate this centralizing tendency. The school directors used to purchase food for the school lunches, subsequently a task directly managed from Oecusse's capital. Similarly, bureaus of education took on an increasingly central role in teacher recruitment, by performing leveling exams and deploying staff from other regions.

not because they belong to allied houses or from women-exchange relations, but because they worked together. It seemed something similar took place with the students, who gathered in groups because they were classmates and spent more of the day together than they did with their own relatives. Such changes in the dynamics of sociability meant that relations between subjects were shaped less by the houses than by the state. When it came to trust and affection, it is possible to envisage how schools enabled colleagues to construct ties as important as those between siblings and siblings-in-law. Therefore, if the house indeed remains a central institution in the community, the state has taken on an increasingly relevant role.

Closing Remarks

The ethnographic notes presented an account of how I settled into my research and described how certain subjects in Usitasae sought to strengthen their houses. I noted the importance of the houses as social institutions shaping how my interlocutors understood my presence, and sought to press it into their own service. Originally, Florindo was drawn to me as someone who could build museum for his house, the Quefi. Even as there were disagreements about my access to their narratives, I became attractive for other reasons: Portuguese language practice for those belonging to Quefi house and mediating alliances with the Sila and Caunan houses.

I observed how people regarded me as an avenue for acquiring capital. Similarly, the Timorese states' school system also became a kind of capital for reinforcing the houses' reproduction dynamics. Those belonging to the *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae* mobilized the school's facilities to replicate the conditions underlying their precedence over the other houses. Schools encompassed and were themselves constituted of a set of communicative and material means that *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae* engaged to reproduce their houses.

Through the school administration and the multiple instruments it provided (appointments, celebrations, meetings), the Sila house worked towards maintaining its distinct role, as well

as that of its allies, the Quefi and Caunan houses. The Arts and Culture festival was one of the means by which paramount houses sought to reaffirm that distinction. The enactment of two sacrifices (one for *kultura* and one for the povo) was a key means for communicating the distinction between the *Estrutura Kultura Usitasae* and the *Estrutura Povo Usitasae.* I argue that schools were an important site for reproducing certain local political structures.

References

Carsten, Janet, and Stephen Hugh-Jones. 1995. "Introduction." In *About the House: Lévi-Strauss and Beyond*, edited by Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones, 1−46. Cambridge University Press.

Cunningham, Clark E. 1962. "People of the Dry Land: A Study of the Social Organization of an Indonesian People." PhD diss., University of Oxford.

Cunningham, Clark E. 1964. "Order in the Atoni House." *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 120: 34–68.

Cunningham, Clark E. 1966. "Categories of Descent Groups in a Timor Village." *Oceania* 37: 13–21.

Cunningham, Clark E. 1967. "Recruitment to Atoni Descent Groups." *Anthropological Quarterly* 40: 1–12.

Demerath, Peter. 1999. "The Cultural Production of Educational Utility in Pere Village, Papua New Guinea." *Comparative Education Review* 43, no. 2: 162–92.

Fife, Wayne. 1994. "Education in Papua New Guinea: The Hidden Curriculum of a New Moral Order." *City and Society* 7, no. 1: 139–62.

Fife, Wayne. 1997. "The Importance of Fieldwork: Anthropology and Education in Papua New Guinea." In *Qualitatitve Educational Research in Developing Countries: Current Perspectives*, edited by Michael Crossley and Graham Vulliamy, 87–111. New York and London: Routledge.

Folds, Ralph. 1987. "The Social Relationships of Tribal Aboriginal Schooling in Australia." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 8, no. 4: 447–60.