Modernisation in Timor Leste: the ‘community’ at stake
Case studying the Aileu people

Paddy Tobias, PhD candidate
Peace Studies, School of Humanities
University of New England

ptobias@une.edu.au
Some broad questions…

- How does state-building – i.e., rapid modernisation – of post-conflict societies impact the indigenous meanings of ‘community’?
- Does the very nature of the modernisation process risk further outbreaks of conflict and in-fighting?
- “Pathologies of liberalisation” (Roland Paris 2004)
Aileu, the “peaceful district”

- Small, mountainous, under-developed
- 4 sub-districts, 31 shires

- Mambai culture and language
  - Austronesian culture
    - Inter-family alliances through marriage
    - Historical precedence – respecting ancestors

ptobias@une.edu.au
Searching for a hybridised ‘community’

there are continuities between the traditional and modern, neither is cut of whole cloth; it is well known how misleading it can be to contrast these two in too gross a fashion (Anthony Giddens 1990)

The “continuist approach”

Continuities and discontinuities of indigenous community

Thus, this project should not be considered a romantic view of traditional Aileu life

Discontinuities of traditional community

• “Social Abstraction” (James 2006)
• “Risk society” (Beck 1992)
• “Post-familial family” and “elective relationships” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002)
• Individualisation towards Individualism (MacPherson 1962; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002)

ptobias@une.edu.au
Ferdinand Tönnies (2001 [1887])

_Gemeinschaft_ (Community)

“genuine, enduring life together”, “living organism” (2001: 19)
“unity of human wills” even if in separation (2001: 22)
More localised and tight-knit

In contrast to the newer, _Gesellschaft_ (Society)

“individuals living alongside but independent of one another” (2001: 19)
voluntary relationships.
Mambai Community

- *uma lulik* – sacred house
  - *Maun/alin sira* – big brother/younger brother
- *Fetosa umane* – wife-giver/wife-taker
  - *Lere dalan* – clearing the road
- Eating, sharing and sitting together

The Barlaque, which is exchanged in *lere dalan* marriages to symbolise the family alliance
Aileu: Religious Continuities

**Spiritual Community**
- Community gatherings
e.g., *Coração de Jesus* (Heart of Jesus)
- Social welfare activities
- Organisations help disadvantaged

*Uma lulik*-styled Church, Aisirimou, Aileu

“Religion qualifies tradition” (interview, PD 14/07/2011)

ptobias@une.edu.au
Aileu: Political and Economic Discontinuities

Democratisation (multi-party politics)
- Hyper-competitive and personality-driven politics
- Perceptions of a corrupt State
- Growing cynicism
  *Mabai* (inform. untrustworthy)

Marketisation and monetisation
- Urbanisation of youth
- Disconnecting from traditional values and practices
- Land disputes and economic competitiveness

Above: God-like PM Xanana Gusmão at CNRT rally, Aileu, 7 July 2012

Left: CNRT’s 2012 election billboard. Gusmão likened to revolutionary figure, Che Guevara

ptobias@une.edu.au
Assumptions …
• That ‘community’, learning to live together, is necessary for rebuilding and stabilizing post-conflict societies
• That modernisation is inevitable, everywhere
• That the debate between modernity and tradition is complex; we need to look for hybridity

For Aileu …
• protect and maintain the ‘in-place’ institutions that promote ‘community’
• Wary of the rush into political and economic modernisation