



Women's Emancipation and Maunbootizmu

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This article explores how dominant traditions and practices in Timor-Leste have combined with colonial legacies to help create Maunbootizmu¹ – one of the biggest challenges for women's liberation. The first part of the article will define Maunbootizmu. The second part will discuss women's emancipation in relation to Maunbootizmu. The article argues that the focus on women's representation in politics and leadership by the post-independence women's movement has missed the main point of women's emancipation.

History and context

Timor-Leste gained its independence almost two decades ago. On the 20th of May 2002, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste once again reclaimed the freedom denied to it in 1975 when Indonesia took over after the Portuguese colonisers had withdrawn. As a country that was born in the 21st century, building a nation from zero required hard work and commitment. In an era of modernisation Timor-Leste has to define its national identity, while at the same time maintaining cultural values and practices. This also touches upon the question of the future role of women in society and the state. During the Indonesian occupation (1975-1999) Timorese women survived violent military campaigns. They became victims of rape, sexualised violence, and torture. Many women willingly and bravely sacrificed themselves for the dream of national liberation. Unfortunately, national liberation does not come with women's liberation.

In the transition period between 1999-2002, before the first constitutional government was formed, the country was under the administration of the United Nations.¹ In relation to women and gender relations, the *United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor* (UNTAET) mainly focused on gender mainstreaming as a strategy to improve the situation of women. Women should be involved in the promotion of sustainable development, peace and security, governance and human rights. Together with civil society organisations, UNTAET carried

out numerous projects in the form of capacity building and training, using gender analysis to ensure the participation of women. And indeed Timor-Leste became a country with one of the highest number of women in parliament. However, gender mainstreaming on this level has not led to seriously challenging the deeply rooted patriarchal establishment. The sole focus on the improvement of women's political participation and leadership has not proven to be the answer for dismantling patriarchy, which is deeply rooted in cultural norms and practices. Today the government is still paying little attention to policies which are of great relevance for the well-being of women. Instead the government is focusing primarily on infrastructure development, while neglecting the importance of policy reforms in sectors like education, health, clean water, and sanitation.

After independence, a number of intellectuals proposed to create an understanding that a true Timorese identity must be achieved through a return to pre-colonial and Indonesian cultural roots. For them the only way to forge a unified national identity is to go back and embrace ancestral tradition. However, the set of practices and traditions they refer to are grounded in the feudal era. They highly disfranchise women and place them as second class citizens. Until today these ideas and beliefs shape the position of women in Timor-Leste's society.

Maunbootizmu – the persisting dominance of male Liberation fighters in Timor-Leste

Maunbootizmu describes a set of unwritten hierarchical rules which emerged after independence. It puts older

¹ <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/past/etimor/UntaetB.htm>

male national liberation fighters, particularly those who lived through the hardships of the occupation and won the fight for independence, especially the 1975 generation, at the centre. *Maunbootizmu* allows older men to lead, make decisions and influence decision-making. *Maunbootizmu* also reproduces a culture of subordination, dependency, obedience, and passivity.

Similar to other former colonies the narrative of the glorious male hero took foothold in independent Timor-Leste. However, particularly the older male liberators have only gained political power on the foundation of a patriarchal heritage and the patriarchal legacy of colonialism. At the same time, their sacrifices and hardship during the Indonesian occupation is a prominent factor in their accumulation of power.

The practice of favouring older males not only prevails in formal systems such as the state or the church, but reaches into the smallest unit of society. Usually elder males are regarded to be in the position to solve conflicts within families or villages. These males can be uncles² or *lian na'in* (literally, "keeper of the word"), a person who has consensually been chosen by the community to be the problem-solver. The main force that has enabled this form of traditional hierarchical approach to survive is a belief system called *Lulik*³ in which the majority of Timorese strongly believes. *Lulik* consists of a set of unwritten rules, practices and values. As a spiritual belief system in relation to customary law, *Lulik* plays its part as an invisible entity that regulates beyond just simple regulations. *Lulik* shapes social hierarchies in which often the older male is determined as the primary ruler of the family as well as the larger community. In this system, *Lia-na'in* have the power to pass on traditional knowledge regarding the relationship between mankind, nature, and ancestors. The system generally allows older males to have the absolute power in the community, which should not be challenged. Questioning their position is considered an attack on the very foundations of societal order, an act which might disturb the harmony and balance of society with the consequence of bringing on a curse or cause harm for generations to come.⁴ This set of beliefs and cultural practices prevent individuals to question or to argue, not least because of the fear of repercussion it could cause. *Lulik* is what holds everything together by way of a system that is led by a structure which is not determined by choices, but by age and sex. The hierarchy inherent in this belief system harbours an attitude that does not allow young people and women to take on any responsibility, even though they have the knowledge, intelligence and experience. Within this system, where questioning is practically ruled out, the power of *Maunbootizmu* can dominate and flourish.

Another significant factor in preventing women and young people to step up, is that those (especially men) who lived through the hardships of the occupation and

who won the struggle for independence, especially the first generation, the so called "1975 generation", don't consider people who didn't share this experience to be as qualified, deserving, or capable as they are. The "resistance generation" fought for the rights to rule themselves – not for other people (even other Timorese) to rule them. On the whole, the establishment of a culture of dominance by *Maunbootizmu* fosters a culture of subservience and subordination – a culture of inferiority to the ruler. In current political discourse, it is often highlighted how the younger generations, with their set of skills will be able to bring the nation forward. However, how is it possible for young people to step into the political discourse when their majority still lives under the culture of subordination?⁵ Young women's political aspirations are doubly thwarted: on the grounds of their gender and their age.

Double exploitation of women in the era of *Maunbootizmu*

Timorese women are bound by traditional practices that often ostracize them for making decisions. As our national hero Rosa Muki Bonaparte famously wrote in her 1975 Manifesto:

*"The principal objective of women participating in the revolution is not, strictly speaking, the emancipation of women as women, but the triumph of the revolution, and consequently, the liberation of women as a social being who is the target of a double exploitation: that under the traditional conceptions and that under the colonialist conceptions."*⁶

During the time of the Indonesian occupation, women were planting, preparing and smuggling food to the mountains to feed the resistance fighters in hiding at great personal risk. Women showed great courage in the long struggle for national independence, they were empowered and their contributions were welcomed. Without the revolutionary acts of Timorese women during the independence struggle, the outcome may have been very different. While women at present remain just as strong, they are forced to continue to fight for their political and economic liberation and have to struggle against those patriarchal, colonial, and traditional forces that continually seek to disenfranchise them.

Not only are Timorese women placed outside political discourse by the (male) proponents of the call to return to precolonial traditional societal and cultural orders. They are also already placed at the lowest level of traditional Timorese societies. Both traditional and colonial legal and belief systems are accountable for the discrimination of Timorese women.

As such, Timorese women are marked as outsiders in their own family and community, and often the subject of double exploitation. The minute a girl is born, she is already considered an outsider in her own family as traditionally the majority of women are required to belong

2 Unlike in the West, "uncle" not only refers to the male sibling of one of one's parents, but also to men of similar standing in the extended family and communal society.

3 Trindade, Josh. "Lulik: The Core of Timorese Values." www.academia.edu/7450617/Lulik_The_Core_of_Timorese_Values.

4 Trindade, Josh. "Lulik: The Core of Timorese Values." www.academia.edu/7450617/Lulik_The_Core_of_Timorese_Values.

5 Sara ten Brinke: "Citizens by Waiting: Timorese Young Adults between State Politics and Customary Authority." Taylor & Francis, www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13621025.2018.1538318.

6 Women's rights activist, member of the FRETILIN national committee and general secretary of the East Timor Popular Women's Organization (Organizasaun Popular da Mulher de Timor); she was last seen alive at the wharf in Dili on December 8th 1975, one day after the Indonesian invasion.

to the family she will marry into and her future husband – in Tetum referred to as *kaben sai*. She will be regarded as the medium to carry the generation of her husband's bloodline and change her clan affiliation to her husband's and belong to the *uma lulik* or sacred generational house of her husband. Regardless of whether she is married or not, she will never be entitled to own land and must leave her family to live with the husband's family. After marrying, her husband's family still considers her as *feto foun*, or 'new woman' and she is expected to be responsible for all the household chores.

Just like *Maunbootizmu*, the practice of traditional marriage is considered an expression of national pride.

Transactional economic marriage

The subordination of women to men is also inherent in the practice of *Barlaki*, a customary marriage system. *Barlaki* is an economic practice to exchange goods and is meant to unify two families. It is informed by *Maunbootizmu* since the uncles (the *maunboots*) of the two families sit to decide the exchange of cows (from the male family) in return for receiving the woman (together with pigs and tais). The woman is obliged to produce offspring to continue the generation of the men's family. If she doesn't reproduce, then her value as a woman will decrease and her husband is encouraged to marry another woman. This system of exchanged goods through marriage has objectified women to the level of equating women to cows and pigs and has turned them into a commodity. At the same time, some men misinterpret *Barlaki* as legitimising domestic violence anchored in a perceived entitlement based on the fact the man has sacrificed a fortune to be able to marry the woman. Intersecting with the patriarchal colonial commodification of women, *Barlaki* has survived hundreds of years of colonialism and oppressive regimes.

During the shift from community-owned production to family-owned farming and then to landowner plantations introduced by the Portuguese colonisers, women's status also changed. Women became tools for reproducing plantation workers, at the same time as working in the kitchen, caring for children, fetching water, gathering firewood, and working in the fields. This was followed by the division of labour where women were expected to work at home and produce children, while men worked in the plantations so they could pay tax to the colonial rulers.

Women's emancipation in the ERA of Maunbootizmu

Women's emancipation started to become an issue when the *Organisação Popular Mulheres Timorenses* (OPMT) was created in 1975. OPMT challenged the common understanding regarding women as vulnerable and secondary to men. The organisation began with the objective to free everyone from the traditional mentality at the same time as the literacy campaign called *alfabetisação* begun. However, this movement came to a halt with the brutal Indonesian occupation. Rosa Muki Bonaparte and her friends were killed in December 1975. During the ensuing independence struggle, women's emancipation was put aside.

After 24 years of brutal occupation, one of the results of early international organisations' influence on women's civil society organisations in Timor-Leste was mainstreaming the idea of a 30 percent quota for women's representation in the parliament. Even though the quota did not become law, it represented the idea of 'gender equality' rather than the 'women's emancipation' which OPMT fought for in 1975.

While at the higher political level and during the process of forming the constitution, the discourse on women's leadership was prominent, the education system did not question the status quo in regard to the position of women in society. Using the same curricula as before independence, young people are taught traditional concepts of gender relations and societal order which leave no space for emancipation and questioning existing role prescriptions. Simultaneously, Catholic missionaries resurfaced and propagated that women needed to be good Christians and servants of the church.

On the whole, three circumstances, embedded in *Maunbootizmu*, exerted a major influence on women after independence: 1. The strong political agenda of women's empowerment and women's leadership propagated by international organisations. 2. The adherence to curricula that are heavily rooted in the colonial education of Christian values such as being good wives, and which also groom students to be workers and part of the system. 3. The *Barlaki* system of marriage still widely practised and propagated as a large part of the national identity. These three circumstances affect women differently, depending on where and how they live.

While international agencies contributed to the development of a discourse in which women and men should have equal rights, such as access to employment and equal payment and the right to vote, their influence did not really challenge traditional sets of rules and beliefs. They did not liberate women from *Maunbootizmu* and the *Barlaki* marriage system.

At the same time, equality in the sense of creating access to employment puts women at risk of double exploitation. While for instance, education enables some women to get employment which had previously been denied to them, it does not give them emancipation or true independence. Middle-class women who earn money still either bear the double burden of managing the household and their job or outsource their discrimination by employing young women from the village to do the housework.

Better financial and economic capacity alone does not teach women to organise themselves, to involve themselves in the movement to continue the legacy of OPMT.

Conclusion

We should aspire to live in a society where women are not seen as objects of exchange for other goods. We should aspire to live in a society where women have the awareness of the oppression they are going through, and where they will come together to change it. We should not expect change to come from some sort of *Maunbootizmu* hierarchy. Traditional education systems that are only geared to create a skilled workforce and to break the glass ceiling



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are not going to change the mentality of *Maunbootizmu*. It is us who are the agents for change.

The struggle for emancipation does not consist of a few successful women leaders breaking the glass ceiling, but for our society to become aware of the practices and the systems we have created and held alive for centuries. Do we want this to continue or is it the time of change in order to build a new society?

Since the current political establishment was built and dominated by the *Maunbootizmu* culture, the radicalization and emancipation of women is needed. It takes time, it takes courage and it takes commitment to change.

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