

## *Barlake*: an exploration of marriage practices and issues of women's status in Timor-Leste

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### Introduction

In Timor-Leste, indigenous customary practices that surround marriage and relations between the families or clans of the bride and groom are called *barlake* (pronounced “baa-lucky”) and today feature in an estimated half of all marriages. As early as the 1960s they have been blamed for the subjugation of women and more recently cited as central a cause of high levels of domestic violence. This condemnation fits into broad global feminist critiques of traditional marriage practices as mechanisms for the control and exploitation of women by men. The contemporary discourse surrounding *barlake* in Timor-Leste is also part of wider debates about the roles and status of women in the new post-conflict nation.

However, a dominant cultural perspective in Timor-Leste is that *barlake* is a cornerstone of East Timorese indigenous culture integral to a wider, complex system of social action and ritual exchange. This system has sustained life in the challenging environment of the island and through a long and recently concluded war with neighbouring Indonesia. This perspective has sometimes crudely been reduced to a nationalist defence and assertion of culture against the creeping incursions of ‘international standards’ regarding gender equity and the introduction of a western feminist agenda.<sup>1</sup> However, there is no doubt that in Timor-Leste these practices engender a deep sense of identity and meaning for most people and that they are dominant in day-to-day regulation of life in the villages and towns where 80 per cent of citizens reside. This perspective is also supported by the more classical anthropological approach which accepts cultural defences of practices despite them possibly being linked to abuses of rights.

Sensitivities over *barlake* have come to the fore within a growing discourse on gender and cultural issues that falls between the two opposing views outlined above and which is reduced to a simple either/or debate: *barlake* is good because it is part of East Timorese culture and values and protects women, or *barlake* is bad because it means men buy women in marriage and this leads to domestic violence. This paper seeks to explore these perspectives on the functions and impact of *barlake* upon women's status and ask the question: can these two views be reconciled? And further, are there any ways forward suggested in these debates about *barlake* in contemporary East Timorese society?

Much recent commentary, both in support of *barlake* and particularly against it, has failed to address the breadth of spiritual, cultural and pragmatic dimensions that the practice serves. Reports by international agencies into gender and cultural issues in Timor-Leste, including the most recent report of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women<sup>2</sup>, reflect international human rights and gender equity approaches. However, as these reports have often lacked a deeper understanding of local context and customary practices, recommendations are difficult to implement. On the contrary, local civil society organisations and the international development industry are increasingly looking to these local systems as the base from which any change or development can occur. This is possibly a result of continued pressure from the local women's movement, which in 2004 at the Second National Women's Congress emphasised culture as central to its Plan of Action. A gender analysis of cultural practices was stressed again at the Third National Women's Congress in 2008 and UNIFEM was working to identify strategies to engage with these beliefs and practices.<sup>3</sup> This is a complex debate which needs careful characterisation and exploration to identify the issues and this is the aim of this paper.

This paper is based on background research and interview data gathered in Timor-Leste during 2010 while researching widely on gender issues in the post-conflict environment, of which *barlake* was one topic.<sup>4</sup> Many formal and informal qualitative interviews and discussions took place over a six month period, mostly in the national capital of Dili but some also in rural areas. Significant interviews mentioned in this article were held with two female members of the national parliament; two male *lia-na'in* or indigenous lore practitioners; and male and female cultural workers in a national women's advocacy non-government organisation. This information was presented in an open public seminar on *barlake* at the Peace and Conflict Studies Centre, Universidade Nacional Timor-Leste (UNTL), Dili in September 2010, followed by discussion by an East Timorese panel of gender experts. Open discussion and comments with an audience of over 100 students and interested parties was recorded and also used in this paper. Other academics working in the field were also consulted and some of those comments also appear here.

### **Indigenous society and gender relations**

*Barlake* is a cornerstone of indigenous culture in its creation of relationships of life-long commitment of mutual support between the families of the bride and groom, and an ongoing exchange of goods and duties in the context of ritual life and death ceremonies. These practices are integral to a wider, complex system of *adat* or *lisan* or lore that regulates indigenous society. Anthropologists have referred to woman's transference in marriage, along with her procreative potential, as the 'Flow of Life'<sup>5</sup> and these customs demonstrate the central importance of women and their fertility

in indigenous society. These classical anthropological perspectives are little influenced by feminism or post-colonial ideas.

Although there are many cultural differences between the distinct ethno-linguistic groups in Timor-Leste – including speaking an Austronesian or non-Austronesian language; identifying as autochthonous or migratory; and favouring matriarchal or patriarchal systems – there is much similarity in cosmological beliefs and social structure. Diverse indigenous ethnicities revolve around concepts of dualism, such as *feto – mane* (female-male) or *ema laran – ema liur* (insider-outsider). In cosmology the visible and tangible secular world, *rai* lies on the earth's surface and is dominated by men; while the sacred world, *rai laran*, 'the world inside', is dominated by female ancestral ghosts. According to this indigenous logic, women and girls are consigned to this internal or domestic sphere and therefore have not held public or political positions but may hold power in a deeper, less obvious way.<sup>6</sup> Domestic duties and care of children are the sole domain of women. While this may explain the formidable positions many women hold within households, it also means these responsibilities limit women's opportunities, including political participation. Anthropologists describe the roles of women and men as complementary and interdependent but this does not mean roles are equal or equitable as we understand these gender relations in a modern sense.

Since the end of the Indonesian occupation (1999) a significant revitalisation or reassertion of customary practices in Timor-Leste has occurred, including within political systems<sup>7</sup>, social organisation<sup>8</sup>, reconciliation<sup>9</sup> and local justice<sup>10</sup>. The strength of customary practices and traditional beliefs in the majority of the population is also noted more generally.<sup>11</sup> McWilliam attributes this revitalisation to national independence and an assertion of 'cultural identity politics'.<sup>12</sup> In other similar post-conflict situations it has been argued that a desire for normalcy and healing can make 'the certainties of patriarchal institutions and tradition seem therapeutic'.<sup>13</sup> Graydon documents similar processes of 'retraditionalisation' and a backlash against women in contemporary Timor-Leste.<sup>14</sup>

Any significant improvements to the lives of the majority of women must be made through an engagement with these indigenous practices. Women are profoundly important within indigenous East Timorese society and elite women are very privileged. Women can be powerful within their own domestic sphere; however the family is also the realm where women encounter the greatest control and threats such as early marriage and disparity in outcomes for boys and girls. Understanding protective factors for women in indigenous systems is crucial because any improvements must be made through an engagement with indigenous or 'traditional' society. In a strong and resilient indigenous culture like that in Timor-Leste we must understand how women's status, power and income are maintained by traditional relations or customary practices and how these can be strengthened.

## What is *barlake*?

*Barlake* is often mistakenly translated into either the English term 'dowry' or 'bride-price' (terms which have also been confused and misused in much recent analysis). It could be argued that *barlake* is simply a combination of both these elements, but *barlake* can be more accurately viewed as a ritual and equal exchange that is the basis of regulating relationships in indigenous society. This error in translation is not new, as an early reference from 1963 states:

The question of *barlaque* has frequently been misunderstood, by those making a casual acquaintance with the expression, to mean the sale of a daughter by her father. Nothing could be further from the truth, for *barlaque* actually represents a contract between the two families to form a union and, should this union fail, all the goods and animals exchanged at the time of the contract must be returned.<sup>15</sup>

The term 'dowry' refers to an endowment by the bride's family, transferred with her in marriage, representing her natal inheritance in patriarchal societies which have no tradition of independent inheritance for women. This has caused much controversy and violence against women in contemporary Indian communities.<sup>16</sup> Bride-price is mentioned in the Bible and is a gift or payment from the groom's family to the bride's family, understood as compensation for the loss to the bride's kin group of her labor and fertility, generally intended to reflect the perceived value of the bride. Many around the world condemn this practice, while others suggest that it brings two families together and is a measure of the high value placed on women.<sup>17</sup>

*Barlake* is an exchange in both directions and these elements are symbolically equal and culturally significant. The equality of these exchanges is a fundamental issue for gender relations and will be discussed below in more detail. The full commitment is rarely given all at once, instead staggered over the life of the marriage at significant ceremonies of life and death. This staggering of payments and the ongoing relationship it creates provides the bride's family with some leverage over the treatment of their daughter and the children.<sup>18</sup>

*Barlake* varies enormously between East Timorese ethno-linguistic groups and from clan to clan within those groups, but general principles exist which allows negotiations between different groups to occur. Some or all of the following stages are practiced: initiation – *tuku odamatan* (knock on the door) when family representatives first meet and the groom's family asks permission for their son to marry the daughter; then secret negotiations amongst each extended family to decide if the match is acceptable and what type of *barlake* the family can raise and should request from the other party. Negotiations between the families through nominated representatives follow and can go on for days. To ensure resolution no eating is permitted until agreement has been reached. The first tranche of the exchange is made and

goods are put on public display. The couple then seeks the blessing of the ancestors in ceremonies at each other's sacred house or *uma lulik* after which they may live together.

*Barlake* exchange and negotiation is based very much on the natal houses of the bride and groom and the long-term relationships that exist between their houses and clans. At its purest it encourages first cousin, *tuananga*, marriage between the daughter of a brother to the son of his sister who has married out.<sup>19</sup> Families or clans are categorised as wife-givers (or life-givers, *manesan/umane*) or wife-takers (or life-takers, *fetosan*) in relationship with other families or clans. Marriages outside these established relationships or between ethnic groups are common but require more negotiation. The flow of *barlake* goods represents the flow of life from one family to another. *Barlake* was described by one *lia-na'in* as a spiritual process which terminates a new wife's relationship with her natal *uma lulik* and binds her to her new husband's *uma lulik*.<sup>20</sup> In the district of Same the groom's family must provide a golden *belak* (large metal disc worn around the neck) to the bride's *uma lulik* to replace her body or spirit that is being lost by her sacred house.<sup>21</sup> An apprentice *lia-na'in* described the way *barlake* regulates social relations between people and their obligations to one another:

We practice *barlake* to create a strong society and good relationships, trust and we stand by each other [solidarity] within our families and culture... all families and relatives gather together to make strong relationships... people will respect you and call you sister and you become a valuable member of society and they know how to treat you and value you. If there is no *barlake* people will be confused about what to call you. If the couple just get together without approval no-one would know their relationship with others... It also protects both man and woman from violence: people will protect you as *barlake* is no secret – it is public knowledge – and people will *tau matan* (keep an eye on you) and protect you.<sup>22</sup>

*Barlake* goods do not stay in the family but 'flow' from one family into a chain of related families, thus theoretically keeping the exchanges at communally agreed levels. The value of the *barlake* exchange is in accordance with the level and class of *uma lulik* the bride hails from, and more pragmatically, what the extended family can afford to pay. The more elite the family the more complex and high value is the exchange, and new research suggests these practices are now used by urban elites to strengthen social status.<sup>23</sup>

Traditionally *barlake* also includes the commitment of the *fetosan* to protect the new wife as the source of life and the new life the couple will create together. It also pays respect to the bride and her family: '*Barlake* gives a woman value and status. If not paid there is no respect for the woman's parents'.<sup>24</sup> There is obviously a deep cultural need to pay respect for the time and effort made by the parents of the bride to raise their daughter. Goods from the *manesan* must match this with women's goods and represent spiritual blessings to the new

life from the marriage. The goods from the wife's family are symbolically more valuable or richer because they are coming from those associated with fertility or the sacred source of life.<sup>25</sup>

The groom's family gives the means of wealth creation, typically buffalos that tread and plough the rice paddies, and the bride's family gives items produced by women in her family such as finely woven *tais* cloth and also pigs, which are seen as 'soft' female objects, raised or made by the women in those communities. There are many other elements exchanged depending on the exact ethnic traditions of families: jewellery like *belak*, *morten* and antique gold earrings or ornaments can feature. One elite family from the exclave of Oecusse described a collection of old coins that had been in the family for generations. These objects are deeply significant and reflect the history and way of life of those communities but today these objects can also be translated into their monetary value.

Depending on the ethnic group, the status and the individual arrangement, the *barlake* exchange includes multiple elements. The *fetosan* family must make a symbolic payment to the bride's *uma lulik* for the loss of her body or spirit; then a gift called *bee manas ai tukun* ('hot water and firewood', alluding the necessary accompaniments to birth) is given directly to the mother of the bride for her pain and suffering during the birth of her daughter; a further gift to the mother's brother to acknowledge maternal family. The most substantial gift, however, is made to the bride's paternal family. It is this particular element that is maligned as the 'bride-price' and which seems in many areas to be paid out of proportion to the gifts from the bride's family.

The perception of an asymmetrical exchange of goods, favoring the bride's family encourages the description of this element as a 'bride-price'. It then appears that women and their fertility are being paid for putting a bride in a vulnerable position. It is argued that *barlake* 'establishes relations of unequal power within the family and instills the idea that women should be subservient'.<sup>26</sup> *Barlake* has been described as a repressive custom in which women are simply exchanged as a commodity and subject 'to violent attacks if she fails to conform to expectations'.<sup>27</sup> It has also been suggested that domestic violence results due to the situation of the husband 'having bought' the wife and 'frustrations caused by the high *barlake* demands of the wife's father and brothers'.<sup>28</sup> This feeling of ownership of a woman and her fertility may also manifest as pressure to produce more children than a woman wants to.

While many East Timorese women argue that practices such as *barlake* value them and protect them<sup>29</sup>, others argue for the end of *barlake*. Traditional lore practitioners or *lia-na'in* very clearly contend that:

The *barlake* exchange should be equal and not beyond capacity of those involved. The two families should agree and make the best agreement within the capacity of family. When making a *barlake*

agreement no-one should be able to say that one family pressed the other family to pay more than they could afford. It is not a correct version of *barlake* that just seeks the highest amount of payment.<sup>30</sup>

Amongst the Naueti people who live in the south-east of Timor-Leste the situation is similar: 'If the goods of *barlake* are used as a commodity to enrich oneself, it destroys the spiritual values within and may lower the status of oneself'.<sup>31</sup>

Differences in *barlake* between matriarchal and patriarchal groups are signified by the amount of ritual and value associated with the exchanges. Matrilineal communities pass down family name and inheritance through the female line and expect the groom to move to live with them (called matrilocal or in Tetun, *kaben tama*, marrying or moving in). In some of these communities *barlake* is not practiced at all, although *bee manas ai tukan*, as mentioned above, often is.<sup>32</sup> In patrilocal groups (*kaben sae*, marrying or moving out) the bride comes to reside with the man's family after marriage. There are three matrilineal groups in Timor-Leste, the Bunak and Tetun-Terik Fehan (living in Manufahi, Covalima, Bobonaro and Manatuto districts) and the Galolen (although little information exists about them). The first two communities make up about 12 per cent of the total population.<sup>33</sup> As a general rule, marriage between those practicing *barlake* and those not 'would result in not very high *barlake*' and men who marry into a matrilineal communities would offer no *barlake* but those marrying into patrilineal communities would.<sup>34</sup>

In patrilineal groups if the groom's family has been unable to produce a reasonable proportion of the agreed *barlake* then he will reside with the wife's family and provide his labour to them until an appropriate exchange is made:

When we cannot pay all of the asking price then some problems arise and then the man needs to enter into the woman's family to work. In traditional times this meant agricultural work: helping in the woman's family household and field. Now we are witnessing a change to this and work might mean helping the wife's younger siblings with their education or other things.<sup>35</sup>

Men in this situation are also vulnerable to ill-treatment by in-laws<sup>36</sup> and feelings of frustration and ill-feeling on the part of the groom are common. Hicks also makes the point that men with families who cannot undertake *barlake* commitments may never marry and have children meaning they will never be recognised as full adult members of their communities.<sup>37</sup> This too leads to frustrations and problematic *de facto* relationships.

### ***Barlake*: influences and issues in contemporary society**

Changes to culture occur over time and in response to specific events and influences.<sup>38</sup> Portuguese colonialism (1514–1974) and Indonesian occupation (1975–99) destroyed and weakened elements of East Timorese culture but also strengthened underlying beliefs and familial bonds. *Barlake* was outlawed in the manifesto of Timor-Leste's first revolutionary organisation,

FRETILIN (*Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente*), in the mid-1970s. After the Indonesia invasion (1975) and years of bitter armed resistance, FRETILIN's position shifted and compromise was reached with indigenous society whose support they required and which became key to resistance structures. Yet the displacement and disruption to family and economic life caused by the Indonesian occupation meant *barlake* could not be carried out.

Effects of modernisation have had a strong impact on *barlake* practices and a 2003 survey measured *barlake* as occurring in only about 50 per cent of marriages.<sup>39</sup> A male and female colleague who worked together on a cultural project in a Dili women's nongovernment organisation explained how they saw *barlake* changing:

In my generation we don't have *barlake* because society is changing. We all live outside the village now and no-one cares. There are no brothers left to take care of the buffalo. It is like this everywhere in Timor now. In future *barlake* will be reduced as the structure of society changes. We now live in a democracy. But still now if my father-in-law or brother-in-law dies, or say if C's daughter has a ceremony, then my brother will still come with a big pig and *tais* (textiles), then the husband's side must bring five buffalo worth around \$500-\$1000 each, and this is the same all over Timor. Education has been an influence too. Education means we get jobs and don't keep buffalo. Today people want a good house and modern conveniences not buffalo. Buffalo used to function as dollars and display wealth, but their value is only for exchange now. Now wealth is shown by houses and cars.<sup>40</sup>

Even amongst younger people who still want to continue to honor their customary practices, it is acknowledged that the practice of *barlake* is declining:

When we [my husband and I] decided the amount [of our *barlake*] we looked at the reality. We decided on this low amount, thirty buffalos, because of my husband's family. We didn't want a huge obligation for us (or for our kids to inherit) and because my family would have to match the value of the buffalo in *tais*. We just wanted an amount we could afford and which would pay respect to our culture and our parents.<sup>41</sup>

Traditional authorities too recognise that the level of resources and participation required are no longer available:

In our grandfather's time [1950s-60s] they made the highest exchanges of seventy-seven buffalo but if this agreement was made now there will be money substituted because there are not enough buffalo anymore. This level of exchange takes up lots of time and resources and maybe it will never happen again. People can't stop their jobs for one month as that's how long it takes to carry out the celebrations and ceremonies.<sup>42</sup>



There is also some consensus that monetisation of the exchange has increased and that this may have driven up *barlake* exchanges. One informant suggested a tenfold increase since the Indonesia occupation, which may be linked to the change in currency.<sup>43</sup> For some commentators it is the commodification, when customary goods are replaced with money, which has loosened traditional meanings and encourages a sense of purchase and ownership. 'Greed and status enhancement' are cited in rising dowry deaths in India linked to an 'escalating consumerist culture'.<sup>44</sup> It appears this is a growing trend in Timor-Leste and motivations of personal enrichment are more apparent. One anthropologist noted that *barlake* is changing for the worse: 'rather than representing part of a process of reciprocal exchange between families it is being increasingly treated as monetary exchange more akin to the idea of bride-price or bride-wealth'.<sup>45</sup>

A key turning point in the *barlake* debate is between the meaning of the terms 'value' and 'price' (*folin*). Instead of the gifts made to bride's parents being a mark of deep respect to the parents of the bride and a 'valuing' and enrichment of a bride's social status, this element has come to be represented as simply a 'price' paid for her to her parents (which is a notion that exists in some Middle Eastern and African cultures). One lecture panel expert noted that these terms were not used in the same way in East Timorese languages and that this point was spurious.<sup>46</sup> This deserves further investigation as does the word *dignidade* or dignity and the assertion that *barlake* increases the dignity of a family.<sup>47</sup> The word *dignidade*, used constantly when talking about *barlake*, is closely associated with notions of 'prestige' or 'status'. In patriarchal societies notions of dignity, prestige and status are common and who they actually benefit in the case of *barlake* needs further investigation.

A documented negative outcome of *barlake* is the burden placed on families that may go on for several generations. As well as the solidarity, support and increased status that are afforded through *barlake*, frustrations are also caused by the ongoing burden. In 1963 Margaret King pointed out:

The feasts connected with these great family festivals have been in the past a source of impoverishment. Many, seeking to impress, or through generosity, have recklessly slaughtered buffalo in celebration, only to find themselves, later in the season, without sufficient livestock to maintain their standard of living. Such foolhardiness in marriage celebration is not confined to this one type of civilization... There is now, however, a law that restricts the number of animals which may be slaughtered in any festivity and this wise legislation has ended the tragic vicious spiral of indiscriminate killing for prestige purposes.<sup>48</sup>

These burdens are still onerous today and mean that families can be left with few resources for health, education, investment and improvement in living conditions. This is also a significant reason modernising and urbanised people opt out of *barlake*.

The conflicting views around whether *barlake* exchanges are equal is the key issue that needs to be assessed, as it is fundamental to the argument that *barlake* leads to domestic violence because women are being bought like a commodity. Advocates of customary practices contend that legitimate *barlake* exchanges are equal. However others view exchanges as unbalanced with all the associated repercussions. The situation is incredibly varied across districts and more research into this is required before conclusions can be made. One preliminary explanation, already alluded to here, is that the exchange is only symbolically (rather than economically) equal due to the fact that gifts from the wife-takers are considered more valuable as they come from closer to the source of life-fertility and procreative potential. Such subtle aspects may have been lost through generations of colonialism and conflict and this has certainly been absent in most contemporary assessments. With the crude trend toward monetisation, meaningful material culture objects are translated to their hard cash value, reducing the exchange and the bride to simple commodities. One woman noted this change had also endangered the cultural production and craft of certain items, particularly the hand-woven textiles.<sup>49</sup> These changes need further clarification across the different ethno-linguistic groups and would provide a great insight into this clash of perspectives.

Domestic violence is a serious problem in Timor-Leste, accounting for 40 per cent of all reported crime; yet a 2004 report found that formal justice systems dismally failed women attempting to pursue justice for such crimes.<sup>50</sup> More generally, in the community mild forms of domestic violence are viewed as normal and even used by those senior to their juniors particularly for 'educative' purposes (called *baku hanorin*). In response a concerted national campaign against domestic violence suggests a countrywide dialogue on this issue and that changes are occurring.<sup>51</sup> The central criticism by East Timorese women's advocates is that the bride-price element of *barlake* exchanges creates a sense of ownership of women that has led to this level of domestic violence. In patrilocal communities the ongoing burden of *barlake* for the groom's extended family can affect their relationship with the bride who must live amongst them. With the wife being 'measured' against a particular 'price', any sense of her inadequacy may subsequently become a focus of frustrations within an extended family that has combined its resources to pay the original amount. The view that these pressures lead to domestic violence is reflected in official documents such as the *Policy Paper for the Draft Law on Domestic Violence*<sup>52</sup>, repeated throughout institutional reports on gender relations in Timor-Leste and in discussions at the National Women's Congress.<sup>53</sup>

In her wide survey of customary law leaders Graydon found that just over half believed *barlake* led to adverse treatment of wives due to expectations linked to the exchange.<sup>54</sup> More recent research describes domestic violence as prevalent in matrilineal communities that do not use the bride price element, in turn concluding it is only one of several influential factors (the others being

the attitudes of traditional and state authorities and general community acceptance of domestic violence).<sup>55</sup> This conclusion is surprising given accepted understandings that matrilocal residence patterns provide a greater measure of protection to women from domestic violence, surrounded as they are by their own kin. Others perceive that the ongoing relationship between the couples' families sustained by *barlake* reciprocity creates protective factors for the wife.<sup>56</sup> In this view 'excessive' domestic violence is deterred by fear of marriage breakdown leading to the return of the wife to her natal family, leaving the husband's family in forfeit of gifts given. A deeper analysis may be needed to disengage customary practices, like *barlake*, from entrenched socialised practices, especially violence, that are commonplace and certainly became more extreme during conflict and have continued in the tough post-conflict environment. However these factors are so interwoven that separating them out is difficult and this is apparent in the discourse surrounding *barlake*. Nuanced and thorough research would be required to sift through these perspectives.

Domestic violence occurs in all societies and has not been conclusively proven to characterise bride-price or dowry societies more than others. What is associated with women's vulnerability to family violence is an overall lack of gender and economic equality. Also linked in societies like Timor-Leste is the break-down of traditional practices and protections and a lowering of women's customary status, often accompanied by a male backlash against women's growing freedoms.<sup>57</sup> This suggests the conflict around modern changes for women might be better managed and integrated.

Yet, today many women in Timor-Leste still speak in favour of *barlake* because it awards them status and respect within indigenous culture.<sup>58</sup> On a practical level *barlake* brings wealth into a bride's extended natal family, benefiting those closest to her and also providing the *barlake* that her brothers will need to gain wives. In patriarchal societies this is a significant way a woman can benefit her natal family. However, an increasing focus on seeking these material benefits to increase economic and social status (a similar corruption to that which has occurred in Indian dowry systems) may be having adverse impacts on women in Timor-Leste today. A veteran of Timor-Leste's resistance struggle for independence and current Member of Parliament puts it this way:

*Barlake* is part of our traditional culture and we have to maintain our culture, but there is misuse of it now so it has to be regulated by law, by the government. Our culture is good but some have misinterpreted the customs. That is why they have spoken about gender equality several times in the Parliament. Some say we shouldn't talk about it anymore because as we always pay for women it means women are already valued within the traditions of *barlake*... There is now an emphasis on people who treat *barlake* as an income source and misuse it.<sup>59</sup>

A younger woman who heads up a women's organisation in Dili said:

I agree and disagree with *barlake*. It is part of my identity as a Timorese and part of my culture. *Barlake* used to be for extending and strengthening families but now it looks more like business. I believe we should keep the form and reduce the numbers. It should be addressed along with the gender equity law now being drafted in parliament.<sup>60</sup>

Some research shows that support for *barlake* is much stronger amongst older, married women and less amongst younger single women whose support is dependent upon whether women are being respected or not. There may well be a cultural and generation shift occurring amongst women in Timor-Leste on this issue.<sup>61</sup>

## Conclusion

In Timor-Leste *barlake* is a cornerstone of indigenous practices which engenders a deep sense of identity and meaning for many people. However there is now a significant push by the women's movement to attend to some of its negative outcomes. *Barlake* is not about the sale of women but concerns about the effects of disparity between the economic value of goods exchanged between families are valid. The exchange between wife-giving and -taking families needs to be balanced so the new bride does not become vulnerable to pressure and family violence. Separating *barlake* out from entrenched socialised practices like domestic violence will be difficult, so a more holistic approach would be to work with customary authorities to improve how women are regarded and treated within those systems. This has been suggested by Graydon who believes that good gender practice in these systems needs to be identified and promoted, along with the reiteration of women's powerful status in indigenous society.<sup>62</sup>

Any significant improvements to the lives of the majority of women in Timor-Leste must be made through an engagement with indigenous society and systems such as *barlake* which penetrate people's lives to a larger degree than official systems of the state. This is a long-term proposal made difficult by the complexity and variability of *barlake* systems that are little documented. Research about attitudes to *barlake* and its everyday impact on women's lives is sorely inadequate, as is more careful documentation of the original principles of *barlake*. My own small study has highlighted the positive attributes of:

1. The honouring of women and their fundamental role in society as life-givers and mothers.
2. The creation of life-long bonds of solidarity and respect between the bride and groom's families leading to social and community strengthening and harmony.

3. Exchanges of equal value which are affordable to families and not a burden.
4. The objects of exchange are items of cultural significance not cash or commodities.

If these principles were emphasised rather than the cash value of goods exchanged it may mitigate negative outcomes for women. Changes in focus on spiritual, cultural and pragmatic elements also need to be measured. The conflation of spiritual systems with pragmatic modern capitalism has had negative outcomes such as the dowry killings in Indian communities. Outlawing these practices has not worked there but some form of national action is required in Timor-Leste, perhaps addressing *barlake* as part of the proposed gender equity law now being drafted in parliament as suggested above. Another potential form of action is a national working conference on marriage practices, such as been held in other countries with similar issues or problems<sup>63</sup>, and solutions shared profitably with other societies around the world. If such programs were combined within the wider government and civil society programs working towards gender equity, the slow but positive shifts in the status of women in contemporary East Timorese society would be strengthened.

There are reasons to be optimistic about gender equity in Timor-Leste: we know that women are profoundly important within indigenous society; that women can be powerful within their own domestic sphere; and elite women are very privileged. Understanding protective factors for women in indigenous systems is crucial because any improvements must be made through an engagement with indigenous society. In a strong and resilient indigenous culture like that in Timor-Leste we must understand how women's status, power and income are maintained by traditional relations or customary practices and how this can be strengthened.

## Endnotes

- 1 As I have argued elsewhere 'some of the [East Timorese] male leadership have patriotically promoted indigenous culture while denigrating international "gender equity" policies as a foreign imposition, which will destroy Timorese culture'. S. Niner, 'Hakat klot, narrow steps: negotiating gender in post-conflict Timor-Leste', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2011, p. 415. Similar trends have been noted in other comparable environments internationally.
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- 4 This was funded by an Endeavour Fellowship from the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Training and I would like to thank them for their support. I would also like to thank all the East Timorese who spoke to me about *barlake* in 2010 and all those who took part in the presentation at Universidade Nacional Timor-Leste, particularly the expert panel members Alita Veridal, Laura Pina, Josh Trinidad, Santana Soares and Ivete de Oliveira, and also my academic

colleagues Carolyn Graydon, Susana Barnes and Sofi Ospina for their advice and for the input of two anonymous reviewers.

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