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# Vernacular Human Security and *Moris Diak* in Timor-Leste: A Social Contract between the Living and Spirit Actants

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The concept of human security argues that the improvement of people's wellbeing and livelihoods is a vital component in the stability of the state. What happens, however, when the state is not viewed as the only (if at all) source of influence on people's everyday security? This article argues for a particular vernacular of human security that recognizes a social contract between the living with spirit actants, in ways that can often compete with or challenge state-building efforts. In Timor-Leste, ancestral spirits (*matebian sira*) can directly intervene in the physical safety of their living descendants, and livelihoods (in terms of food security) often depends on engagement between the living and their ancestors as well as nature spirits (*rai-nain-sira*).

**Keywords** Timor-Leste, vernacular security, human security, social contract, spiritual landscape

## Introduction

This article puts forward alternative narratives of what security means and looks like to people in Timor-Leste, exploring subjective conceptions of wellbeing and livelihoods relating to two human security categories: (1) personal security and (2) food security. Following the tradition of anthropologists working in Timor-Leste who use ethnographic quotes to draw out explanations of patterns of understanding and practice, this article demonstrates how seemingly objective indicators of basic human needs (such as food and natural resources, service provision, and physical and mental health) can actually be conceived within a complex network of living and spirit actants.[1] Post-independence, these spirit actants—ancestors (*matebian* or *avo-sira*) and *rai-nain sira* (spiritual custodians of nature and the land)—continue to be core components of daily practices of threat and risk management, minimizing vulnerability to harm, and the preservation

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of bodily integrity. What happens when—as in Timor-Leste—the state is not the sole entity providing security and livelihood assurances in people's lives? Most conventional approaches to human security (in academic discourse and within state-building projects) do not recognize, let alone comprehend, pre-existing forms of governance that provide important aspects of security and wellbeing for many communities.[2] This article sees human security as a concept that is is based on and perpetuates the Hobbesian idea of a social contract; continuing to tie societies into a relationship with a *sovereign state* body by placing responsibility and power within state institutions. In short, human security is (problematically) understood as a means to an end in the consolidation of a foundational contract between citizens and state.

The introduction of human security in 1994 is widely recognized as the first significant shift away from a preoccupation with narrow, state-centric security, and in re-visioning the referent object of security from the state to people and communities. It continues to be guided by four key principles in that any kind of research, policymaking or programmatic objectives should have the following foundations: (1) people-centered, (2) context-specific, (3) compatible with local realities, and be (4) bottom-up rather than top-down in focus.[3] Human security was intended to be a paradigm resurgence (Owens and Arneil 1999); a "widening" and "deepening" (Buzan and Hansen 2009) of the analytical lens to allocate greater attention to people's "everyday realities" and to identify the array of interrelated issues and events that constitute threats to daily routines, livelihoods, and existential integrity. Most approaches to human security, however, continue to be situated within two problematic norms that are not only counterproductive to these four principles of human security, but also present challenges to international state-building objectives; objectives which often aggressively promote the idea of a "certain generic model of the modern state" based on a (predominantly Western-centric) "neoliberal, broadly Weberian, rational-legal" template of a political community (Brown and Grenfell 2017, 176). Firstly, the idea of human security is based on modern liberal social contractarian theories of state-citizen relationships that are not necessarily applicable in all contexts. Secondly, methodological nationalism (see Wimmer and Schiller 2002) continues to be prominent in thinking on human security, asserting the primacy and centrality of the state in all aspects of people's lives.

The problem with this approach to human security, and the policymaking and programmatic work that ensues, is the assumptions made regarding the social, political, and historical context of security governance in a site. This has become particularly evident given the growing momentum of the local turn in peace- and state-building.[4] The first problematic assumption is that the foundation for this Western liberal form of state-society relationship already exists in order for this contractarian agreement to be installed (for want of a better word). Secondly is the assumption that a society has an understanding,

experience of, or even desire for the state to be responsible for security provision and that, historically and culturally, this is a relatable political ideal for people and communities. In a report commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), for instance, it is written that "fragile and conflict affected countries are often far removed from this ideal equilibrium on which a durable social contract is supposed to be based" (Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center and UNDP 2016, 8). What happens when there are different understandings and expectations of security architecture? What happens when there are vastly different non-state actants that people see as responsible for and of having an influence over security, wellbeing, and quality of life?

Through analysis of interviews conducted during fieldwork at two sites[5] in Timor-Leste and based on participant accounts, this article argues that relationships between living and spirit actants represent a social contract that parallels the functions of the Western liberal social contract between state and citizen(s), and that this has ramifications for the way we conceive of human security. That there are a plurality of actants involved in security provision is best captured in the following excerpt from an interview with a *kios*[6]-owner in Irabin de Cima (located in the sub-municipality of Uatu-Carbau, Viqueque) who was discussing his thoughts on security in *moris bain-bain*[7] (everyday, normal life). When asked: "normally, what kinds of things do you use to protect your home and family?," he responded: "I cannot look to the state [for security]…there are many people in Timor-Leste. They cannot look out for everyone. Everyone has to protect their own life, right? Good or bad, you have to seek it yourself, not ask the state" (Interview 17, Irabin de Cima). When asked how to go about this more specifically, he explained that *kultura* provides protection in his life (*proteje hau nia vida*), specifically referencing the role played by the ancestors to the wellbeing of their living descendants, in both malevolent and benevolent ways:

> Say tomorrow I need to get on a plane. Before I go, I will put flowers on my mother's grave, or I will pray to my ancestors (*husu missa*[8])…That means that when I get onto the plane, I will have no problems…Or say someone does not have a job, they [ancestors] provide assistance, give a blessing so that people can get a job. Then our children can become a professor, or a judge, or a doctor (ibid.).

What this participant expressed is representative of many of the other conversations and interviews with community members which call into question the primacy of the state as central to people's senses of security and wellbeing. In the context of present-day Timor-Leste, there is an already-established set of practices that fulfill what is stipulated in liberal social contract theory between the sovereign-power and subject-principle[s] which are the mutual flows of obligation, recognition, and responsibility between living and spirit actants contributing to the frameworks of regulation of society. Furthermore, there is

an already established understanding of these relationships and arrangements in regard to safety, wellbeing, and livelihoods, and what this means for hurtful disruptions to daily life. These all have ramifications for the ways in which scholars and practitioners seek to understand security governance, as well as the ethics and practicalities of state-building norms.

This article builds on the Tetum phrase *tenke fo atu hetan* (one must give in order to receive), an expression used by research participants when talking about the ritual activities and relationships of exchange, expectations, and obligations. Drawing from Bubandt's concept of vernacular security that "security is conceptualized and politically practiced differently in different places and at different times" (Bubandt 2005, 291),[9] this article asserts that political, social, historical, and cultural contexts frame people's experiences and understandings of security. This extends to how the ideals of human security unfold in the context of daily life in Timor-Leste. Embedding people's everyday lived experiences, ideas, practices, and routines into a security narrative (and bringing it into an analytical, academic space) means taking into consideration different ways of being in, practicing, and seeing the world. In her article on the importance of making space for people to voice and share their narratives within the broader context of post-war trauma and transitional justice, Kent (2016, 35) also states that the "everyday" analytical lens is important in reorienting focus away from more formal institutions toward "stories," helping to "illuminate the myriad ways in which people pursue mundane activities and practices to restore or maintain social relations to restore the basic fabrics of meaningful social relations, negotiate or recreate protective mechanisms and provide some sense of continuity in their lives." Expanding our lens of inquiry thus allows for recognition of a more complex network of interconnected actants that share relationships of expectations and obligations that have very real, felt impacts on security production. Also, as part of this ethos of recognizing the *subaltern* in knowledge production, Tetum terms and phrases are prioritized throughout the article as a way of holding political space for the local vernacular within global, meta-narratives of security. This is particularly significant given that the terms *seguru* and *seguransa* are derived from the Portuguese language and there are a range of other Tetum expressions and words used by people in Timor-Leste when talking about what we refer to in this article as *security*.

This article is divided into four sections. It begins by highlighting the intended shift of human security away from state-centrism before moving on to point out the problematic assumptions of Western liberal social contractarian norms. The third section puts forward the idea of expanding the social contract in the context of Timor-Leste to recognize the socio-material relationships of exchange, duty, and obligation between living and spirit actants. In doing this, it draws on parallels between liberal social contract theory and examples from fieldwork to show how exchange (what is sacrificed, given, or gained)—as well as

associated norms of expectations, obligations, and reciprocity—contributes to a broader system of security governance. In the final section, these arguments are contextualized within two of the seven pillars of human security; (1) personal security;[10] and (2) food security.[11] Participant accounts are used to elaborate on ritual acts and daily practices of risk mitigation and minimizing vulnerability and harm to threats against bodily integrity. At the end of the article, the role of the social contract between living and spirit actants in relation to agriculture and livelihoods assurance (food and economy) is discussed.

## Common Understandings of Human Security and Its Continued State-Centrism

At its core, the most basic definition of human security means safety from the constant threats of hunger, disease, crime, and repression. It also means protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the pattern of our daily lives—whether in our homes, jobs, in our communities, or in our environment (UNDP 1994, 3). In its first introduction of the concept, the seminal *Human Development Report 1994* published by the UNDP identified seven key pillars of human security: (1) economic security, (2) food security, (3) health security, (4) environmental security, (5) personal security, (6) community security, and (7) political security (ibid.). With a dual rights and security focus, the ideological foundation of human security is to target those multidimensional aspects of security that threaten *freedom from want* and *freedom from fear*. Although there is debate over the tension between narrow (freedom from fear) and broad (freedom from want) definitions of security, this article takes the approach that any definition of human security must recognize both violent and non-violent threats that diminish quality of life. This was encapsulated well within one interview with a young male participant in Dili who explained that physical security was not the only thing that matters:

> If there are economic problems, your necessities are not being met, then you are not *hakmatek* (at peace)…then this can cause that person to create conflicts with people…If a person does not have money to attend to their basic needs, they can become stressed, they might think about stealing…They will commit crimes in order to have the money to be able to sustain their life (Interview 8, Dili).

Since its inception in 1994, however, human security has been plagued by a range of critiques. While there is not the space here to conduct a detailed review of this large body of material, much of the critique from scholars and practitioners alike has centered on its ambiguity (Chandler 2012, 214), conceptual loftiness (Kaldor 2004, 11), being overly-ambitious and overly-expansive in terms

of the threats it seeks to address (Thomas and Tow 2002, 178), and referred to by some as "empty rhetoric" or a "slogan" (Nishikawa 2009, 226), particularly when it comes to operationalization "in the field" (Paris 2001). The fact that its top-down macro-level policymaking is a "scalar mismatch" with micro-level "on-the-ground-realities" (Lemanski 2012) is also called into question. Other critique focuses on the politics or ethics of human security, highlighting its promotion of a Western or "global north" agenda in terms of "smuggling in particular standards of civilization" as the benchmark for universal norms and "normative prioritizations" (McGregor 2006; Owens and Arneil 1999). Despite all of this, however, it is clear that after almost thirty years, the notion of human security has become an "enduring feature of the international peace and security landscape" and "is here to stay" (Krause 2008, 79).

Moreover, despite ideological underpinnings, we continue to see state-centrism in human security policy and programming. Referring to it as the "rise of social contract talk," Hickey (2011) writes how social contracts have become an "increasingly popular theme amongst development agencies and some development academics," with the "language of social contracts" being employed to explain, among a range of other things, taxation and poverty reduction, the politics of wellbeing. The 2008 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report on fragile states also argues for the critical nature of a social contract, that "human security goals require healthy states to be able to fulfil key responsibilities and provide domestic goods including security," however makes no mention of the fact that there can be existing security governance already in place providing for communities (OECD 2009, 69). Similarly, UN Resolution 66/290 (UN General Assembly 2012) on human security and its follow up report (UN General Assembly 2013, 4) explicitly state the need to mainstream human security into "national planning by government" with section II stipulating the following two points: "human security is based on national ownership" and that "governments retain the primary role and responsibility for ensuring the survival, likelihood and dignity of their citizens" (UN General Assembly 2012). The document (and its follow up report) offers further support for the state as the most well-placed political entity to deal with human security by stating that, given the political, economic, social, and environmental conditions for human security vary significantly, local realities are "embedded in" and "based on national ownership" (UN General Assembly 2013, 4).

This article does not make dichotomous arguments for or against human security. Rather it advocates for an approach that remains accountable to its stated core tenants of being people-centered and "context-specific," focused on everyday realities and routines of different communities and should be bottom-up not top-down in focus, stemming from community engagement. Bearing all of this critique in mind, this article suggests that human security can still be a step in the right direction and, if approached properly and guided by the above principles,

can provide a space for dialogue that is open to alternative narratives and experiences that are often overshadowed by dominant structures and systems. In this sense, what was once a critique of ambiguity can be considered a strength in terms of encouraging a range of context-specific identification of security needs and issues, as well as solutions and responses that reflect local realities and ways of being.

## Assumed Western-Liberal Social Contractarian Norms within Conventional Approaches to Human Security

The overarching logic of liberal social contract theory is that such an arrangement between a state and its citizens is in the best interest for all parties and is conducive to order, stability, and rule of law.[12] As stipulated by Hobbes (1660, 154), it is "the consent of a subject to a sovereign power" which outlines "the duties and obligations that the sovereign-agent owes the subject-principal(s)" (Hampton 1986, 124). These include the maintenance and guarantee of order and security through the enforcement of a judicial system, as well as the provision of public goods and services. It is society's expectations of the state, in return for recognition of the state's legitimate authority as governing power over them. In a report commissioned by the UNDP, fostering resilient societies is equated to "supporting a society to strengthen, or in some cases renew, the social contract between state and society" (Muggah and Sisk 2012, 12). With this in mind, we can see how human security is linked into the broader state-building project through a symbiotic process of (1) assuming the architecture of the modern nation-state and all the related responsibilities and expectations is the status quo;[13] and that (2) human security can serve to bolster this status quo state-society relationship. Reports such as UNDP's concept note *Engaged Societies, Responsive States* similarly frames human security objectives alongside state-building impetuses, reinforcing the onus on (and legitimacy of) the state to provide security in order to support a particular modern, Western liberal form of state-citizen relationship (Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center and UNDP 2016).

Scholars such as David Leonard (2013, 1) refer to attempts by the international community[14] to "state-build" as being based on (and "led astray") by classical social contract theories. Specifically, misguided assumptions that the structures of the central state must be restored in order for anything else to happen. This causes the prioritization of "bonds of legitimacy between the state and a citizenry of individuals" (ibid., 11); and which are based on assumptions about how humans behave, what conditions or factors contribute to legitimizing certain authorities, and the "principles from which a stable political order would need to be (re)constructed" (ibid., 3). Leonard argues that these presumptions tend not to recognize "non-state forms of governance that can provide better safety

and economic development" (ibid., 6), citing examples such as kinship-based protection, and other local-level systems such as through the church, other forms of community and family leadership. This is similarly the case in Timor-Leste, and Grenfell (2020, 461) argues that security, wellbeing, and the "more generalized ability to lead a good life" is often made possible via the sustaining of "mutually reinforcing cognate communities" (ibid., 461). In his article, Grenfell defines "cognate communities" as communities that are "formed through blood and conjugal relations (consanguineal and affinal), comprised of both the living as well as ancestral spirits" (ibid.). De Matos Viegas (2019, 56-57) similarly writes of the co-presence of ancestors with their living kin as "networks of interaction and tension" that are part of an "extended web." She adds that understanding kinship in Timor-Leste requires seeing it as an "existence of a continuum that comprises the relationships established among living relatives, and those between the living and their deceased forebears" (ibid.).

## Expanding the Social Contract to Include Spirit Actants

Building on Grenfell's terminology of "cognate communities," this section expands on what this relationship of mutual recognition sustaining life actually looks like, specifically between living communities and spirit actants. Ancestral spirits, particularly, are understood to be able to directly intervene in and influence risk outcomes; whether this be related to journeys or travel (mobility), conflict, accidents or disasters (for example a car or motorbike accident), crop production,[15] illness (physical or mental) and even death, misfortune, or, in the reverse, improved opportunity (such as a job promotion). In short, all kinds of events or situations that impinge on the quality of life, or in terms of another cultural expression *moris diak* (a good life).

As previously introduced, the Tetum phrase tenke fo atu hetan parallels the idea of a social contract in the sense that people must give or sacrifice in order to receive anything in return. This includes the mitigation (or prevention) of harmful disruptions to people's daily lives (physical security) or maximizing the quantity and quality of agricultural production (food security). This article argues that this social contract is enacted through practices of socio-material exchange that manifest in the form of sacrificial offerings made by the living to spirit actants. In Tetum, these sacrificial offerings and ancestral venerations are known as *fo han* (to give food) or *halo tuir* (to submit to, obey, or comply with a regulation). These can be ongoing offerings (such as daily prayers and recognition) or specific offerings (such as a communal ritual) at certain times of extraordinary need such as conflict, violence, instability, general problems, sickness, or calamity. Material offerings can come in the form of livestock and other consumables (alcohol, cigarettes, flowers, or biscuits), or in some instances money (usually gold coins).

The ritual of fo han often precedes activities such as rice or corn planting and harvesting, fishing trips (Poblacin 2013, 811), hunting and foraging (McWilliam 2017), before embarking on a long journey, or in response to illness, conflicts, or reoccurring disasters or accidents. For instance, one ritual leader *(lia nain)* in Dili explained that when someone is ill or keeps having bad luck, he offers betel nut or meat to the ancestors (sometimes it is a general sacrifice to all the ancestors or sometimes a specific ancestor(s) is named)[16] who takes the spirit of an animal[17] and in return empowers the meat which is then barbequed and consumed by the person(s) who has been unwell and they get better (and sometimes the rest of the family also) (Interview 1, Dili).[18] The significance of these rituals is that the living has made the offering, the spirit actant has come and participated in the ceremony, shared and consumed with the living, and then in exchange for that veneration, imbues the item(s) with a blessing, protection, or power that is for the benefit of the recipient. The significance is two-fold, however, as the act of giving to and recognizing the ancestors (demonstrating respect) is equally as important as the material good being given. Another ritual elder from a different suburb of Dili described four different types of fo han rituals:

> One is to the ancestors, that's on November 1 (*Loron Matebian*).[19] The night before, you kill the pig, goat, or chicken at the graves, then you all eat together like a party… Another one that happens around November or December is when you plant the corn. Then [the second part] you have to come back and conduct another ceremony when the corn is ready [to harvest]. You have to offer livestock before you are allowed to eat the corn. We did this on March 26. It makes the harvest better, also. We followed the ritual protocols *halo tuir* and sacrificed pigs, goats, and chickens. After we feasted, we brought the harvested corn to Farol Park and placed it there—there is a sacred tree there. There is another religious one where we celebrate Saint Antonio on June 13 (Interview 9, Dili).

As explained by the majority of interviewees, it is important to show that you are always thinking of and respecting the dead so that they know to keep watch over you; like a little reminder saying "I am here. I have not forgotten you" (Interview 11, Irabin de Beixo). If the living fail to uphold this practice, the ancestors can at best withhold protection (*la tau matan*, meaning to not be watching over) or at worst, develop malicious intentions (*matebian bele sai hirus*, meaning that the ancestors become angry) which manifest in the form of punishments such as illness, death, or misfortune. The possibility of this, however, is not seen as negative aspect of life to be scared of but a normal aspect of the regulation of social life and relationships to be complied with but which can also have benefits. One older female participant in Viqueque explained that "our tradition (*adat*) is just like that! We are happy, not stressed! You give in order for them to give you things: give you education, a car, a motorbike, or to go to school. You will not get sick" (Interview 11, Irabin de Beixo). One prominent way

of showing respect to one's ancestors is the importance placed on rehabilitating and maintaining graves (*hadia rate*), i.e. keeping it tidy, clean, and decorated (if familial funds allow). This action is representative of the place that the deceased still holds in the minds of the living. In an interview with a group of women in Viqueque, one said the following: "If one of the graves has become bad, or the wooden cross is damaged, you have to fix it. If you do not, then they [ancestors] will think that you are not thinking of them, and they will hurt you (*baku moras ita*). This is why you always need to maintain graves" (Interview 13, Irabin de Beixo). The women then expanded on this in terms of the rehabilitation of their *uma lulik*'s (sacred house) which are arguably the most significant physical and cultural structures in Timor-Leste. Central to social and ritual life, "discursively and symbolically [it] represents the important connections and relationships that people must continue to maintain within their kinship group—living and dead" (Winch 2020, 126) and of which affinal relations and relationships and flows of exchange, reciprocity, and mutual obligation are structured (McWilliam 2005). As they explained, if the wooden stilts of the house are weak or damaged, they must be "secured" to strengthen the overall structure of the house (*mahon didiak*[20]):

> If the poles are weak and it rains, then the whole house can collapse. It will not matter how you try to move forward [in life], you will always end up going backward because you have no support…You will always have conflict in your life, and violence in your home…You could get just a little bit sick but then die a few days later. You can go to the doctor, they can give you medicine, or tell you that they do not know why you are sick. But then you will die. But if you always maintain your uma lulik then you will be secure, your life will proceed normally, you will be able to earn a living (*buka moris*) in the future (Interview 13, Irabin de Beixo).

What these examples demonstrate is a recognition of spirit actants as a source of governing authority in people's lives in the sense that these actants have the power and resources to exert influence, both good and bad. The concept of human security argues that the improvement of people's wellbeing and livelihoods is a vital component of the stability and responsibility of the state. Human security and the state-building project are mutually reinforced by long-standing liberal contractarian arguments; and in this way, the dimensions of human security are instrumentalized to legitimize and bolster the state into a context where the modern nation-state is the overarching form of political community. This makes two interconnected assumptions, however. Firstly, that the state has the territorial authority and reach to govern the society in ways more than just the legality of national sovereignty (juridical sovereignty versus empirical sovereignty); that they are the *sole* provider of resources, service provision, protection, and welfare more generally. And secondly, that the state is widely perceived as the legitimate, sole provider of these functions. As demonstrated in the interview with the kios-owner who said that he does not look to the state but relies on his ancestors to

protect his life, what happens when there are a plurality of agents that a society relies on for the various dimensions of their everyday needs? In this sense, we need to understand the social contract in terms of a more complex network that encompasses relationships between the living and spirit actant.

It is, however, important not to disregard what the state represents for many East Timorese. Much in the same way that social relationships are based on notions of mutual obligations and the principle of reciprocity, people's engagement with the state can be understood to be shaped by the same worldview. This argument is most prominently made by anthropologist Elizabeth Traube in her 2007 article entitled "Unpaid Wages: Local Narratives and the Imagination of the Nation" which documents how the suffering endured by the Timorese in the nationalist struggle is conceptualized as a debt that must be repaid to them by the state as "payment for their fatigue" in their fight to win independence from the Indonesian occupation (Traube 2007).[21] As such, the phrase tenke fo atu hetan can also be applied to how many Timorese understand and perceive the expectations of state-society relations, and how these principles of obligation, reciprocity, and compensation can underpin politics at a national scale (Silva 2008). Thus, it can be argued that the social contract that does exist between people and the state is shaped by local cosmologies and worldviews. In present-day Timor-Leste, many people call on the state to provide public goods and functions. For instance, one participant asserted that the state has a responsibility to make the environment (society) conducive to stability and peace in the form of providing the material goods and resources that people need and that this form of ensuring security and stability (*atu halo ema seguru no moris hakmatek*) is an important part of Timor's national development (Interview 24, Irabin de Cima). These would be things that can minimize conditions of insecurity (freedom from want) and thus vulnerability to structural violence. What is argued, then, is that in Timor-Leste the state is not the *only* political entity with governing authority over people's lives. And in many ways, the alternative—ancestors and spiritual custodians of the land—are much more accessible in the context of an under-resourced state which is yet to hold dominant "territorial authority," "reach," and "capacity" to fulfil what spirit actants are seen and believed to do for people.[22] Again, this is not to say that there are no expectations of the state. One male participant in Viqueque used the example of climate change impacting agricultural production and suggested that one solution would be for local government to make a request (on behalf of the community) to the Ministry of Social Solidarity (in the capital) to provide assistance, specifically referencing the school feeding program and to other material resources that could come through the schools to ensure their children's health (Interview 19, Irabin de Cima). As such, these sentiments shared by participants can also be understood in terms of the socio-cultural and historical significance of collective sacrifices and suffering made for nationhood and independence, and the subsequent owing of

livelihoods that the state has to their citizens. Moreover, the state's role in human security is not seen as a handout per se, but rather as a fulfillment of debt owed to its citizens. In short, the claims that citizens make on the state can be seen as activating elements of local cosmologies and worldviews of obligation and compensation.

In the interview with this participant, however, there was still deference to the ways of the ancestors and achieving (or maintaining) security through the perpetuation of family relationships. He referred to "relations of wife-giving and wife-taking" (marriage), further pointing out that when you "make someone family," you make the relationship better because if there is a problem (like someone dies, or does not have a job) "you are always there for each other" (Interview 19, Irabin de Cima). A moris diak (good life) was spoken of by a number of research participants in terms of *relasaun familia*, with one female participant (an NGO worker living in Dili but originally from Bobonaro district) saying she felt secure when she was (physically) close to family, "when there was no fear in her life, and there was food and work" (Interview 40, Dili). Participants spoke of security as *liuhusi relasaun familia* (through family relations), which would lead them to discuss the importance of their uma lulik in reference to kinship and the family unit, the sacred house, as well as the *lisan* (customary rules and regulations) governing them. One village chief, for instance, when asked what things make people feel secure in life responded, "four things are important: sacred house, ancestors, marriage, and death rituals" (Interview 20, Irabin de Cima). As he explained, people feel more secure when they are a part of a community, and there are traditional justice methods (mediated by the elders in consultation with the ancestors) to resolve problems like theft or murder if they do occur. The significance of this in regard to human security, then, lies in the understanding that many Timorese understand wellbeing in relational terms, a state that no one can achieve alone but is dependent on fulfilling mutual exchange obligations between the living and the dead.

This coincides with claims made by Trindade and Barnes (2018, 163) that it is not the lack of conflict that is idealized but rather the "existence of a stable social order regulated by the law or the rules of *ukun* (rules, regulate) and *bandu* (forbidden) or customary law" (Babo-Soares 2003, 89).[23] These conceptualizations of security and stability are intertwined not only with the role of the ancestors in the regulation of social order, but also of the inseparable and mutually sustaining relationship between living and spirit actants.[24] From one participant's perspective, going to the tribunal to resolve issues or sending a person to prison, only creates more hatred and vengeance (Interview 19, Irabin de Cima). He explained that an important aspect of this ritual was that the sacrifice of livestock (provided by the perpetrator's family) represents a payment or repaid debt (*kastigu*) made by the family of the wrongdoer.[25] Furthermore, invoking the presence and participation of the ancestors in ceremony is what gives the process

validity. The perpetrator(s) are taking an "oath" not to commit the crime again or to continue on with certain bad behavior, and what enforces this is the possibility of facing consequences and punishment (kastigu) metered out by the ancestors. This indicates that when it comes to the management of relationships, security governance can tend to veer more toward familial networks. More specifically, the governing power of lisan in managing relationships and tending to conflict can, at times, have greater purchasing power than the social contract between state and society. This also indicates that the maintenance of social order—with an emphasis on collective rather than individual needs—is an important aspect of alternative conceptions of what security means to many Timorese. The significance of this in relation to alternative conceptions of security is that people's confidence in—and reliance on—familial linkages (and the accompanying regulations of relationships, behaviour, and disciplining of wrongdoing) is one contributing element to people's sense of security that is akin to the role and function of the modern legal judiciary system.

In an interview with one village chief in Viqueque, the participant mentioned the state but spoke in greater detail about how he seeks security from his traditions,[26] placing his ancestors first and foremost: "you cannot see them but they support you in life. I am Catholic so I [also] believe in God…So, in my daily life, in order to feel safe, I have faith in these two things" (Interview 24, Irabin de Beixo). When I asked this participant to explain how his ancestors gave him security (*fo seguru*) he provided examples (*aseguru hau nia vida*) of his ancestors making sure he does not face any dangers on the road while he was travelling between districts for work. He also said that his ancestors would send him a sign or miracle (*milagre*) and he would know not to do certain things, go down certain paths or enter certain places. He used the example of once having visited Australia, saying that he communicated with his ancestors and made an offering to ensure everything goes well, that he did not get sick or get into any bad situations." Then, upon returning to Timor-Leste, after waiting for a month, he went back to the graves of the ancestors and made an offering to thank them for their protection. This participant was also a member of a martial arts group (MAG) and had expectations of security provision from the gang (for him and his family) in the form of protective amulets or special *ai-moruk* (traditional herbs or medicine) with special powers that he receives from the teacher of the gang.[27] He gave the example of going away for work and leaving an item in the house that created a protective boundary around his house so that his wife and children remained safe and unharmed by potential intruders or attackers. His membership within this group afforded his family protection, despite MAGs being a divisive issue, with these groups often seen as the source and instigators of violent conflict.[28]

## Day-to-Day (Immediate) Security and *Moris Diak*: Agricultural Cultivation and Personal Security

That the core tenants of human security—namely wellbeing and livelihoods—resonated with research participants was evident. In terms of the post-independence era, participants in both the rural and urban sites used the language of moris bain-bain and moris diak when asked about the kinds of things that make them and their families feel secure. For instance, one male participant said that their lives were "very normal" and that they only needed a home and food: "we look after our farms, our animals, and so our lives are peaceful and sufficient" (Interview 22, Irabin de Cima).

One young male university student explained how, in his opinion, there is "physical security" (which relates to security from "physical violence" and intimidation like fighting or rock-throwing (*tuda malu*)) but then also "non-physical security" which relates to people's "harmony, education, psychology, and overall good relationships with people."

> It is difficult to achieve security and stability for everyone because so many people still live with trauma and this impacts their mentality. [This mentality] starts from a young age. That is why it is good to have school programs implemented by the Ministry of Education to influence the mentality of students to use dialogue and communication, not violence (Interview 8, Dili).

He emphasised the importance of the economy, and its link with security, because if it is "good" then people can afford to go to school to "become smarter" through a range of ways such as the program mentioned above, learning how to interact with one another and doing the "right thing." "All of these things contribute to security in people's lives" (Interview 8, Dili). The notion of "trauma" and its link to perpetuating instability (people specifically used the term *la hakmatek*) was brought up by a number of participants. The idea of trauma can be conceptualized in terms of the secular, psycho-social but also in the local socio-cultural context of creating a socio-cosmic imbalance, and in terms of relationships between people, nature, and spirits.[29] Some instances of this include unresolved conflict or acts of wrongdoing not yet addressed, where the resulting trauma manifests in the form of the reoccurrence of bad things happening to people (accidents, misfortune, ill health, or death) because the socio-cosmic balance has not been restored. For instance, one male participant in Viqueque was asked "what kind of things make a community secure?" and "what makes people feel secure in their community?" He responded: "People cannot have trauma [in their life], they cannot have *rungu-ranga*,[30] and people cannot do things that will destroy their future. What do I mean by this? Just hanging around for no reason

(*ransun-malun*), drinking alcohol, getting drunk, getting into fights. This makes a community and a family not peaceful" (Interview 21, Irabin de Cima). This participant spoke of interrelated physical and non-physical conditions of security, making reference to "youth" in particular needing opportunities to make the most of their life and not to destroy their future so that they do not just "sit around," because that creates an environment where fights and violence can break out (*halo problema*), contributing to an overall lessening of stability in a community. In this way, we can see there can be a mutually reinforcing effect of direct inter-personal violence and structural violence (social and economic circumstances, diminished access to, and supply of resources, opportunities, etc.) feeding one another and increasing the overall conditions of insecurity.

*Agricultural Cultivation*

Food security, as defined by the UNDP (1994, 27), includes physical and economic access to basic food. This means that people have the capacity to either grow it for themselves (production), have the means to purchase it (linked to economic security), or can access it through some form of public food distribution system (ibid.). In Timor-Leste, agriculture provides an income for an estimated 80 percent of the national population (DFAT 2020). Particularly outside the urban capital of Dili,[31] subsistence agriculture is a dominant form of food production and major source of income and, thus, a key aspect of and contributor to people's livelihoods. Even in Dili, one will see fruit and vegetables being sold on the streets at kios and markets. In this sense, agricultural production and successful harvesting is crucial not only for direct consumption, but to generate cash revenue to purchase other basic goods and consumables.

Demonstrating the centrality of subsistence agriculture to daily life in Timor-Leste, the phrase *halo to'os, halo natar* (farming) was a key topic throughout the interviews in three key ways. Firstly, when describing daily life and routines (moris bain-bain). Secondly, when participants would talk about the kinds of things that were important to their livelihoods (moris diak), referred to by some as *necessidade loron-loron* (daily necessities). Community members, in Viqueque particularly, would talk about how most people in the village get their livelihoods through looking after their farms ("that is what normal life is like in this village"), and that every day they eat and drink products from their farming (Interview 20, Irabin de Cima). One community member explained how aside from fighting for independence, post-1999 his life has revolved around agriculture: "cultivating land, looking after my animals—horses, buffalo—my family gets their livelihood through these things (*familia bele moris liuhusi buat ne'e*)" (Interview 21, Irabin de Cima). Thirdly, when talking about the kinds of things for which they engaged with spirit actants, specifically to ensure agricultural prosperity. This, among other functions such as asking for protection or good luck, was one of the key practices discussed by participants when asked about the kinds of things for

which they sought assistance for from their ancestors. A bad harvest could be attributed to not satisfying the ancestors with a ceremony or not providing a good sacrifice or offering. The consistency and prominence of interviews which discussed agricultural cultivation as a key aspect of their daily lives, particularly in terms of linking it to socio-material relationships of exchange between the living and spirit actants, demonstrated it to be a core element of people's understandings and experiences of human security.

> When it is time to plant the corn, people must first *hamulak* (pray) to the rocks or mountains that are closest to that field. They are like the owners that live there. You need to ask for permission (*husu lisensa*); you kill the animal and place their blood in that place. Then you cook and place the meat as an offering to the *rai-nain* to ask for permission to farm there, and for the *rai-nain* to keep an eye on the field and make sure everything goes well (*bele lao didiak*) (Interview 42, Dili).

In linking security and stability to agriculture, one view was that agricultural responsibilities played an important role not only in minimizing violence but in providing people with the means to improve their lives. One village chief in Viqueque spoke of youth needing something productive to do—halo to'os, halo natar—in order for a community to be secure and stable (Interview 21, Irabin de Cima). Another village chief shared a similar opinion:

> Drugs, people committing crimes, these impact a peaceful environment. These things make the population unstable. You need to eliminate these bad things and then focus on what you know. For example, if it is agriculture, just focus on looking after your crops and your animals. Then with these you can make money that you can use to send your kids to school or to buy the things you need that help to sustain a family's day-to-day life (Interview 24, Irabin de Beixo).

*Risk Mitigation and Minimizing Vulnerability: Personal Security*

When talking about direct interventions of protecting against or responding to physical threats to their bodily (or mental) integrity (for example, assault or sickness), interviewees would often speak of the role played by spirit actants. A commonly discussed item used for protection was ritually-blessed betel nut (*bua malus)* received from one's uma lulik which people keep in their wallet or bag as a form of protection or blessing from their ancestor, acting like a protective amulet. It was explained that this act of carrying the blessed betel nut on one's body has been common practice since the "times of the ancestors" and that "people always carry bua malus when going to school, to work, for no temptations to bother you, and to not succumb to sickness or death" (Interview 44, Dili). While the object itself is a betel nut, it was referred to by some participants as *matak malirin*, a Tetum idiom referring to a "state of good health and productive life energy" (Kehi and Palmer 2012, 447) endowed or provided as a blessing by the

ancestors. The following from Trindade and Barnes (2018, 159) encapsulates well the significance and function of matak malirin.[32]

> A state of matak malirin can be achieved through participation in ritual and adherence to local norms and practices that serve to regulate these exchanges…In the context of communal rituals, such as rice or corn harvest, matak malirin is distributed to participants in the form of a portion of the sacrificial meat and ritually blessed betel leaves and areca nut.

Matak malirin in the form of the ritually-blessed betel nut was prominently mentioned throughout interviews and conversations. Interviewees would describe it as not just ancestors providing security through blessings, protection, and "tau matan" (Winch 2020), but said there is an inextricably related aspect where physical items are imbued with the power of the ancestors, like giving you "energy in your body like metabolism!"[33] One research participant provided the following description of protective amulets being used by some Timorese people:

> It's like a sacred thing that you accept from your uma lulik. It is like the spirit that comes from your uma lulik that goes with you everywhere. They protect the offspring that belong to that house [kinship group]. So we take it with us. I could go somewhere really far and if anything happens or if there are any dangerous situations (*situasaun manas*), their ancestors will know and protect them. In that time and place that I need them, they will be there, and nothing bad will happen to me (Interview 42, Dili).

This participant explained that the majority of people in Timor-Leste use and carry these kinds of items. When asked "protection from what?" he used the example of the lead up to the vote for independence in 1999:

> Such as from assault. In 1999, there was an incident in Becora[34] between pro-Indonesian militia and some youth. There is a video where you can see lots of people wearing this red fabric (*hena mean*) around their wrist or like a bandana…the situation was dangerous so they wore the hena mean which is like a sacred thing that they would carry with them from their uma lulik which would make them strong and so nothing could penetrate them (*kona isin*) (Interview 42, Dili).

He went on to provide other examples of how *buat sagradu* (sacred things) from one's uma lulik can help in a range of other ways such as hiding oneself from enemies and making yourself invisible (or changing the appearance of your eyes),[35] or to *halo malirin* which means to cool someone's bad intentions or wishes to harm you. He also added that someone may wish to enact revenge on you (*ema bele odio*) but they would physically not be able to hit you: "It is like it shuts down all forms of attack (*taka buat hotu*)" (Interview 42, Dili).

## Conclusion

This article has argued that there is a contract between living and spirit actants that fulfills similar objectives in relation to security governance and that this, in turn, has ramifications for the way we should approach state-building in Timor-Leste. Furthermore, if human security is to be applied to "successfully understand" and help with the "core problems underlying potential [and actual] threats," it needs to take analytically seriously the ramifications of different socio-cultural and locally contextualized understandings of the social contract theory that influence the security governance infrastructure in any given context. When reflecting on the past twenty years of state-building in Timor-Leste, we have seen the consolidation of the state that appears to replicate a "certain generic model of the modern state" (Brown and Grenfell 2017, 176). We have also seen the purposeful perpetuation of the state-citizen social contract while other important social relationships and actants are either paid lip service within the rhetoric of *recognizing the local*, or where any serious analytical engagement or discussion is isolated to the academic spaces of social and cultural anthropology.

Timor-Leste is not alone in this and globally we see a certain template of a political community being encouraged, idealized, and installed. In the context of discussing social wellbeing and economic livelihoods (and the institutions responsible for these), how can there be improved modes of community consultation and program implementation when it comes to incorporating the particular realities, preferences, and existing ways of doing things within these communities? Utilizing a human security approach, or applying a human security lens to any analysis, will miss key elements of peoples *everyday lived realities* until it recognizes and properly engages with the fact that there are contrasting agential sources of and influences over livelihoods and security provision, as well as corresponding expectations of responsible actants. This is not to say that the state is not considered a political entity that has a responsibility to provide welfare to citizens, but rather that there are a plurality of agents that constitute the security governance and infrastructure in independent Timor-Leste and spirit actants have an active role to play. To this end, this article has sought to demonstrate the ways we can see the continued relevance of customary social life to modern forms of governance.

## Notes

1. Drawing from new materialist discourse and Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, the author uses the term actant in order to shift away from the dichotomy of human and non-human actors (Latour 1996). In using this terminology, all actants—even those that

are unseen—are treated analytically equally as social beings with agency and the capacity to exert influence and be influenced.

2. While there is not the space here to provide a socio-historically situated analysis of human security in Timor-Leste (nor is that the objective of this article), some useful references are Howe (2013) and Valters, Dewhurst, and de Catheu (2014).

3. These four principles have been taken from the UN General Assembly Resolution adopted on September 10, 2012, 66/290. See Part II: A common understanding on human security.

4. Scholars such as Roger Mac Ginty (2012) and Oliver Richmond (2011) are well known for their work on the local turn in peacebuilding. See also Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013).

5. Fieldwork was conducted in the urban capital of Dili (predominantly in the suco of Comoro), and in the two neighbouring suco of Irabin de Beixo and Irabin de Cima (Viqueque municipality). The contrast between these two sites (urban and rural) is important to remember when considering the context of participant responses. The presence of the state is much more visible and clearly felt in the urban context and, as such, the needs and experiences of participants will vary. For instance, later on in the article, the participant in interview 8 is a university student in Dili and speaks of their concerns about physical security as well as the non-physical dimensions of security such as the importance of access to education. For further detail regarding the significance of the urban and rural divide in terms of governance and the extent to which the state is implicated more directly in people's sense of security and wellbeing, see Silva 2013 (particularly pages 456-457). Here, she discusses the significance of the urban capital in shifting positions of authority from rural knowledge systems and institutions, toward the secular and the state as power brokers. This can be understood as part of the consolidation of broader nation- and state-building impetuses.

6. A kiosk (or in Tetum, kios) is a common small booth usually on the side of the street which sells basic goods such as instant noodles, cigarettes, candles, biscuits, and soft drinks. It is a significant source of income or employment for many in Timor-Leste.

7. This phrase is used interchangeably with *moris loron-loron*(day-to-day life).

8. The term *husu missa* refers to Catholic prayers of communication made with ancestors, often for the purposes of invoking protection or guidance from them. It would involve asking the priest leading mass to say the name of the ancestor(s)—to *temi naran* (to say a name)—and would usually require a small contribution from the individual or family making the request. The significance of this practice is a demonstration from the living of their continued respect to that particular named ancestor(s), to show that they have not forgotten them and which in return, grants them blessings and protection.

9. The concept of vernacular security can best be understood as recognition of the plurality of "ways in which different people and communities conceptualize security and security threats" (Jarvis 2018, 108). Croft and Vaughan-Williams (2016, 11) explain it best in saying that a recognition of vernacular security is a recognition of how people "construct and describe experiences of security and insecurity in their own vocabularies, cultural repertoires of knowledge and categories of understanding." Other terms that are considered synonymous to vernacular security are "everyday security" and "quotidian security."

10. Personal security, defined as direct, immediate targeted threats (perceived and actual attacks) on bodily and mental integrity and health, including threats of physical violence

and malicious, intentional attacks of crime, harassment, or as a result of ongoing (or heightened) conflict between two or more parties (UNDP 1994, 30).

11. Food security, broadly meaning "physical and economic access to basic food and nutrition" (UNDP 1994, 30).

12. The UNDP's 2012 report, *Governance for Peace*, defines a social contract as being "forged on the basis of an agreement between elites and citizens [and] is credible when it adequately reflects citizens' expectations and the state's capacity to meet those expectations" (Muggah and Sisk 2012, 18).

13. Even in their critique of human security, scholars such as Thomas and Tow (2011, 182) argue that the state has a "natural propensity to provide maximum security for its own citizens" without any problematisation of how the relationship between state and its citizens, and the traction (perceived legitimacy and efficacy) of the state, can vary between different sites.

14. International community here connotes "those who populate international organisations and donor agencies," as well as "the academics and consultants who advise them," who come forward to provide [security] assistance [but] have never lived for long themselves in such conditions (Leonard 2013, 2).

15. These occur as specific phases in the life cycle of different crops and in rituals of atonement or gratitude (McWilliam 2009).

16. See the previously mentioned definition of temi naran.

17. Key anthropologists McWilliam (2011a), Pannell (2006), and Población (2013, 811) write how animal souls are believed to mediate between the world of death, life, and spirits and thus animal sacrifice is seen as a vehicle to communicate with spirits and souls. Población (2013, 813) also explores the ritual and ceremonial distribution of animal sacrifices in terms of an important source of protein consumption and this being an important factor of food security in Timor-Leste.

18. Another community member (a high school teacher in Viqueque) explained fo han in the following manner: "Before you kill the animal, you state who you are making the sacrifice for (temi naran), and the meat is for them to eat, and that the rest is for you. The significance of sharing in the consumption of sacrificed meat is that the blessings and protection from the ancestors are transferred into it. It is the same if you are sacrificing the *malus* (betel pepper). Later on, if you chew the bua malus (betel nut), you are consuming the blessings transferred into it. Other things could also include offering *tua* (alcohol) or coffee" (Interview 19, Irabin de Cima).

19. The Day of the Dead.

20. The Tetum expression *mahon didiak* (good shade, shelter and in turn, protection) is significant when talking about different vernaculars of security as the term mahon translates to shade. Many participants would use the term mahon when talking about the shelter and protection provided to them by their ancestors and the importance of ancestral land and uma lulik (sacred house). In some cases, when discussing the protective function of bua malus (betel nut) as matak malirin (loosely translated as a form of blessing and protection) people would use the term mahon. Botanic idioms are commonplace throughout the Tetum language and relevant in discussions of security; for instance, many participants would say that without their roots or being firmly grounded (not only to the land but to their kin—living and dead), they would be left floating and thus vulnerable to risk and harm (using the Tetum phrase of *hamriik namlele* which in English means to be

floating).

21. In her article, Traube (2007, 10) references a common Mambai saying that "the nation was won through suffering and sacrifice; it was 'purchased' not with silver or gold but with the blood of the people."

22. Drawing from arguments around complex political hybrid orders, Feijó (2017, 240) argues that it is more accurate to look at public administration in Timor-Leste as "cohabitations" between pre-existing "well-structured socio-cultural systems" interacting not only with the modern liberal state but also the influence of the authority of the Catholic Church. Furthermore (and most importantly), it is not that the modern liberal state has "superseded" customary governance structures but in fact have utilized its legitimacy to bolster its own authority, further emphasizing the continued significance of these pre-existing structures and systems of order (ibid., 239).

23. Trindade and Barnes (2018, 163) write how the "times of the ancestors" is closely associated as being "tranquil times" of peace and prosperity, where "there is no shortage of food, no war, and no violence" and people are able to freely go to their farms "without fear."

24. McWilliam (2011b, 73-74) writes "just as people depend on ancestral blessings for their own health and wellbeing, so ancestors cannot exist without the continued ministrations of sacrificial offerings and the attentions of their living descendants."

25. For a more in-depth explanation of what the material exchange of goods represents in terms of the social relationships between people and beyond the act of penalty and compensation, see Simião (2013), particularly pages 3-5.

26. The participant used the term *tradisaun* and then followed up with the term *lisan*.

27. An older female respondent also showed some items she wore around her wrist (and which her young granddaughter wore around her neck) as well as a tattoo that she had on her arm from one MAG, which she received due to her son-in-law's membership within the group and which kept her safe from physical harm (Interview 11, Irabin de Beixo).

28. One participant talked about how gangs could make people feel unsafe but that is usually in the context of visiting another suburb, not your place of residence (Interview 8, Dili).

29. See work by Babo-Soares (2004), Sakti (2013), Trindade (2008), and Trindade and Castro (2007).

30. Indonesian colloquial term for chaos, disturbance, disorder.

31. Approximately 70.4 percent of the population lives in rural areas (FAO 2020).

32. Although for the purposes of this article *matak malirin* is discussed as a component of personal security, it can be understood to encapsulate the notion of human security more broadly across all seven of its pillars.

33. Conversation with local co-researcher documented in fieldwork journal.

34. An eastern suburb in Dili.

35. When talking of this technique, participants used the Tetum phrases *taka dalan* (to shut the road or path) or to *taka matan* (to close your eyes).

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