International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation
E-ISSN: 3107-6157 editor@ijamri.com
Volume 2, Issue 6, November-December 2026

Continuity and Change in Universal Cultural Elements around the *Uma Lisan*: An Exploratory Multiple-Case Study of the Perspectives of Male Elders and Ritual Speakers in Five Municipalities of Timor-Leste

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Abstract

Ethnographies of Timor-Leste have described cosmology, sacred houses and ritual exchange in depth, but usually within one or two communities. This exploratory multiple-case study compares how seven male key informants — six elders and one young man, all of whom the source reports call *lia-na'in* (ritual speakers) — describe continuity and change in Koentjaraningrat's seven universal cultural elements around seven *uma lisan* (sacred ancestral houses) across five municipalities (Baucau, Aileu, Lautém, Ermera and Manatuto) and five mother tongues. The empirical sources are written reports produced by seven groups of student teachers, each of which interviewed one informant. As no audio recordings were made, the reports are treated as mediated records collected for teaching and re-used for research, and the data chain is reported transparently. No formal ethics review took place before data collection; institutional authorisation and student consent for re-use were obtained afterwards, and this limitation is discussed openly. A two-level thematic analysis (deductive and reflexive) generated four themes: reciprocity as the logic of *fetosaan–umane* (wife-taker–wife-giver) exchange (five cases); ancestral sanction (*malisan*, misfortune) as a mechanism of social order (four cases); the co-existence of *lulik* (the sacred) and Catholicism in several forms (five cases); and concern about transmission to young people (three cases). For the informants, the *uma lisan* is a valued site of articulation; however, this finding is partly an artefact of the study design, and the data also point to cultural spaces beyond it: the school, health services, the market, work for the state and everyday church practice. The article formulates three propositions for future research. The findings cannot be generalised to any ethno-linguistic group, but they may inform contextual pedagogy in teacher education.

Keywords: *uma lisan*; *lia-na'in*; *lulik*; continuity and change; reciprocity; mediated qualitative data; Timor-Leste

International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation
E-ISSN: 3107-6157 editor@ijamri.com
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1. Introduction

Culture is a fundamental part of human life. Through social and intergenerational interaction, people learn, interpret and transmit language, beliefs, knowledge, norms, livelihoods, technology, art and forms of social organisation. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) showed that, despite the diversity of definitions of culture, all of them include patterns, values, ideas and symbols that are learned and socially transmitted. Geertz (1973) added that culture is a web of significance that people themselves spin and interpret. The study of culture therefore cannot be limited to what people do; it must also seek to understand the meanings that communities attach to these practices.

In Timor-Leste, culture has been shaped by successive historical layers: contact with Portugal from the sixteenth century, the Indonesian occupation from 1975 to 1999, and the restoration of independence on 20 May 2002 (Taylor-Leech, 2009). Each layer brought new institutions. During the occupation, the Catholic Church became a place of protection and resistance (Hodge, 2013). Before the 1975 invasion, only about 20% of the population was Catholic (Taylor, 2003, p. 381); data from the 2015 census put the figure at 97.6% (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Portuguese and Indonesian schools introduced new languages and methods of learning, while the market, migration, the media and digital technology have intensified contact with the wider world. Nevertheless, the *uma lisan*, ritual, mother tongues, *fetosaan–umane* relations and the knowledge of the *lia-na'in* remain alive. The Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (Constitution of the RDTL, 2002) provides a legal basis for this continuity on three counts: it recognises norms and customs that are not contrary to the Constitution (Section 2.4); it requires the State to value and develop Tetum and the other national languages (Section 13.2); and it imposes on everyone a duty to preserve, protect and value the cultural heritage (Section 59.5).

Recent anthropological literature on independent Timor-Leste shows that *kultura* or *lisan* (custom) is not a passive survival from the past. Rather, it is a resource that people negotiate, deploy and rebuild in their relations with the state, the Church, development and the market (Alonso-Población et al., 2018; Fidalgo-Castro, 2022; James & Grenfell, 2018; Silva, 2020; Viegas & Feijó, 2017). This raises the central question of this article: according to customary elders (*katuas-adat*) and *lia-na'in*, what continues, what changes, and how do *lisan* practices and new institutions coexist in their communities?

1.1 Research Problem

Cultural change is often interpreted as a conflict between tradition and modernity, or as a path from an "inferior" to a "superior" culture. Contemporary debate instead favours notions of "multiple" or

International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation
E-ISSN: 3107-6157 editor@ijamri.com
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"alternative" modernities (Eisenstadt, 2000; Gaonkar, 2001) and of "continuity through transformation" (Sahlins, 1985): communities receive new institutions through their own cultural categories, and in the process those categories themselves change in meaning. In Timor-Leste, ethnographies such as Traube (1986), Hicks (2004), McWilliam and Traube (2011), Bovensiepen (2015) and McWilliam (2020) describe cosmology, the *uma lisan*, alliance and ritual exchange in depth. However, they focus mainly on one or two communities studied through long-term observation. Fidalgo-Castro's (2022) review of post-2002 anthropology of Timor-Leste shows that most studies concentrate on local cases, land, the state and religion, and that comparison across ethno-linguistic groups using a single analytical framework remains rare. This article does not seek to replace the depth of these ethnographies. Instead, it offers a comparison of broad scope but limited depth, in order to identify patterns and formulate propositions for more in-depth research.

1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

The main research question is: How do male customary elders and *lia-na'in* from seven *uma lisan* describe the universal cultural elements in "former times" (*tempu uluk*), and what do they regard as continuity or change "today" (*ohin loron*)? This question is divided into three specific questions:

1. How do the informants describe the seven cultural elements in former times?
2. How do the informants relate these elements to one another, and where do important cultural practices take place outside the *uma lisan*?
3. Which elements do the informants describe as continuing, adapting or changing, and what factors do they identify?

Accordingly, the research objectives are (a) to describe the seven cultural elements from the informants' perspective; (b) to analyse the relationships among the elements and the limits of those relationships; and (c) to formulate propositions about continuity and change that subsequent research can test.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The article contributes at three levels. At the empirical and theoretical level, it applies a single guiding framework to seven cases spanning five mother tongues and formulates three propositions on the relationship between contact factors and specific cultural elements. At the educational level, it shows how interviews with *lia-na'in* can serve as a learning method in teacher education, and what methodological and ethical safeguards are required when student-generated data are used for research. At the heritage level, it documents knowledge at a general level while protecting sacred (*lulik*) knowledge. This documentation is

timely, because several informants (K1, K2, K6) expressed concern that young people are not carrying this knowledge forward.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Culture and Cultural Change

Culture has both a material dimension (houses, tools, goods) and a symbolic one (beliefs, values, meanings). Koentjaraningrat (2009) distinguishes three forms of culture: systems of ideas and values, patterned systems of social activity, and artefacts or physical culture. This distinction is useful for the study of change, because the three forms may change at different rates — an idea with a classic antecedent in Ogburn's (1922) thesis of "cultural lag", which has been criticised for separating material things from their meanings. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) showed that some traditions regarded as "old" may in fact have been invented or reinvented quite recently. Sahlins (1985) argued that cultural categories are "put at risk" in action: when people use them to make sense of new events, the categories themselves acquire new meanings. In other words, a culture may maintain certain aspects while changing their form or meaning, and change need not imply wholesale replacement.

One further concept, often cited in this context, is set aside here. Steward's (1955) concept of "multilinear evolution" refers to parallel paths of development shaped by ecological adaptation and a "cultural core"; it does not denote the idea that cultural elements change at different speeds. Because the data in this article do not permit the ecological comparison that Steward's method requires, the article does not use this concept, nor does it adopt a unilinear evolutionist framework or a stage-based "traditional–modern" dichotomy.

2.2 Universal Cultural Elements and Rationale for the Framework

The term "universal" does not mean that all cultures are alike; it refers to cultural domains found in every human society, albeit in different forms (Brown, 1991). Koentjaraningrat (2009), a founding anthropologist of the Indonesian academic tradition, organised these domains into seven elements: (a) religious systems; (b) knowledge systems; (c) systems of technology and equipment; (d) social organisation and kinship; (e) economic and subsistence systems; (f) language; and (g) the arts. His list is rooted in Kluckhohn's (1953) "universal categories of culture".

There are three reasons for using this framework in post-occupation Timor-Leste. First, it is simple yet sufficiently comprehensive to serve as an interview guide for student teachers who are only beginning to

learn research methods. Second, several of its domains (language, the arts, ritual, knowledge of nature and craftsmanship) correspond partly to the domains of intangible cultural heritage defined by UNESCO (2003), thereby linking the framework to curriculum and heritage concerns. Third, it allows diverse cases to be compared using the same categories. The framework nevertheless has limitations. It derives from a functionalist tradition that tends to treat culture as a static and balanced system; it was developed in the context of Indonesian nation-building, where it was also used to classify "regional" cultures; and it divides culture into compartments that communities themselves do not draw. This article therefore uses the seven elements as a heuristic tool for collecting and organising data, not as a complete description or a theory of change, and treats overlaps between elements as data rather than as error.

2.3 Tradition, Modernity and Continuity Bias

Traditional culture refers to the values, beliefs, knowledge and practices transmitted across generations through oral tradition, the family, ritual and community memory. Tradition is not a static system; it adapts to need. Modernity involves change in institutions, technology, the economy, communication and education (Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1990). In Timor-Leste, James and Grenfell (2018) analyse how customary cultures confront global modernism; Silva (2020) and the contributors to her edited volume show how new pedagogies and technologies "perform" modernity in everyday life; and Alonso-Población et al. (2018) show that *kultura* itself has become a field in which power is negotiated. This literature treats tradition and modernity not as opposing poles but as interacting forces.

An emphasis on continuity carries two risks that must be kept distinct. The first is what Robbins (2007) criticises as the "continuity thinking" of *analysts*, who tend to see conversion to Christianity as merely a surface layer over an older culture and overlook the ruptures that believers themselves often emphasise. The second lies in the *positional interests* of informants: in this study, six of the seven informants are elders whom the reports call *lia-na'in* and whose authority depends on *lisan*, and they therefore have reason to portray *lisan* as strong and unchanging. The article guards against both risks in its analysis of every claim of continuity, not only those concerning Catholicism: statements that something "continues" are treated as the informant's representation, and the author's interpretation is signalled separately.

2.4 House, *Lulik* and Alliance in Timor

Fox (1980) showed that societies in Timor and eastern Indonesia share common categories, such as the house as a social and ritual unit, the relationship between wife-giving and wife-taking families, and parallelism in ritual speech. Lévi-Strauss (1975/1982) proposed the concept of "house societies" (*sociétés à*

maisons), in which the house — rather than descent alone — is the unit that holds names, wealth and titles. Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995) and Fox (1993) developed this idea, showing that throughout the Austronesian world the house is a place of origin, an archive of memory and a structure for social relations. In Timor-Leste, Traube (1986) explains how cosmology and ritual exchange are linked to the house, land and the ancestors (*matebian*) among the Mambai, and Hicks (2004) describes the relationships among fertility, gender, kinship and spirits in a Tetum community. In West Timor (Indonesia), Therik (2004/2023) describes the matrilineal ritual centre of Wehali, a reminder that patrilineal patterns are not universal on the island of Timor.

In independent Timor-Leste, McWilliam (2005, 2020) shows that the *uma lisan* continues to structure social life and post-conflict economic recovery; McWilliam and Traube (2011) show that land, sacred houses and alliance relations are central to rural life; and Bovensiepen (2015) analyses the revival of ritual and *lulik* in the post-conflict period. Fidalgo Castro (2015) shows how the *uma lulik* became an "uncomfortable object" for the nation-state, and Viegas and Feijó (2017) bring together studies of transformation in independent Timor-Leste. On customary authority, Hohe (2002) shows the tension between local political legitimacy and international administration, and Babo-Soares (2004) describes *nahe biti* as a philosophy and process of grassroots reconciliation. Trindade (2012) describes *lulik* as the core of Timorese values, and Palmer (2015) shows how spiritual ecology continues to govern water and land in the context of development.

This article therefore does not propose a new theory of "house societies"; the idea that the house integrates kinship, ritual and wealth is already established by Fox, Traube, McWilliam and others. The gap the article seeks to address is more specific: a comparison of cases from different mother-tongue communities using a single guiding framework; attention to cultural spaces outside the *uma lisan* that the informants themselves mention; and methodological and ethical reflection on the use of data from student teachers as an ethnographic source. The following sections review literature on the specific domains of exchange, art and language that helps to interpret these data.

2.5 Exchange, Wealth and Gender

Mauss (1925/2002) showed that gifts create obligations to give, to receive and to reciprocate, thereby binding groups in enduring relationships. Polanyi (1944) argued that the economy is "embedded" in social institutions. Weiner (1992) added that not all things circulate: "inalienable possessions", such as sacred heirlooms, are kept within the group to maintain identity and authority, a paradox she called "keeping-while-giving". Appadurai (1986) showed that things can move into and out of a commodity phase.

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E-ISSN: 3107-6157 editor@ijamri.com
Volume 2, Issue 6, November-December 2026

The literature on *barlake* (bridewealth) in Timor-Leste reveals tensions. Rees et al. (2016), in a survey of 1,193 married women, found associations between bridewealth-related problems and anger, psychological distress, poverty and family conflict; a UNFPA (2012) report likewise examined the relationship between *barlake* and domestic violence. Niner (2019) argues that *barlake* goods represent persons and relationships, and that efforts towards gender equality must be built from local frameworks. Narciso and Henriques (2020) show that in matrilineal societies the relationship between land, kinship and women's empowerment differs from that in patrilineal societies. These perspectives help to read with due caution the data in this article, which come from men only.

2.6 Art, Sacred Objects and Material Culture

In the anthropology of art, artworks are not merely objects of aesthetic contemplation. Gell (1998) argues that art objects possess social "agency": people treat them as agents that produce effects in relations between persons. This idea is important for the sacred objects kept in the *uma lisan*, because communities feed them, pray to them and fear them, as though they had power of their own. In the Timor region, Hamilton and Barrkman (2014) show that *tais* (handwoven textiles) carry social, historical and ritual significance beyond aesthetic value: motifs and colours indicate origin and status, and *tais* circulate in alliance exchanges between families. The inscription of *tais* on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding (UNESCO, 2021) recognises its role in ceremonies, in *barlake* exchange and in group identity, notes that weaving is women's work transmitted to the next generation, and also points to threats to that transmission. With regard to music and dance, Dunlop (2012) documents traditional instruments and musical forms from various regions of Timor-Leste and shows that they are closely tied to ritual, ceremony and local identity. This literature helps to read the element of art in this study not as a separate category but as part of ritual, exchange and transmission.

2.7 Language, Education and Heritage

Timor-Leste is a multilingual nation. Tetum and Portuguese are the official languages, while other local languages have the status of national languages (Taylor-Leech, 2009). Fishman (1991) argues that the critical point for a language's survival is intergenerational transmission in the home and community. The National Policy on Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education proposes a "first language first" approach: children learn to read, write and do mathematics in a language they already know before transitioning to Tetum and Portuguese (Ministry of Education, n.d.).

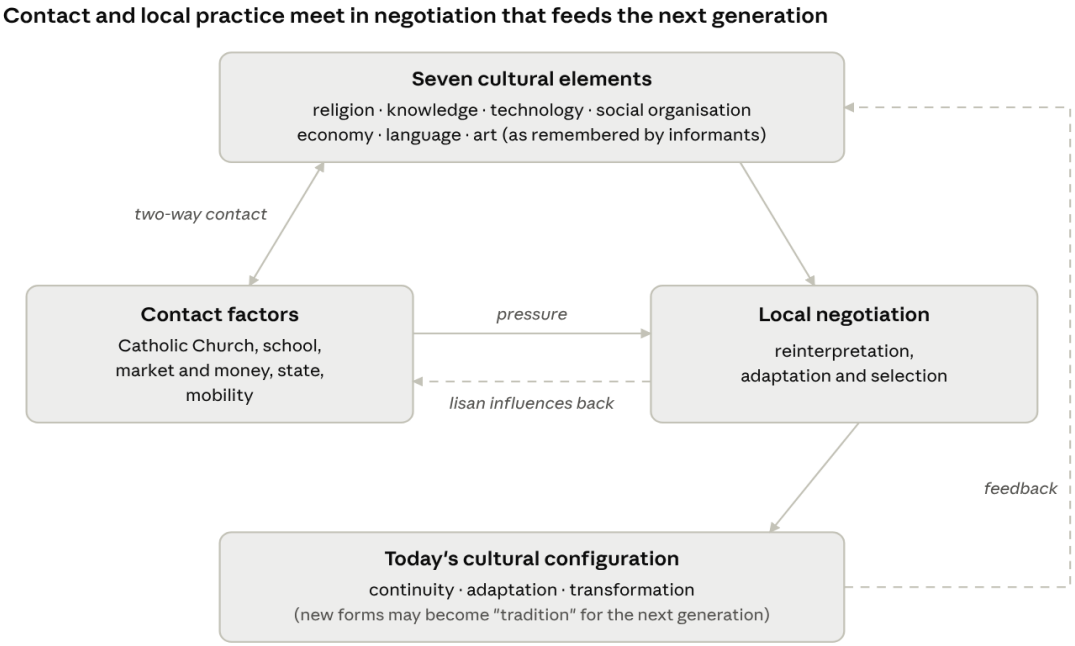
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In pedagogy, Moll et al. (1992) introduced the concept of "funds of knowledge": the knowledge and skills held by families and communities, which teachers can discover through qualitative research with families and draw on in the classroom. Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that culturally relevant pedagogy raises academic achievement, strengthens cultural competence and develops critical consciousness. UNESCO (2003) defines intangible cultural heritage as including oral traditions and expressions, including language; performing arts; social practices and rituals; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and traditional craftsmanship.

2.8 Conceptual Framework

Drawing on this literature, the article uses the heuristic framework shown in Figure 1. The framework is not a linear sequence from "traditional" to "modern". The seven cultural elements, as remembered by the informants, encounter contact factors (the Catholic Church, the school, the market and money, the state, and mobility) in a bidirectional relationship: these factors put pressure on local practice, but *lisan* also shapes how new institutions are received (for example, Catholic prayers are used in the ritual of gathering medicinal plants). The outcome of this negotiation is today's cultural configuration — continuity, adaptation or transformation — which in turn becomes the basis for the next generation, following Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and Sahlins (1985). The framework is a tool for organising the analysis, not a law that the data prove.

Figure 1. *Heuristic Conceptual Framework: Continuity and Transformation around the Uma Lisan*



Note. Adapted from Koentjaraningrat's (2009) seven cultural elements and the idea of continuity through transformation (Sahlins, 1985). Dashed arrows indicate feedback: *lisan* in turn influences new institutions, and today's configuration becomes the basis for the next generation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Approach and Design

The study adopts a qualitative approach of an exploratory and interpretive nature (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2025). The design is a collective case study (Stake, 1995): seven cases, each an *uma lisan* described by a single key informant, are used instrumentally to explore patterns and variation, not to strengthen conclusions through "replication logic" (Yin, 2018). Because the cases were not selected on theoretical criteria, the article makes no claim to literal or theoretical replication. The empirical source for the cases is the student reports (see Section 3.3); the literature is used only in the Discussion, for comparison and interpretation.

3.2 Selection of Cases and Informants

Cases were selected by convenience sampling linked to the students' places of origin (Patton, 2015): each student group chose an *uma lisan* in its community of origin or in a community to which it had access, and interviewed one informant recognised by the community as knowledgeable about the history and *lisan* of that house. This explains why the seven cases span five municipalities and five mother tongues (Waima'a, Makasae, Mambae, Makalero and Galolen), and why Baucau accounts for three cases (K1, K2, K5). The inclusion criteria given to the students were that the informant was (a) a *lia-na'in* or customary elder of the *uma lisan*, or (b) a person identified by members of the house as knowledgeable about its *lisan*. Case K6 did not meet criterion (a): the informant is a young man who acquired his knowledge from his family, and the interview was conducted online. K6 is included in the analysis, but his statements about former times are treated as second-hand knowledge and given less weight.

The cases are identified by the codes K1–K7 (Table 1). The names of informants and *uma lisan*, and locations at *suku* (village) and *aldeia* (hamlet) level, are withheld, and ages are reported in ranges (see Section 3.7). All seven informants are men. All seven reports refer to the informant as a *lia-na'in*, but only the K2 and K7 reports explicitly describe his formal role as *lia-na'in* of the *uma lisan*; the remaining reports do not explain this role, and the K6 informant is a young man. The article therefore uses the terms "key

International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation
E-ISSN: 3107-6157 editor@ijamri.com
Volume 2, Issue 6, November-December 2026

informant" or "customary elders and *lia-na'in*", and does not assume that all informants hold the same ritual role.

Table 1. *Cases, Informants and Context*

Code	Municipality (area)	Mother tongue	Informant (role, age)	Livelihood context (as reported)	Interview mode
K1	Baucau (Waima'a area)	Waima'a	*Lia-na'in* (per report), 65–75	Maize and rice fields; rain-calling ritual; multilingual community	Face to face
K2	Baucau Vila	Makasae	*Lia-na'in* of the *uma lisan*, 65–75	Agriculture; Portuguese and Indonesian schooling; *uma lisan* relocated in Period III	Face to face
K3	Aileu	Mambae	*Lia-na'in* (per report), 65–75	Dry fields and paddies; livestock; exchange of food crops and market	Face to face
K4	Lautém	Makalero	*Lia-na'in* (per report), age not recorded	Paddies worked with buffalo; sale of coconuts and maize in Laga and Luro	Face to face
K5	Baucau (Makasae area)	Makasae	*Lia-na'in* (per report), age not recorded	Agriculture; livestock; exchange involving *surik* (sacred swords)	Face to face
K6	Ermera	Mambae	Young man; report calls him *lia-na'in*	Fields with local produce; many imported goods today	Online
K7	Manatuto	Galolen	*Lia-na'in* of the *uma lisan*, 65–75	Coastal; fishing, salted fish and salt; exchange with other communities	Face to face

Note. Contexts are described only on the basis of information in the student reports; they are not a thick description. Ages are given in ranges to reduce the risk of identification. Interview mode is as recorded in the reports.

The contexts of the cases differ. The three Baucau cases (K1, K2, K5) are maize- and rice-growing agricultural communities, but with two mother tongues (Waima'a and Makasae) and varying degrees of contact with schools and the town: K1 is a multilingual community, K2 lives in Baucau Vila and has experience of Portuguese and Indonesian schooling, and K5 describes a patrilineal order and exchange involving *surik*. K3 (Aileu, Mambae) is a community of dry fields and paddies that raises livestock, exchanges food crops and takes produce to market. K4 (Lautém, Makalero) works paddies with buffalo and sells coconuts and maize at regional markets. K6 (Ermera, Mambae) describes a transition from local foods and goods to imported products. K7 (Manatuto, Galolen) is a coastal community that lives from fishing, salted fish and salt, and trades with other communities. These ecological and economic differences help to explain some of the variation between cases, but the reports provide insufficient data on local Church history or administrative structures.

International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation
E-ISSN: 3107-6157 editor@ijamri.com
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3.3 Data Collection and the Data Chain

The data come from written reports produced by seven groups of students (52 in total) in the course EDAR 202 at ICFP Baucau as a course assignment; each group interviewed one informant. The author was the lecturer for this course and prepared a semi-structured interview guide built around the seven cultural elements; the groups adapted the questions to their informants, so that the comparison rests on a common guiding framework rather than an identical instrument. The questions asked how a given practice was carried out in former times and how it has changed today (Appendix B). Before the interviews, the students received guidance from the author on the purpose of the assignment, the topics of the interview guide and how to approach informants respectfully. They received no specific training in translation or in writing ethnographic notes. The students conducted the interviews in their own municipalities over two months, beginning on 31 July 2026; the exact date of each interview was not recorded in the reports. Six reports were submitted on 15 and 16 October 2026, and the K3 report bears no date.

Interviews were conducted in Tetum or in the informant's mother tongue. The reports do not systematically record who translated or whether the students were fluent in the informant's mother tongue; nevertheless, each group chose an informant from its own community of origin or from a community to which it had access, and several reports include words and phrases in the mother tongue (K1, K2, K5, K6, K7). Translation into Tetum took place either during the interview or when the report was written. Students took notes in Tetum during or after the interview; there were no audio recordings and no verbatim transcripts.

The data therefore pass through a chain of three transformations that must be clearly acknowledged: (a) the informant's oral statements, often in the mother tongue; (b) translation, selection and writing by the students in Tetum; and (c) reading, coding and interpretation by the author (Temple & Young, 2004). To prepare for analysis, the seven handwritten reports were transcribed in full into a single Tetum document with the support of a generative artificial intelligence tool (see the Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence). Spelling was standardised and some unclear phrases were corrected, but the content and meaning of each group's report were preserved. The author compared this transcription against the original reports and takes responsibility for its accuracy; this constitutes a further layer of mediation in the data chain. The reports are not interview transcripts; they are mediated records collected for pedagogical purposes and re-used for research (re-use; Heaton, 2004). The practical consequences are as follows: (1) text enclosed in guillemets «…» in the Findings consists of *recorded paraphrases* written by the students in Tetum, not the informants' verbatim words; (2) local terms are spelled as in the reports (Appendix A); and (3) where the author generalises or interprets, the text says so explicitly (e.g., "in the author's reading") and identifies the

supporting cases. In this English version, the paraphrases have additionally been translated from Tetum by the author, which adds a fourth layer of mediation; the Tetum originals are provided in Appendix A. The complete data matrix by case and element is presented in Appendix C.

3.4 Operational Definition of "Former Times" and "Today"

This study has no longitudinal data. Claims about change are based on the comparisons that informants themselves draw between "former times" and "today". To read these comparisons accurately, the article uses three operational periods. *Period I* (former times) refers to the time informants remember from their childhood and youth, or that their own elders passed on to them. For the four informants with recorded ages (K1, K2, K3, K7; aged 65–75 at the time of interview), this corresponds mainly to the late Portuguese colonial period (late 1950s to 1975); for the younger among them, however, youth extends into the early years of the Indonesian occupation. Temporal markers in the data support this reading: the *pataka* coin (K1) and colonial taxes (K1, K4), Portuguese schooling (K2), fear of the Portuguese (K4) and road work in Manatuto (K7). *Period II* is the Indonesian occupation (1975–1999), which appears in the data mainly through Indonesian schooling (K2). The relative absence of Period II from the data may reflect an interview guide focused on the "former times"–"today" comparison, informants' reluctance to speak about the occupation, or selection by the students when writing their reports; the data do not allow us to determine which explanation is correct. *Period III* (today) runs from independence to the time of the interviews, with markers such as an *uma lisan* that was relocated (K2), house posts that rot quickly "after Timor's independence" (K4), imported materials and products (K6, K7) and hospital medicine (K4). For K6, statements about Period I are second-hand knowledge. The terms "traditional" and "modern" are used only when referring to the literature.

3.5 Data Analysis

The analysis combined two levels. The first level applied deductive, domain-based codes — the seven cultural elements and Periods I–III — in the manner of a codebook approach; the outcome of this level was a set of domain summaries, not themes. The second level followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis: the author read the seven reports repeatedly, generated inductive codes (e.g., "gifts according to means", "illness as punishment", "Catholic prayer in *lisan* ritual") and developed themes that cut across domains. A code → theme → case table is presented in the Findings (Table 4), and the full codebook is provided in Appendix D.

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E-ISSN: 3107-6157 editor@ijamri.com
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Many statements touched on more than one element (for example, ancestral sanction concerns both religion and social organisation; *barlake* concerns both social organisation and the economy). The coding rule was that a statement could receive more than one code (multi-coding); in the Findings it is presented under the element the informant emphasised, and the overlap is recorded as data on integration. Because informants were selected through the *uma lisan* and the interview guide was structured around the seven elements, the design itself tends to produce the image of an *uma lisan* that integrates everything. To control for this circularity, the author explicitly searched for disconfirming evidence: important cultural practices that informants described as taking place outside the *uma lisan*.

3.6 Credibility, Reflexivity and Methodological Limitations

Judged against Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria and the validation strategies recommended by Creswell and Poth (2025), the study has both strengths and weaknesses. The strategies used were: (a) comparison across seven cases to see whether patterns appear in different contexts; (b) documentation of the data chain, coding rules and code table (a partial audit trail); (c) a clear separation between recorded paraphrase, description and the author's interpretation; (d) a search for disconfirming evidence (negative case analysis); and (e) a statement of the author's reflexivity. Comparison between the data and the literature is made in the Discussion, but is not treated as triangulation, because the literature is not an independent data source on the same cases.

Some strategies were not employed: there was no member checking with informants, no formal peer debriefing, and coding was carried out by the author alone. Transferability is limited because Table 1 and the accompanying paragraph provide only brief, not thick, description. The findings should therefore be read as exploratory.

Regarding reflexivity, the author was the lecturer of the student interviewers and designed the interview guide around the seven elements; this shaped what the students asked and wrote. All informants were men, and six of the seven were elders whom the reports call *lia-na'in*, with a positional interest in representing *lisan* as continuous and strong (see Section 2.3). In the Findings and Discussion, statements that something "has not changed" are treated as the informant's *representation*, not as confirmed fact. The lecturer–student relationship also has ethical implications, which are discussed in the next section.

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3.7 Ethical Considerations

This study re-uses data collected for pedagogical rather than research purposes. This situation raises two ethical questions, which this section addresses: first, whether the data were collected in a way that respected the informants and the students; and second, whether re-using the data for publication is justified, and under what conditions. To answer them, the section is organised according to the research phases recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2023) and Creswell and Poth (2025) — prior to the study, beginning the study, collecting data, analysing data, and reporting, sharing and storing data — and sets out transparently what was done and which limitations remain unresolved. Table 2 summarises these considerations.

Institutional authorisation (prior to the study). The interviews were conducted as an assignment for the course EDAR 202 (see Section 3.3), with a primarily pedagogical aim: to prepare students to collect data for their own future articles or theses. Institutional authorisation proceeded in three stages. First, the Research, Ethics and Investigation Commission (*Komisaun Investigasaun, Étika no Peskiza*, KIEP) of ICFP Baucau approved the title of the article on 27 July 2026, before data collection began on 31 July 2026. Second, the KIEP Statute and Internal Regulations, which establish the procedure for ethical approval of research involving human participants (Art. 21), were approved on 10 August 2026, while data collection was under way (Instituto Católico para a Formação de Professores [ICFP] Baucau, 2026). Third, the Director of ICFP Baucau authorised the re-use of the student reports for research and publication by letter Ref. 58/ICFP/X/2026, dated 29 October 2026. This chronology shows that the KIEP approval in July covered the title, not a formal ethical review of the data collection protocol, and that the Director's authorisation was obtained after the data had been collected. The study therefore does not meet Creswell and Creswell's (2023) recommendation to obtain ethical approval before collecting data, and this constitutes its principal ethical limitation. The authorisations obtained permit the re-use of the data for publication, but they do not function as retrospective ethical approval. On the other hand, because the KIEP had approved the article's title before data collection, a research purpose already existed when the interviews took place. The study is therefore better described as research conducted through a course assignment at a time when institutional ethics procedures had not yet been established, rather than simply as the re-use of pedagogical data.

Informant consent (beginning the study). The students approached the informants in an academic and respectful manner: before each interview they explained its purpose in Tetum or the mother tongue, and the informants gave oral consent to participate. This consent was general and informal and was not documented in writing. The students' explanation focused on the learning purpose; the reports do not indicate that informants received specific information about academic publication, even though the article's title had been

approved before data collection. According to Creswell and Poth (2025), consent must cover the intended uses of the data. The article therefore does not treat consent to a learning activity as consent to international publication, and it reduces the risk to informants through the privacy protections and safeguards for sacred knowledge described under the analysis and reporting phases below.

Student consent (prior to data analysis). The relationship between the author — as the lecturer responsible for assessment — and the students creates a risk that students felt obliged to agree to the re-use of their reports. Student consent was sought in class by a show of hands after the reports had been submitted on 15 and 16 October 2026, and all 52 students agreed. The author began writing the article only after this agreement. The students showed interest because each group is to receive a copy of the article to present to the *lia-na'in* of its *uma lisan*. Nevertheless, this form of consent was not anonymous, took place in the lecturer's presence and was not documented in writing; 100% agreement therefore cannot be interpreted as evidence that the decision was entirely free from pressure. To mitigate this risk (ICFP Baucau, 2026, Art. 15), the reports are used only as a source of information about the informants, not to assess the students, and the students' names are not disclosed. With regard to authorship, the students are acknowledged in the Acknowledgements as interviewers but not as co-authors, because they did not take part in the analysis or the writing of the article (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Sacred knowledge and privacy (analysis and reporting). An individual informant's personal consent does not necessarily represent the consent of the community or the *uma lisan* to publish restricted knowledge (Smith, 2012). This is all the more important because informants' consent to publication is incomplete (see above). The article therefore took three decisions: (a) the names of informants, *uma lisan*, *suku* and *aldeia* are withheld; ages are given in ranges; and details that could identify a particular *uma lisan*, such as the year it was relocated, have been removed; (b) ritual practices and sacred objects are described only at the general level needed for the argument; the monetary price of ritual objects in one case has been removed; ritual prayer texts in the mother tongue are not published (Appendix A); and no photographs of informants or *uma lisan* are used; and (c) disconfirming evidence and negative cases are reported alongside the evidence supporting the themes, so that the analysis does not select only findings that favour *lisan*.

Sharing and storing data (final phase). The original reports and the full transcription, which contain names and places, are stored securely in an archive accessible only to the author and are not published; an anonymised matrix is presented in Appendix C (ICFP Baucau, 2026, Arts. 16 and 19). As a form of reciprocity, each student group will deliver a copy of the article and a summary of the findings in Tetum to the informant and *uma lisan* it interviewed. This returns knowledge to the community but does not replace

consent prior to publication. Section 5.10 therefore recommends ethical approval and consultation with the *uma lisan* before data collection in future studies.

Table 2. *Ethical Considerations by Research Phase*

Phase	Ethical issue	What was done	Acknowledged limitation
Prior to the study	Institutional authorisation; local permission; negotiating authorship	Interviews conducted as a course assignment under lecturer guidance; students sought permission directly from informants in their communities; KIEP approved the title (27 July 2026); Director of ICFP Baucau authorised re-use of the data (Ref. 58/ICFP/X/2026, 29 October 2026); students acknowledged in the Acknowledgements	KIEP approved the title, not a formal ethical review; Director's authorisation obtained after data collection; permission from *suku* chiefs not documented
Beginning the study	Explaining the purpose; no obligation to participate; respecting community norms	Students explained the purpose; informants gave general oral consent to a learning activity; informants chosen from communities to which students had access	Initial consent oral, informal and not covering publication
Collecting data	Respecting the setting; avoiding power imbalance and exploitation	Interviews held in the informant's home or online; students guided on approaching informants respectfully; nothing asked that informants did not wish to share	No translation training; date of each interview not recorded
Analysing data	Consent to re-use; not reporting only positive findings; protecting privacy	All 52 students agreed to re-use of their reports by show of hands; disconfirming evidence sought; codes K1–K7; ages in ranges	Student consent neither anonymous nor written, within a lecturer–student power relationship; coding by the author alone
Reporting, sharing and storing data	Avoiding harmful disclosure; clear language; returning results; secure storage	Names, photographs, prayer texts and prices of sacred objects not published; original reports kept by the author; copy of the article and summary of findings delivered to informants	Consultation with the *uma lisan* about publication not yet undertaken; returning results does not replace consent prior to publication

Note. Phases and ethical issues adapted from Creswell and Creswell (2023) and Creswell and Poth (2025).

4. Findings

The findings are presented in three parts. The first summarises, by domain, what the informants reported about the seven cultural elements (Question 1). The second presents four themes that cut across domains, together with disconfirming evidence on practices outside the *uma lisan* (Question 2). The third synthesises continuity and change by period (Question 3). The summaries here are based on the full data matrix in Appendix C; theoretical interpretation is reserved for the Discussion.

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4.1 Summary by Cultural Element

4.1.1 Religious and Belief Systems

Informants in all cases mentioned some element of a belief system centred on sacred places, the ancestors and the *uma lisan*, although the evidence is uneven across cases. Belief in sacred stones, trees, springs and mountains was reported in K1, K2, K4, K6 and K7. In K1, offerings to nature (called *kiawe* in Waima'a) are made to bring rain for maize and rice. The K6 informant called this belief animism and described nature itself as «our God». In K7, sacred places have unseen owners who sometimes reveal themselves through animals, and moving a sacred stone requires a ritual to "draw" the spirit to its new location. Harvest rituals, involving animal sacrifice or offerings to the ancestors before the new harvest is eaten, were reported in every case: as *sau batar* and *sau hare* (maize and rice first-fruit rites) in K1, K2, K3, K5, K6 and K7, and in K4 as an offering of rice or maize seed to the ancestors and the spirits of the land (*rai-na'in*) before the rice is cut.

4.1.2 Knowledge Systems

The knowledge informants described is organised around the agricultural calendar, healing and food, and is learned through observation and practice within the family (K3, K4, K7). In K4, elders read the strength of the first rains to decide when to plant maize and beans. K7 gave the most detailed calendar: in Galolen, *Adahunu* is a star that «sets into the sea» in June and rises again fifteen days later, and people count the months with a *tali fukun* (knotted cord) of twelve knots, which also marks the hungry season (*bai-loron*). Informants described healing with bark, leaves and roots as a practice from a time when there was no hospital (K1) or when hospitals were few and distant (K7); K4 mentioned drinking a leaf infusion against malaria and asserted that this remedy heals when the hospital cannot, and in K7 families consult a *matan-dook* (diviner) to learn whether an illness has a natural cause or comes from the ancestors. In K3, children learned values, work and *lisan* by watching and helping their parents, not from books; K2 described Portuguese and Indonesian schools as places where the teacher wrote on the board and pupils «wrote and memorised».

4.1.3 Technology and Equipment

The materials informants mentioned were wood, stone, iron, rope, animal hide and animal power (K4, K5, K6, K7). Rice and maize were pounded with stones or with a pestle and mortar (K4, K7), and paddies were trampled by buffalo (K4, K7). Building an *uma lisan* is the most ritualised technology: it uses house posts, ironwood and black rope rather than corrugated iron (K4), or *ai-na* timber and leaf rope (K7); the male post

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is raised before the female post and receives a ritual with animal blood, and striking or hitting such a post brings misfortune (*malisan*) (K5); sacred objects enter a new house only after an animal sacrifice, with the *fetosaan* and *umane* seated around (K4). As for change, the K4 informant said that house posts once stood for up to 50 years, but since Timor's independence they have begun to rot after 10 years; K7 noted that imported materials are now common in customary houses; and K6 contrasted the local foods of former times with today's many imported goods, clothing and accessories.

4.1.4 Social Organisation and Kinship

In every case, informants described social life as organised around the *uma lisan* and the alliance between *fetosaan* and *umane* (K1–K7). K4 described the *uma lisan* as «a shelter for everyone». An *uma lisan* can also be relocated: in K2, a house was moved to a new site in Period III. On *barlake*, the K4 informant explicitly rejected the interpretation of "buying a woman": «It is not about using money to buy, but about further strengthening the two families» (K4); K5 described the woman's family draping *tais* over the man «to symbolise mutual recognition», and K7 described *barlake* as a way of linking *umane* and *fetosaan*. In K5, descent is patrilineal: sons remain in the *uma lisan* and daughters marry out. K7 distinguished *folin kotu* (the woman moves to her husband's *uma lisan*) from *kaben tama* (the husband marries into the woman's house, and her family «does not demand *barlake*»). On gender, K2 described a division of ceremonial labour (women fetch water and cook; men prepare the site and slaughter animals); K5 described an order in which authority and wealth belong to men and women serve their husband's family; and K6 stated that in this *lisan* «men hold full rights and power to rule» and that sons inherit the family's wealth. Dispute resolution appeared in K4 (the *lia-na'in* settles disputes in the house) and K6 (men sit on the mat, *biti*, to resolve *lia moris* and *lia mate*, matters of life and of death). These descriptions are men's perspectives; there are no data from women.

4.1.5 Economic and Subsistence Systems

Families lived from dry fields and paddies (K2, K3, K6); K7 added fishing as the principal livelihood on the coast, including a seasonal fish (*boek*) that is caught after the *lia-na'in* performs a ritual at sea. In former times, goods were exchanged directly: in K7, salted fish and salt were bartered for *akar* (sago), cassava flour and maize, with value measured by quantity (e.g., a saucer of small fish); in K4, coconuts and maize were taken to Laga and Luro for sale; in K3, food crops were exchanged between households or taken to market; and in K6, people bartered goods or sold animals for money. In K1 and K4, informants said that money was scarce and was needed mainly to pay colonial taxes: in K1, work for the state earned one *pataka* a day, the tax was five *pataka*, and families without money sold goats, buffalo or horses to pay it; in K4, people

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worked for others in order to pay the tax. Animals and sacred objects had both economic and ceremonial value (K3, K4, K5): in K5, a single *surik* could be exchanged for twelve buffalo, and the informant summed up that people were «poor in money but rich in animals» (K5); in K4, one *mamulik* (gold pendant) was worth six buffalo.

4.1.6 Language

The mother tongue was explicitly described as the language of ritual prayer (*hamulak*) in four cases: Makasae (K2, K5), Mambae (K6) and Galolen (K7). In K4, Makalero was described as the only language of daily life and of dispute resolution in former times. K1 described a multilingual community (Waima'a, Tetum and Makasae) and gave ritual terms in Waima'a (*kiawe*, *rawai*); the K3 report has no section on language. In K5, the reason for praying in Makasae is that «the ancestors understand it and can grant blessings (*matak-malirin*)». In K7, *hamulak* is chanted in a "drawn-out" voice, rhythmic and lengthy, unlike everyday speech. Tetum serves as a contact language (K1, K6, K7). In K4, language is linked to unity: «we [this community] must all be as one person». In K6, the informant observed that today's generation rarely uses the mother tongue because «many educated people» have come and teach in various languages.

4.1.7 Art

Informants described art as inseparable from ritual (K1, K4, K6, K7): *tais*, ornaments and instruments are objects, and dance is an art form, whose use is restricted by status, gender and the ritual calendar. Objects kept in the *uma lisan — morteen* (coral beads), *surik*, *tais*, *mamulik*, *belak* (metal discs) and *kaibauk* (crowns) — appeared in six cases (K1, K2, K4, K5, K6, K7); people «feed» them through offerings (K1, K6), and consecrated objects may not be used at will (K7). Grandmothers wove *tais* (K1); K3 mentioned hand-woven *tais*, K4 described dyes from bark and leaves, and K7 described white *tais* made from local cotton. Instruments (*babadok* drums and other drums) were made of wood, hide and rope (K2, K5), and gongs of metal (K2); K6 listed the *titir* (slit drum), *babadok* and gong. In K5, *babadok* and drums were once made from soft, lightweight wood without iron tools, whereas other wood is used today. The *tebedai* dance (K2, K6), *dadolin* (K6) and the *ai-lalan* funeral songs (K7) accompany ceremonies. In K4, a new practice emerged in the ceremony of bringing down the new bride: a ceremonial knife (*tudik*) bought with money. Table 3 summarises the domains and the cases that reported them.

Table 3. *Summary by Domain (Cultural Element) and Case*

Domain	Summary	Cases
Religion	Belief in sacred stones, trees, springs and mountains	K1, K2, K4, K6, K7

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Domain	Summary	Cases
Religion	Harvest ritual (*sau batar* / *sau hare*, or offering before rice is cut)	K1–K7
Religion	Illness or misfortune as sanction	K1, K4, K5, K7
Religion	Co-existence of *lulik* and Catholicism (various forms)	K1, K2, K3, K5, K6
Knowledge	Healing with bark, leaves and roots	K1, K4, K7
Social organisation	*Fetosaan–umane* alliance	K1–K7
Economy	Exchange, and animals as wealth	K1, K3, K4, K5, K6, K7
Language	Mother tongue as the language of ritual prayer	K2, K5, K6, K7
Art	Sacred objects (*surik*, *morteen*, *mamulik*, *belak*, *tais*)	K1, K2, K4, K5, K6, K7

Note. The table summarises what appears in the reports, not every practice in a community. In K4, Makalero is described as the language of daily life and dispute resolution; the K3 report has no language section.

4.2 Cross-Domain Themes

Table 4 shows how the inductive codes were grouped into four themes and which cases support each theme. The themes cut across the seven cultural elements and thus reveal relationships that the domain summaries do not.

Table 4. *Codes, Themes and Evidence by Case*

Codes (examples)	Theme	Evidence (recorded paraphrase or description)	Cases
Fetosaan–umane exchange; gifts according to means; equivalence of objects and animals; contributions at funerals	A. Reciprocity as the logic of exchange	*Fetosaan* give buffalo and horses, *umane* give *tais* and pigs; gifts not obligatory if a family lacks the means; sacred objects have equivalence in buffalo	K1, K2, K4, K5, K7
Breaking *lisan* → illness; touching sacred objects or posts → misfortune; illness as ancestral punishment	B. Ancestral sanction as a mechanism of order	«Illness can strike our children and grandchildren»; children who touch sacred objects fall ill; the *matan-dook* identifies the cause of illness	K1, K4, K5, K7
Catholic prayer in *lisan* ritual; one God through *lulik*; dualist belief; Catholic in daily life, *lisan* at major moments	C. Co-existence of *lulik* and Catholicism in various forms	The Our Father when gathering medicinal plants; religion «not to divide but to complete»; *lisan* at weddings and funerals	K1, K2, K3, K5, K6
Young people not using the mother tongue; messages to youth	D. Concern about transmission	The new generation rarely uses the mother tongue; appeals to young people to learn and continue the culture	K1, K2, K6
Formal school; hospital; market; work for the state and taxes; everyday Church	Disconfirming evidence: cultural spaces outside the *uma lisan*	Learning to «write and memorise» at school; hospital medicine; selling at market; selling animals to pay taxes	K1, K2, K3, K4, K6, K7

Note. A case may support several themes. All codes are based on the student reports (recorded paraphrase). K3 and K6 mention the *fetosaan–umane* alliance, but their reports do not describe the logic of exchange, so they are not included in Theme A. The K3 report also expresses concern about transmission to young

people, but in text written by the students themselves rather than as the informant's statement, so K3 is not included in Theme D. Case counts mean "mentioned in the report", not "present or absent in the community": because groups adapted the interview guide and the depth of reports varies, a theme's absence from a report does not mean it is absent from that community.

4.2.1 Theme A: Reciprocity as the Logic of Exchange

In five cases, informants described exchange as a way of strengthening relations between houses, not merely as a transfer of goods. The *fetosaan* give buffalo and horses, and the *umane* give *tais* and pigs (K1, K2); at funerals, the *fetosaan* bring buffalo, horses, goats and money, and the *umane* bring *tais* and pigs (K2). Sacred objects have equivalents in animals (K4, K5), and in K5 *surik* are exchanged for animals to help with *lia moris* and *lia mate*. The K1 informant added that gifts are not obligatory if a family lacks the means, and K7 described how obligations to the parents in *kaben tama* can be paid in animals or money. In the author's reading, this shows that the obligation is flexible according to a family's economic capacity.

4.2.2 Theme B: Ancestral Sanction as a Mechanism of Order

In four cases, fear of illness or misfortune functions as a reason to follow *lisan*. Breaking *lisan* brings illness to the person or to their descendants: «If we do not comply, we may fall ill, and the illness can also strike our children and grandchildren» (K1). In K4, children who touch the sacred objects of the *uma lisan* fall ill, and failing to follow *lisan* in *barlake* makes life «unsettled». In K5, striking or hitting the posts of the *uma lisan* brings misfortune. In K7, illness may be interpreted as punishment from the ancestors; the family consults a *matan-dook*, makes an offering, and then reads an animal's liver to confirm that the problem has been resolved. In K1 and K7, the *lia-na'in* or *matan-dook* mediates between people and the ancestors. K5, however, adds an important nuance: in his view, *malisan* is «not misfortune sent by the ancestors, but the rules of life that exist» — indicating that sanction can also be understood as a moral order, not merely as ancestral punishment.

4.2.3 Theme C: Co-existence of Lulik and Catholicism in Various Forms

In five cases, informants described the relationship with Catholicism as co-existence rather than conflict, though in different forms. In K3, Catholic practice and traditional custom are described as «continuing to exist together». An explicit division of functions appears in K6: most people's faith is tied directly to prayer and Mass, while *lisan* remains important at weddings, funerals and community events. K5 describes Catholicism as completion: the ancestors always worshipped one God through *lulik*, and religion is «not to divide but to complete». K2 describes a "dualist" belief in God as creator and in the protective power of

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sacred objects. K1 shows incorporation: he prays the Our Father and the Hail Mary when gathering medicinal plants. Yet K1 also voices a rupture: he rejects the *hakoi xumasu* ceremony as unnecessary, because «we die only once» and people «will return to the earth», an idea he links to the Bible. This is a clear example of change in practice reported by the informant himself. K4 and K7 mention only that religion arrived later or through the missionary priests; they do not describe the present-day relationship between *lulik* and the Church.

4.2.4 Theme D: Concern about Transmission

In three cases, informants expressed concern or made appeals about transmission to young people. K1 and K2 ended their interviews with a message urging the new generation to learn and continue the culture; K2's message was recorded in Makasae (Appendix A). The mother tongue is mentioned explicitly only in K6, which links its declining use to the «educated people» who teach in various languages, and urges young people not to lose it.

4.2.5 Disconfirming Evidence: Cultural Practice outside the Uma Lisan

Alongside these four themes, the data reveal five cultural spaces that do not fit the image of the *uma lisan* as the sole centre. First, *the school*: K2 describes Portuguese and Indonesian schools as a learning system separate from learning at home, and K6 links the declining use of the mother tongue to "educated people" who teach in various languages (in the author's reading, formal education). Second, *health services*: informants describe healing with medicinal plants as a practice from a time when hospitals were absent or distant (K1, K7); K4 says that hospital medicine is now available, but maintains that traditional leaves still heal when the hospital cannot — a representation of continuity that must be read with caution. Third, *the market*: exchange between communities and selling at market (K3, K4, K7). Fourth, *work for the state*: in Period I, work for the state and colonial taxes forced families to sell animals (K1) or to work for others (K4). Fifth, *the everyday Church*: everyday religious belief and practice are now tied to the Church (K6). The reports do not mention youth organisations, cooperatives or new associations; this may reflect the interview guide rather than community reality.

4.3 Continuity and Change by Period

Table 5 organises the evidence by period: what informants describe as continuing from Period I to Period III, what has adapted or changed, the temporal markers present, and the factors of change. The factor column distinguishes factors named by informants themselves (I) from factors interpreted by the author (A).

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Table 5. *Continuity and Change by Element and Period*

Element	Described as continuing (I→III)	Adapted or changed (III)	Temporal marker	Factor (I/A)
Religion	Sacred places (K1, K2, K4, K6, K7); harvest ritual (K1–K7); ancestral sanction (K1, K4, K5, K7)	Our Father in plant-gathering ritual (K1); rejection of *hakoi xumasu* (K1); everyday practice tied to the Church (K6)	Today (K1, K6)	Catholic Church (I)
Knowledge	Reading the rains (K4); star calendar (K7); leaves still heal (K4)	Hospital medicine now available (K4); learning to «write and memorise» (K2)	Portuguese and Indonesian schools (K2)	Hospital (I); school (A)
Technology	Ritual rules for building the *uma lisan* (K1, K4, K5)	Posts rot faster (K4); imported materials (K7)	Once up to 50 years, now 10 years, after independence (K4)	Imported materials (I); market (A)
Social organisation	*Fetosaan–umane*; *barlake*; *lia moris* and *lia mate*	*Uma lisan* relocated (K2)	Period III (K2)	Mobility (A)
Economy	Animals and sacred objects as wealth (K3, K4, K5)	Objects bought with money in ceremonial exchange (K4)	*Pataka* (K1) and taxes (K1, K4) in Period I	Money (I); market (A)
Language	Mother tongue in prayer (K2, K5, K6, K7)	New generation rarely uses the mother tongue (K6)	Today (K6)	Contact with various languages (I); school (A)
Art	*Tais*, *tebedai*, *dadolin*, sacred objects	New wood for drums (K5); ceremonial knife bought with money (K4)	Today (K4, K5)	Money (I); natural resources (A)

Note. I = factor mentioned by the informant; A = the author's interpretation. The "continuing" column represents informants' statements, which may carry a continuity bias. Evidence for Period III is more limited than descriptions of Period I, and Period II barely appears in the reports; the literature indicates that most Catholic conversion took place during Period II (Hodge, 2013).

5. Discussion

5.1 The *Uma Lisan* as a Site of Articulation

From the informants' perspective, the *uma lisan* is a place that connects many elements: a place of worship, a repository for sacred objects, a site for renewing the *fetosaan–umane* alliance, and a locus for transmitting ritual language and knowledge. This is consistent with the literature on "house societies" (Carsten & Hugh-Jones, 1995; Fox, 1993; Lévi-Strauss, 1975/1982), with Traube (1986) and with McWilliam (2005, 2020). It also shows that the seven-element framework is most useful when used to examine relationships rather than to sort culture into separate compartments. This finding, however, is not a new discovery, and it is partly a product of the study design (see Section 3.5). The disconfirming evidence shows that cultural life has many

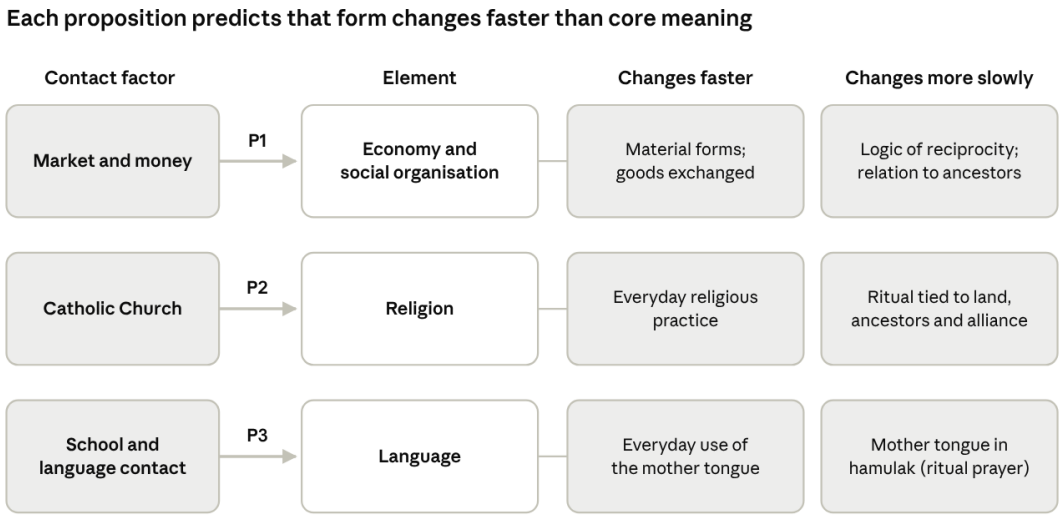
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centres (see Section 5.6). The reading the data support is therefore that the *uma lisan* is *one site of articulation* that elders value and that interacts with other institutions, not the sole institution integrating all of life. The role of *lia-na'in* and elders as mediators in ritual (K1, K7) and in dispute resolution (K4, K6) is also consistent with Babo-Soares's (2004) account of *nahe biti* and with the tension between local legitimacy and the state identified by Hohe (2002). The data are insufficient, however, to determine whether this role is declining or growing today.

On this basis, the article formulates three propositions linking specific contact factors to specific elements (Figure 2). In contrast to the concept of "house societies", which explains how the house constitutes social groups, these propositions focus on how different elements respond, at different rates, to external pressures:

1. **P1.** As pressure from the market and money increases, material forms and the goods exchanged change before the logic of reciprocity and the relationship with the ancestors change.
2. **P2.** Everyday religious functions shift to the Church, while rituals linked to land, the ancestors and alliance remain in the *uma lisan*.
3. **P3.** As schooling and contact with other languages increase, everyday use of the mother tongue declines faster than its use in ritual prayer (*hamulak*).

Figure 2. *Heuristic Model: Propositions P1–P3 on Contact Factors and Specific Elements*



Note. These propositions are the author's analytical proposals based on the informants' perspectives in seven cases; they have not yet been tested. The evidence base is uneven: P2 rests on K6 alone, and P3 rests solely on K6's statement about everyday use of the mother tongue; the reports provide no data on change in

mother-tongue use in *hamulak*, so the "changes more slowly" part of P3 is as yet unsupported. Arrows indicate pressure from contact factors; the boxes on the right separate the aspects the propositions predict will change faster from those predicted to change more slowly.

5.2 Reciprocity, Sacred Wealth and Monetisation

The informants' descriptions of *fetosaan–umane* exchange (Theme A) are consistent with Polanyi's (1944) argument that the economy is "embedded" in social relations, and with the logic of obligation described by Mauss (1925/2002). Fox (1980), Hicks (2004) and McWilliam and Traube (2011) describe similar alliances across the region. Data from a single informant per case cannot test these theories. They do show, however, that informants use the language of relationship — «further strengthening the two families» (K4) — rather than the language of commerce. Flexibility according to means (K1, K7) shows that elders also recognise the economic burden of these obligations.

The data also reveal a distinction that matters for Weiner (1992). Objects kept in the *uma lisan* that may not be used at will (K7) resemble the "inalienable possessions" that maintain a house's identity. Yet the equivalence of sacred objects with animals (K4, K5), and the exchange of *surik* for animals in K5, show that some sacred objects do circulate. Evidence for this circulation comes from a single case. In the author's reading, the category "sacred objects" in the reports encompasses both kinds — objects that are kept and objects that circulate — and this distinction requires further research. In Period III, the ceremonial knife bought with money (K4) shows how ritual practice can enter the money economy. In Appadurai's (1986) terms, such an object sits on the boundary between ritual gift and commodity. This evidence comes from one case only, but it is consistent with P1.

5.3 *Barlake* and Gender: The Perspective of Male Informants

The K4 informant explicitly rejected the interpretation of *barlake* as "buying a woman", and other informants (K5, K7) described *barlake* as a way of linking two families. This perspective is in line with Niner's (2019) argument. At the same time, K5 and K6 described an order in which authority and wealth belong to men, and K2 described a gendered division of ceremonial labour. Because there are no data from women, the article cannot assess whether this order is experienced as asymmetry, protection or something else. The conclusion the data support is that *male informants describe barlake as alliance, and two informants (K5, K6) also describe a patrilineal order that gives power to men*. The literature (Narciso & Henriques, 2020; Rees et al., 2016; Therik, 2004/2023; UNFPA, 2012) shows that women's experiences may differ markedly by context, and this is the principal gap for future research.

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E-ISSN: 3107-6157 editor@ijamri.com
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5.4 *Lulik* and Catholicism: Complementarity or Constructed Continuity?

Theme C shows that informants do not describe the *lulik*–Catholicism relationship according to a single model. This is consistent with Bovensiepen (2015), who shows that *lulik* did not disappear with Christianisation but was revitalised, and with Trindade (2012). K5's reading, that the ancestors worshipped one God through *lulik*, reflects a revaluation of the category *lulik* in Christian terms: an instance of continuity through transformation (Sahlins, 1985), in which an old category acquires new meaning when used to make sense of a new religion. The division of functions in K6 points to a different dynamic: *lisan* is concentrated in major ritual moments, while the Church dominates everyday religious life (P2). Because the evidence for P2 comes from a single case — a young informant whose knowledge of the past is second-hand — P2 is the weakest proposition and must be tested with care.

Here the two risks identified in Section 2.3 must be considered. The narrative that "Catholicism completes *lisan*" may serve as a legitimation strategy for elders in a society that is now almost entirely Catholic (U.S. Department of State, 2022) — the informants' positional interest. And analysts may read this narrative solely as continuity, overlooking rupture (Robbins, 2007). The data contain two signs of rupture: everyday religious practice is now tied to the Church (K6), and the K1 informant himself rejects the *hakoi xumasu* ceremony on biblical grounds. This suggests that the relationship is better described as a negotiated division of functions than as simple continuity.

5.5 Local Knowledge and the School

The star calendar, counting with a knotted cord, reading the rains and medicinal plants (K4, K7) are consistent with Berkes's (2012) account of traditional ecological knowledge as a knowledge–practice–belief complex, and with Palmer's (2015) work on spiritual ecology in Timor-Leste. In the author's reading, the contrast K2 draws between school («writing and memorising») and learning by watching and doing at home (K3) suggests that formal schooling in Periods I and II made no room for local knowledge of this kind. The reports provide no data on schooling today; the next section analyses the school together with other spaces outside the *uma lisan*.

5.6 Cultural Spaces outside the *Uma Lisan*: Disconfirming Evidence

To reduce the risk that the centrality of the *uma lisan* is an artefact of the research design (see Section 3.5), this section gives balancing attention to the five spaces outside the *uma lisan* that informants themselves mentioned (Table 4); the market and the state are discussed together because the informants linked them through money and taxation. These spaces are not substitutes for the *uma lisan*. They are other places in

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which knowledge, alliance and belief live and change. The evidence for each comes from few informants; this section therefore formulates questions for future research rather than conclusions.

School. K2 describes Portuguese and Indonesian schools as places where the teacher wrote on the board and pupils «wrote and memorised», unlike learning by watching and helping parents at home (K3). K6 links the declining use of the mother tongue to "educated people" who teach in various languages. The schools K2 describes used Portuguese and Indonesian, not the mother tongue; this connects with the multilingual situation described by Taylor-Leech (2009). The data do not show, however, that today's school threatens the *uma lisan*, because the reports do not describe present-day schooling. The school can also be read as a place where modernity is "performed" in everyday life (Silva, 2020), not merely as a threat to local culture. The concept of "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992) and the mother tongue-based multilingual education policy (Ministry of Education, n.d.) suggest that local knowledge could enter the school; this is a hypothesis, not a finding.

Health. Informants describe healing with bark, leaves and roots as a practice from a time when hospitals were absent or distant (K1, K7). K4 says that hospital medicine is now available, but that traditional leaves still heal when the hospital cannot. In K7, families consult a *matan-dook* to learn whether an illness has a natural cause or comes from the ancestors (Theme B). In the author's reading, this indicates medical pluralism: people pursue several paths, and the *uma lisan* is not the only place where illness is explained and treated. K4's statement about leaves is the informant's own representation of continuity (Table 5), not data on how individuals seek treatment today, and must therefore be read with caution.

Market and state. K3, K4 and K7 report exchange and sale, including at markets: K3 describes the exchange of food crops between households and taking produce to market, K4 describes selling coconuts and maize in Laga and Luro, and K7 describes exchanging salted fish and salt with other communities. K6 describes the abundance of imported products today. In Period I, colonial taxes forced families to sell animals (K1) or to work for others (K4) to obtain money. Animals of ritual value were also used to pay taxes (K1); this suggests that ritual goods and the money economy intersected in everyday life, consistent with Polanyi's (1944) view of an economy embedded in social relations. The ceremonial knife bought with money (K4) shows that the market also enters ritual (P1). Hohe (2002) describes the tension between local legitimacy and state administration; the K1 and K4 data are insufficient to observe this tension at the level of the *uma lisan*.

Church. The Catholic Church is a religious space that warrants separate discussion, given its large presence in Timorese life (U.S. Department of State, 2022) and in the history of resistance (Hodge, 2013). In K6, most people's faith is tied directly to prayer and Mass, while *lisan* matters at weddings, funerals and community events. K1 prays the Our Father when gathering medicinal plants and rejects *hakoi xumasu* on biblical grounds; K5 describes Catholicism as completion; K2 describes a dualist belief. On one reading, this is co-existence (Bovensiepen, 2015; Trindade, 2012). On another, it is rupture voiced by the informants themselves (Robbins, 2007). The data do not allow a choice between these readings, because K4 and K7 mention only that religion arrived later and do not describe the present-day relationship. The Church should therefore be seen as a cultural space with its own authority, not merely as a factor to which the *uma lisan* must adapt.

This evidence shows that each space has its own logic, language and authority. The *uma lisan* therefore does not confront "modernity" as a single bloc, but is one site among many in which elders negotiate cultural categories (Sahlins, 1985). Informants did not mention youth organisations, cooperatives or new associations; this absence may reflect the interview guide. Future research should ask directly about each space, including with women, young people and urban residents, to establish whether the *uma lisan* is central or peripheral for them. In this way, the idea that the *uma lisan* is "one site of articulation" becomes a testable hypothesis rather than a presupposition.

5.7 Art as Ritual Object and Living Heritage

The data on art are consistent with literature that treats art as part of social and ritual relations. Sacred objects that people «feed» through offerings (K1, K6) and that may not be used at will (K7) indicate that, for the informants, these objects are not passive; this is consistent with Gell (1998), who describes art objects as possessing social agency. In connection with Theme A, *tais* circulate in *fetosaan–umane* exchange (K1, K2, K5), in line with Hamilton and Barrkman's (2014) account of *tais* as objects of alliance and identity. The description of grandmothers weaving *tais* (K1), with dyes from bark and leaves (K4), echoes UNESCO (2021), which emphasises women as the holders of this knowledge and the risks to its transmission; because there were no female informants, this study cannot examine how women themselves describe this work. Instruments and dances (*babadok*, drums, gongs, *tebedai*, *dadolin*, *ai-lalan*) appear in the reports only in ceremonial contexts, consistent with Dunlop (2012). The change in instrument materials (K5) and the ceremonial knife bought with money (K4) show that art is also a domain in which P1 can be observed: material form changes while, according to the informants, ritual function continues.

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E-ISSN: 3107-6157 editor@ijamri.com
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5.8 Material Change and Proposition P1

Informants describe the ritual core (harvest ritual, *barlake*, funerary obligations, sacred objects) as continuing, and describe change mainly at the material level (Table 5). In terms of Koentjaraningrat's (2009) three forms of culture, this pattern suggests that artefacts change faster than ideas and values. The data, however, do not measure this pattern. Evidence of material change is limited to a few statements (K4, K5, K6, K7), and the evidence that values "change slowly" comes from elders with a positional interest in demonstrating continuity. The article therefore formulates this pattern as P1, not as a finding. P1 resembles Ogburn's (1922) "cultural lag" thesis. Any test of P1 must take into account the criticism levelled at that thesis: a change in objects may also change their meaning, as the ceremonial knife (K4) illustrates.

Alongside these shared patterns, the cases also show variation. Coastal Manatuto (K7) relies on fishing and salted fish; K5 and K6 describe a more explicitly patrilineal order; Galolen (K7) has a richer astronomical vocabulary; and K4 links language to community unity more directly. With one informant per case, this variation may reflect regional differences, but also differences between informants, student groups or reports.

5.9 Implications for Education

The findings most directly relevant to education are the contrast between school and learning at home (K2, K3) and the concern about transmission (Theme D). Local calendars, medicinal plants, house-building technology and *tais* could serve as "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992) for contextual learning, and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) could narrow the distance between school and community. The method of this study — student teachers interviewing *lia-na'in* — may have pedagogical value, but this study did not measure student learning. The experience also shows that learning activities that may later be used for publication need to be prepared from the outset under the methodological and ethical conditions detailed in Recommendation 1.

5.10 Limitations and Future Research

The principal methodological limitations — convenience sampling, one informant per case, mediated data without recordings, and second-hand knowledge in K6 — have been described in the Methodology. Here, the article highlights four limitations that most affect the interpretation of the findings. First, the findings do not represent any ethno-linguistic group, because each case represents one informant and one *uma lisan*. Second, the depth of the reports varies (e.g., K3 has no language section), and K4, K5 and K6 have no recorded age, which limits reading by period. Third, all informants are men and there are no longitudinal

data: change is reconstructed from memory, and Period II barely appears. Fourth, no formal ethical approval was obtained before data collection, and informant and student consent to publication was not documented in writing (see Section 3.7).

Future research requires (a) ethical approval and consultation with the *uma lisan* before data collection; (b) direct interviews by the researcher, with audio recording and transcription in the mother tongue; (c) more informants per case, including women and young people; (d) participant observation of ritual; (e) purposive case selection, for example rural and urban, patrilineal and matrilineal communities; and (f) testing of propositions P1–P3.

6. Recommendations

Three recommendations follow from the findings and their limitations.

1. **For ICFP and teacher education** (based on the contrast between school and learning at home, K2, K3): integrate the local knowledge that students document (calendars, medicinal plants, technology, *tais*) into contextual learning materials, and continue interviews with *lia-na'in* as a learning method — with ethics training, audio recording and written consent obtained before the interviews.
2. **For families and *uma lisan*** (based on Theme D and P3): since K6 links the loss of the mother tongue to contact with other languages, *uma lisan* rituals could become a space in which young people use and learn the mother tongue.
3. **For researchers** (based on the limitations of the data and the gender gap): conduct in-depth studies with women and young people, using direct interviews and recording, to test propositions P1–P3.

7. Conclusion

This article asked how male customary elders and *lia-na'in* from seven *uma lisan*, across five municipalities and five mother tongues, describe the universal cultural elements in former times and today. In answer to the first and second questions, the findings show that informants describe the cultural elements as interconnected around the *uma lisan* through *fetosaan–umane* reciprocity, ancestral sanction, the co-existence of *lulik* and Catholicism, and concern about transmission to young people. The *uma lisan*, however, is one site of articulation, not the only one, since the school, health services, the market, the state and the Church also shape cultural life. In answer to the third question, informants describe the ritual core as

continuing and change as occurring mainly at the material, linguistic and everyday religious levels — a pattern the article formulates as propositions P1–P3 rather than as established findings.

The study does not demonstrate any cultural "evolution". Its principal contribution is an exploratory comparison across diverse cases using a single framework, together with methodological and ethical reflection on re-using data from student teachers. Data of this kind have value for research and for contextual pedagogy, but they require transparency about their limits, protection for informants and sacred knowledge, and, in future studies, ethical approval and consent to publication before data collection.

Declarations

Acknowledgements

The author thanks the seven informants who shared their knowledge and time, and the 52 students of the course EDAR 202 at ICFP Baucau who conducted the interviews and wrote the reports. To protect privacy and sacred knowledge, the names of the informants, the students and the *uma lisan* are not disclosed in this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

The author used a generative artificial intelligence tool to support the transcription of the seven handwritten reports into digital text. Changes were limited to standardising spelling and correcting a small number of unclear phrases; all text presented between «…» in the Findings was checked against the original reports. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy of the transcription and for the content of the article.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no financial conflict of interest. As the lecturer of the course in which the student interviewers were enrolled, the author discusses the institutional authorisations (KIEP and the Director of ICFP Baucau) and the ethical safeguards in Section 3.7.

Data Availability

The original reports and the full transcription are not published, in order to protect identities and locations; the original data may be requested from the author with a justified reason and with authorisation from the relevant *uma lisan*.

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