

# SACRED HOUSE UMA LULIK OF TIMOR LESTE



Uma  
Natureza



*Tartehi - a cluster of totemic houses perched on the hill top for the hamlet of Liquitei, opposite the Knua Hakmatek eco-tourism lodges in Maubisse*

Sacred houses are probably the most representative of traditional Timorese architectural designs. They are known locally as uma lulik in the Tetum language; um lulik in the Mambai language, le tenu in the Fatuluku language and umo luli in the Tokodede language. They are used for practical purposes as well as spiritual. From a spiritual and cultural perspective, uma lulik mean a lot to the local people. It is a symbol of their cultural identity and marks their original place of domicile and the connection to the land and its spirits.

Maubisse is especially known for the many traditional sacred houses that are still being built in every hamlet and village. Los Palos and Maubisse and in general in most rural areas, rituals and ceremonies are actively practiced till the the present time.

Every uma lulik has its own unique characteristic and construction style depending on the local belief system and the availability of natural materials locally. The architectural style is also linked to the climatic and environmental conditions of the place.

In Maubisse where it is cool, mountainous and windy, the thick low grass roof helps to block the chilly wind and maintains the stability of the building.

The vast flat plains and the forest in the eastern region provide plenty of space and relative abundance of building materials for the tall majestic raised buildings known in the Fatuluku language as *le'e jia wale*. The construction of *le'e jia wale* sacred houses in the district of Lospalos is an intensive and extensive process that can take many years and an enormous amount of joint community resources to complete.

The traditional way of getting one such sacred house built involves the initiator securing support and resources from the different clans. Rituals have to be strictly carried out at different stages of the construction starting from the choosing of a suitable site and before the laying of the foundation. In the process each clan is owed favours and the obligation to “repay” remains for a long time – over the life time of the building and even beyond. In this way, communal harmony and the sharing of resources are assured.

*Le'e Jia wale sacred houses in Lospalos, eastern Timor Leste*



Uma lulik are also known as houses of totems because of the symbolic representation of each of the buildings and the specific ritual or prohibition linked to the place. Every location – usually a hamlet and its surrounding landscapes including the water supply and the land; weather conditions, farm harvests and natural resources as well as activities vital for the survival and livelihoods of the community – are ritually or customarily guarded by a keeper or tokoh adat in Indonesia, known as lia-nain or kuku In Tetum, gaesubun in Mambai, naravana in Fatuluku and ivodale in Tokodede) with and for his community.

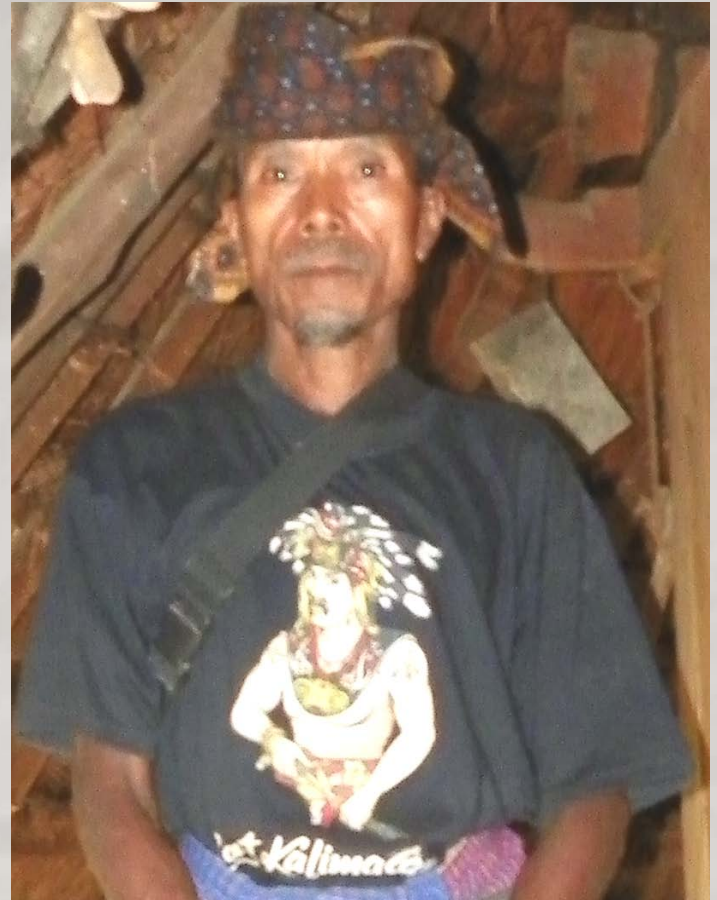


*A sacred house umo luli in Maubara in the Liquica district*

*The ivodale or tokoh adat or  
the customs keeper of the  
umo luli in Maubara*

# TOKOK ADAT

Tokok adat is in charge of the uma lulik and leads all rituals and ceremony in accordance with the customs and beliefs of the community. In so doing the community maintain their spiritual beliefs and unique cultural practices. At the same time, they live in relative harmony as a community and as a whole with their natural environment. In Timor Leste, the animist belief system is still strong today despite the long colonial Portuguese control and the brutal Indonesian occupation, both of which brought drastic changes and new religions to the country. The presence of uma lulik, the role of tokoh adat and the many rituals that have continued in the rural areas are clear indication that many of the traditional spiritual practices have remained alive and cherished.



# ECO-LODGES OF THE COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM

The three community-based ventures in Valu Sere in Tutuala in the Lospalos district in the east, Knua Hakmatek in Maubisse in the highlands district of Ainaro and Laloran at the coast of Maubara in Liquica district have all based their eco-lodges on traditional architectural designs and construction methods.

They have been designed and built entirely by the community tourism groups using local materials and skilled people. They are much simpler in design and construction as compared to uma lulik to fit the shorter timeline and the low-budget of the project specifically to meet basic accommodation needs of visitors. The use of traditional designs and materials attributed to their low carbon and ecological footprints, and at the same time for the community groups to showcase their heritage and skills to visitors.

Complimented by the spectacular natural surroundings and strong culture, they have quite firmly established as Timor Leste's distinguished eco-cultural ventures drawing visitors from many foreign countries and attracting regular group tours to these destinations.

*The first set of lodges open for tourists at Value Sere in the district of Tutuala*



*The cluster of huts and the dinning hall that forms the Knua Hakmatek accommodation in Maubisse*



*The Laloran eco-lodges in Maubara, the most recent community-based tourism ventured supported through the Haburas-CIDAC partnerships*



# TRADITIONAL CONSTRUCTION AND BUILDING MATERIALS FROM THE BUSH

Traditionally, uma lulik are constructed using only what nature provides the community with – stones and gravels, clay, leaves, stalks, fibres and trunks of a variety of palm, tall grass, timber, bamboo– Most of which can be easily found near the community food garden or in the bush or forest near their villages.

Bush building materials are normally found in relative abundance. Most of them, except for certain timber species, regenerate easily and are useful low-carbon renewable resources. These bush materials have provided shelters to the communities for generations. They are good natural insulators keeping the inside of the building at comfortable temperature to live in.



*Imperata cylindrical commonly known as blady grass, commonly used for roofing in Maubisse*

## BLADY GRASS

Blady grass is a quick growing weed that often appears in open fields and bush land that has been cleared for food garden. Bundles of the dried grass are used to line the roof frame to form layers of thick weather-proof roofing that can last for about five years before replacement with a new lot of the grass. The use of blady grass as roofing material has positive environmental impact. Cutting fields of blady grass is a good way to control the weed which can easily become invasive. This weed is fast spreading and if left unused will displace all other grasses and deplete the soil of its water and nutrients.

# AREN PALM

Aren or sugar palm (*Arenga pinnata*) is a very useful multipurpose palm tree – Its fruits are edible, sweet and juicy, its nectar can be made into wine or palm sugar; leaves and stems can be used for craft work and building material. Almost every part of the palm can be used. The aren palm produces a tough black fibrous spines along its trunk which is much more durable than most of the plant materials. The spines are a sought after material for roofing and for making ropes. In Bali the aren palm spines can only be used by high caste families for their shrine or temple roof.



*A matured Aren Palm (*Arenga pinnata*) in the Noni Koni Santana National Park*



*Black fibrous spines growing around the trunk*



*Ropes made from the aren fibre used as fasteners for beams in buildings*

Most of the uma lulik have a decorative roof top made from the Aren palm fibrous spines, seashells, stones and tusks, teeth or bones of animals – objects of significance to the community who are still very much animists. They are things from the natural environment which local people have placed a spiritual significance into when used in a house of totem and used in rituals and ceremonies.



*A typical roof top of a uma lulik in Maubara*



*Eucalyptus urophylla* grown on steep hillside in Aileu. A native timber species used for buildings for the highlands communities  
(Colin Trainor)

## **EUCALYPTUS UROPHYLLA**

This eucalyptus species grow in higher altitude. In some part of Maubisse, this timber species have become scarce through over harvesting and no replanting. In Aileu, they are found in natural forests often perched on steep hillside. Their removal will risk soil erosion and landslides.

# BAMBOOS

Timor Leste has some of the finest bamboos in the world and grow widely throughout the country. They are a fast growing plant, with some growing up to 1.2 metres a day, hence holding the Guinness World Record for the world's fastest growing plant. As such bamboo can be chopped down regularly to be used to build houses and other structures, where the carbon remains sequestered for an average of 80 years (*Castañeda, 2006*), and that the plantation will recover quickly due to the fast growth rate. Bamboo has great strength and flexibility, making it an ideal low-cost building material accessible to most rural population.



*Au-metan (Bambusa lako) or Timor black bamboo*

Bamboo has a multitude of uses. For traditional buildings, bamboo can be used for making the frame, roof structure, floor and walls. They can be used as long round stalks or splitted slats that can be tied together with the aren ropes.

Three common types of bamboo in the country are the giant *Dendrocalamus asper* (au-betun in Tetum) , *Timor Black Bamboo* or *Bambusa lako* (au-metan in Tetum) and *Gigantochloa atter* (au-Roma in Tetum).



# COCONUT

The coconut (*Cocos nucifera*) is a member of the palm family *Arecaceae*. Coconuts are grown throughout the tropics and is a highly utilised palm. Virtually every part of the coconut palm can be used in some manner and it has a significant economic value both for local communities and the nation state as a whole. In Timor Leste, coconut trees are found in every human settlements where they can grow, particularly along the coastal strips.

For building materials, coconut leaves are used widely to thatch roofs. The thatched roof provides a good insulation keeping the building cool in hot days and warm in cool nights. Coconut leaves are water proofed. If well thatched the roof will last for at least five years before repairs and addition of newly dried leaves are required.

*Matured coconut palm trees in Tutuala*

AN INICIATIVE



**CIDAC**

SUPPORTED BY



EUROPEAN UNION

**COMÕES**  
INSTITUTO  
DA COOPERAÇÃO  
E DA LÍNGUA

MINISTÉRIO DOS NEGÓCIOS ESTRANGEIROS

Rua Gov. Celestino da Silva, Farol,  
Díli POBOX 390  
Timor-Leste

Email: [kop.natureza@gmail.com](mailto:kop.natureza@gmail.com)



Uma  
Natureza

With support from the European Union and the Comões Institute under the project "Ahimatan ba Futuru". The content is solely the responsibility of Haburas Foundation / CIDAC / Natureza and can in no way be taken to reflect the positions of the EU and CICL.