



## Harmonization of Border Communities between Indonesia and the Democratic Republic of Timor Leste

Heribertus Binsasi<sup>1\*</sup>, Remigius Seran<sup>2</sup>, Handrianus Nino<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Program Studi Ilmu Pemerintahan, Universitas Timor, NTT, Indonesia. E-mail:

binsasiheri@unimor.ac.id

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### ABSTRACT

*This study attempts to reveal the reality of community harmonization on the border between the Indonesian people and the Democratic Republic of Timor Leste people who live around the border area, precisely in the Haumeni Ana Village area, Bikomi Nilulat District, North Central Timor Regency, with the Oecusse District. By using a qualitative approach and a cultural study perspective, the researcher revealed the existence of harmonization between the two groups of people with different national foundations which in principle are based on cultural similarities as atoin meto (people who live on dry land), the same language speech, namely uab meto, tribal unity framed in the term bae feto bae mone (brothers and sisters) so that various problems that occur are often resolved with a local wisdom approach, namely maloe mamat (serving betel nut), tok tabua (sitting in dialogue together), menu tiun (customary oath) and natoni (customary ritual). The recommendations produced in this study are that strengthening policies related to problems that occur in society are handed over to traditional leaders and the government becomes social control over the ongoing process.*

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### Corresponding Author:

Handrianus Nino,  
Program Studi Ilmu Pemerintahan,  
Universitas Timor,  
Jalan Km. 09 Kelurahan Sasi, Kefamenanu  
Telepon: 0388 Kode Pos :  
85613  
Email: handrianusnino@unimor.ac.id

### 1. Introduction

The dynamics of communities in border areas are often an interesting topic to study and research, both by academics and practitioners. In general, the author can describe why studies related to the harmonization of border communities are always an interesting issue because there are several strong basic reasons, including the first: border areas are the face of the country, in this case the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (Yuniar & Rahmah, 2024). Second, border communities are still very weak in terms of development, as evidenced by several points on the borders of the region that are still underdeveloped, although the focus of development in the era of President Jokowi is building from the edge, it can be seen that it is not yet optimal. And the third reason is that studies on local communities on the border are not yet encouraging, both in terms of numbers and in terms of the impact of the study results in the form of policy results (Sudika Mangku, 2017).

These three arguments are the motivation for researchers to study the various interesting contents in the border area of North Central Timor Regency, Bikomi Nilulat District and Oecusse District. This study captures the issues that are developing in grassroots society, traditional leaders, ex-East Timor community and leadership elements in the border area, in this case the Village Head, and related elite apparatus (Remigius, 2018). Among the issues that are developing and interesting to study are those related to the harmonization of border communities. The fundamental problem that is the focus of this research is the relationship between communities that are actually different in terms of the country's constitution, but at the same point they have the same cultural ties, allowing both parties to always be together in various social activities, such as marriage, holding traditional rituals, to events of grief (Taena & Afoan, 2020). The fundamental issue that is the focus of this research is the relationship between communities that are actually different in terms of the country's constitution, but at the same point they have the same cultural ties, allowing both parties to always be together in various social activities, such as marriage, holding traditional rituals, to mourning events. The urgency of this research is that communities that are different in terms of constitution but on the other hand they have strong bonds of brotherhood in all components of life starting from blood relations, marriage relations, traditional house relations, traditional motifs to the same regional language, namely uab meto.

Traces of cultural harmonization of border communities occurred long before the referendum in 1999 in East Timor Province (when it was still part of Indonesia) until it became an independent country until now (Yakobus Kolne, 2014). The communities around the border are generally atoin meto communities (the regional language of the uab meto border community which means people who live on dry land), who have the same characteristics, both physically, language dialectics, and also dress codes so that they are very difficult to distinguish. During the Portuguese and Dutch colonial era, the eastern region was an area divided into two parts, namely West Timor (North Central Timor Regency and South Central Timor), and East Timor (currently Timor Leste), and the atoin meto community inhabits this area (Ethelbert et al., 2022). Cultural civilization and similarities in tradition are also mixed in it, such as the helaketa ceremony, gong dance, tama maus, and even the planting and harvesting traditions have the same characteristics. This point is the beginning of the harmonious integration of local communities and the people of the Democratic Republic of Timor Leste, in this case the Oecusse district around the border area (Nino, 2018). This study aims to reveal the harmonization that occurs between local communities spread around the border area and also former East Timorese residents in North Central Timor Regency, especially in Bikomi Nilulat District. This study uses a qualitative approach with a cultural study strategy, in order to reveal the social relations of community life, starting from culture, education system and community economy (Binsasi et al., 2024). The cultural study strategy itself is considered capable of revealing the reality related to the social relations of the two citizens, because of ideas, patterns of interaction between communities and also cultural ideas that historically have a relationship with each other. The approach used is Cultural studies, which is a formation of discourse, namely clusters of ideas, images and practices that provide ways to discuss certain topics, social activities or institutional arenas in society and these methods can be in the form of knowledge and related actions (Barker & Beezer, 2003).

Cultural harmony this border community has its own uniqueness that can be raised by the author, including the first geographical reasons and the existence of cultural structures. In a study conducted by (Sugiarti, 2018), it was shown that the tribes on Timor Island are still in one lineage, where it is said that the origin of the community came from three ancestors who were

siblings, namely Nekin Mataus (Likusain), the Mataus tribe (Sonbay), and Bara Mataus (Fatuaruin). This perspective is what gives rise to different views on the concept of local society with the perspective of state politics. The same thing was also expressed by (Binsasi & Korbaffo, 2019) who emphasized that changes in the country's political map do not affect the social dynamics between communities on the border of the two countries, because of the very close blood ties, so that whatever events are happy or sad they visit each other. The existence of blood relations and customary relations due to marriage often have an impact on the social dynamics that occur between the two groups of people who live side by side in border areas, so that mutual interaction between the communities is very easy (Herawati et al., 2024). Geographical reasons are also very possible for the community because they are on one land so that access in and out is very easy, although there are border security posts but they only apply at certain points, not all border points have security forces, geographically it can be seen in the following image, which shows that the boundary between the two communities is geographically a single entity that has a land boundary that is very easy to access.

The characteristics of the border areas in East Nusa Tenggara are different, for example, with Kalimantan and East Malaysia being separated by a wide river (Kurniasih, 2022), while the border area between NTT and Timor Leste, such as Haumeniana, is separated by a small river which dries up during the dry season, making it easily accessible by motorized vehicles. The second reason is security and convenience, as evidenced by the weak security and complicated rules that make people tend to take shortcuts (Marthen, 2022). Timor Leste, which became independent not long after separating from Indonesia, still has poor security and security stability, while in Indonesia, weak supervision and easy neglect of the duties played by security officers and immigration officers make it easy for people to enter and exit between the two countries (Y. S. Korbaffo & Sengkoen, 2023). The most vulnerable obstacle is the lack of security guards at each border route, and as a result, there are still many Timor Leste and NTT citizens who cross the border without going through immigration posts. In addition, there are many 'rat routes' around the borders of the two countries. Security issues in the border area between NTT and Timor Leste are very loose, the area is wide open, allowing anyone to cross. This is not because it is not guarded by officers but because limited human resources (HR) and infrastructure are also obstacles. These illegal border crossers can enter through border areas, be it immigration gates or official access and what are called uncontrolled "rat trails", which are so numerous along the Indonesian border with Timor Leste. From TNI intelligence data, the total rat trail data reaches 42 on each border route and along 148.7 kilometers (Taena & Afoan, 2020). Third, economic and educational reasons and development; economic and educational factors that are not yet fully adequate often create opportunities for various violations. The economic crisis, declining security levels in many countries and increasing poverty rates as well as the influence of globalization and access to information facilitate cases of illegal border crossings. The entry and exit of a person from one region to another to fulfill daily life both in terms of education and economy are great demands and must be met. In terms of education, it can be seen that Timor Leste citizens prefer to continue their education in Indonesia, not only because of the close distance, there are also more supportive educational facilities and infrastructure, as well as a better understanding of the Indonesian language, and also because there are relatives or family who live in Indonesia, making it easier to get a place to live or protection even though they do not have official identification. In terms of economic factors, for example, the use of currency (US Dollar and Rupiah) and different exchange rates also have a big influence.

Empirical evidence related to the resolution of problems between communities on the border, for example related to the determination of different boundaries as expressed by researchers

(Binsasi, n.d.), reveals the existence of conflict resolution based on local wisdom, namely with *maloe mamat* (offering betel nut), *tamolok tabua* (joint dialogue), *natoni* (customary ritual), and *tiun menu* (customary oath). This can reduce conflicts triggered by the determination of boundaries that have been determined by the two countries. The model for resolving any problems that occur in the border area of Haumeni Ana Village and Oecusse District, even for almost all Atoin Meto communities, generally uses the same model as the four things above.

Based on these three arguments built, this study focuses on the harmonization of border communities with different constitutions but bound by culture, kinship, economic needs, and have fairly easy access to the region. So to help this research, a cultural sociological approach is used because it is the right approach model to review the harmonization of community culture, which has different constitutions.

## 2. Method

This research was conducted in North Central Timor Regency, especially Bikomi Nilulat District, Haumeniana Village, which is geographically located in the border area between NKRI-RDTL, and the research time lasted for 2 months, namely, November to December 2024, and the instrument used was in-depth interviews, to collect data and information through verbal interaction between researchers and respondents. This research was conducted by visiting sources who had been determined by researchers who had knowledge and were community leaders around the border area, both the former East Timor community and the local community (Suwartiningsih & Purnomo, 2020). In addition, the researcher also interviewed the Village apparatus and also the communication of the former East Timorese Community, not to mention the border security forces in both border areas. Observation: This instrument is used to observe the behavior of individuals or situations being studied. The main target of observation in this study is how to see the interactions that occur between the two groups of Communities, namely the former East Timorese Community and the local community in the border area. The cultural approach used in this study is to reveal the deep nature of the harmony that occurs in border communities through traditional rites and cultural activities because the Atoin Meto community highly values and upholds cultural values, even cultural values play an important role in social life so that this is what is used as a benchmark to see the harmony that exists between border communities, especially the Atoin Meto. Researchers also use documentation to collect data through literature studies, namely by reading documents related to the research object, taking evidence in the form of photos and documentation to strengthen research arguments. The cultural approach used in this study is to reveal the deep nature of the harmonization that occurs in border communities through traditional rites and cultural activities because the Atoin Meto community highly values and upholds cultural values, even cultural values play an important role in social life so that this is what is used as a benchmark to see the harmonization that exists between border communities, especially Atoin Meto. Researchers also use documentation to collect data through literature studies, namely by reading documents related to the research object, taking evidence in the form of photos and documentation to strengthen research arguments. The data analysis technique used is carried out in depth so that it has academic strength, because in addition to researchers, they are also people who live in border areas so that the basic assumptions and research processes are carried out in depth. The stages of the research are carried out in four stages, namely the first stage, this study will examine the understanding related to the harmonization between local communities and the former East Timorese community, the measurements and dimensions that form social interaction patterns, the second stage of this

research will develop into the political realm to examine whether socio-cultural interaction patterns will form representation and consolidation of democracy to strengthen the identity of atoin meto, the third is conducting a pilot study with the general public to obtain opinions on the concept of social adapters that form social harmony in society, and the fourth is conducting in-depth interviews with cultural figures and academics to strengthen in building new concepts.

### **3. Analysis and Results**

The long history of the territorial boundaries of the countries of Indonesia and Timor Leste is present and separates the Atoni Meto ethnic community territorially and politically. Although the boundaries of state sovereignty give rise to their own dynamic problems, cultural activities such as traditional ceremonies, kinship relations, economic ties, customary law practices and other cultural activities are still ethnic identities that bind the Atoni Meto ethnic group amidst the dominance of the modern state (Nuradhawati & Kristian, 2022). The close ethnic ties are reflected in the use of the word Dawan by the Atoni Meto Community in South Belu (TTU) to refer to their neighbors who live to the west. Meanwhile, the Atoni Meto people call their brothers who live in the eastern part (Oecusse) "Belu" which means friend or companion. The similarities in traditions, customs, history and beliefs of the Atoni Meto people show that the presence of state borders does not separate the two in carrying out social relations activities with each other (Gonzaga Afeanpah et al., 2024). Moreover, their relationship is also influenced by the factor of intermarriage between Atoni Meto ethnic groups. Ethnic relations in the two countries after East Timor's separation from the Republic of Indonesia reproduced through the harmonization of community culture carried out by individuals from the Atoni Meto community. The relationship between the Atoni Meto ethnic group in these two countries is described in the term *aok bian*: which means "different body parts but one body". The habit of serving each other through the *Malo'e* tradition or offering each other betel nut, palm wine and tobacco, shows their closeness to each other regardless of differences in citizenship status. In traditional meetings, betel nut is used as a means of opening communication or interaction, as well as introducing and strengthening ethnic relations (Neonbeni et al., 2023). The *Malo'e* tradition shows social cohesion that transcends the boundaries of state sovereignty (borderless). The historical fact of the formation of state territorial boundaries that separate them is something that came from outside and was born from the political interests of colonialism to compete for the wealth of natural resources on the island of Timor. As a result, the process of territorialization of colonial power took place fiercely in the midst of the rich landscape of Timor Island, where the Atoni Meto people live and build their culture (Kalembang & Korbaffo, 2022). Long before colonialism entered the island of Timor, Enik Atoni Meto only knew customary territorial boundaries. Even so, the agreement on customary territorial boundaries was only a symbol of royal authority and did not limit the social and cultural space of the Atoni Meto community to relate to each other (Siswanto et al., 2024). These boundaries are in the form of natural boundaries such as mountains, hills, rivers and also artificial boundaries in the form of trays. The boundary agreement was accompanied by a traditional ceremony so that all parties would obey it. This kind of traditional ritual ceremony is still carried out by several kingdoms in West Timor to this day. For example, the non pah ceremony in the Bikomi kingdom is held every 7 (seven) years. The non pah traditional ceremony is a traditional ritual carried out by each kingdom to ensure that the territory of its kingdom is safe and prosperous (Anna Yulia Hartati et al., 2022).

The Atoni Meto community has a philosophy of “*tah hun naka mese, teun oemata mese*” which literally means “eating from one garden and drinking from one water source”. This philosophy not only describes the bonds of brotherhood that occur through marriage, but also describes that all communities come from the same mother’s “placenta” which is the earth (soil). If we look further, land is one of the binders of cultural relationships that are summarized in the traditions of the Atoni Meto ethnic community to build togetherness in the spirit of “communal” life. In relation to ritual traditions, the existence and role and function of sonaf (clan) are also very central. The ancestors who founded the forefathers of the village are one of the most important objects of worship or centers of religious orientation in the original belief system of the Atoni Meto people (Y. S. ; B. H. Korbaffo, 2021). It was the ancestors who gave birth to various teachings and customary rules as well as ceremonies/rites. Sociologically, the attachment of the Atoni Meto people to their respective ancestors through various ritual ceremonies has an important role in building and supporting an atmosphere of togetherness in the lives of fellow Atoni Meto people. Traditional rituals that are still carried out in the Atoni Meto communities of Indonesia and Timor Leste are a medium for gathering and maintaining and strengthening their values of togetherness regardless of citizenship status (Faizurrizqi et al., 2024).

The traditional house unites all the tribe members, and all members of the tribe always attend all meetings in the traditional house. The traditional house is everything so that everything that happens around it must be sincerely obeyed by all the tribe members. In each traditional house, not only do all the tribe members gather, but also the ancestors are present with the Divine. The Atoni Meto ethnic belief is in close alliance between the macrocosm and the microcosm when traditional rituals and traditions are carried out around the traditional house. As a 'spiritual capital', the traditional house is a place of communion between heaven and earth in relation to harmonization between those above and those below, and even all human citizens from all points of the compass: north, south, east and west together (Vianey et al., 2024).

In the context of handling problems in border areas, the role of traditional houses is very effective, namely discussing and resolving a number of problems experienced by fellow Atoni Meto people. In fact, if this traditional house can play an effective role, the government can use this role to support various government policies including development policies and other social communities to accelerate development in border areas. Even socio-anthropologically, traditional houses are always seen as special locations where customs and traditions play a role as a means of uniting all warring citizens. More specifically, how the role of the traditional house as a place that embraces all parties, a place that unites all residents, including those who are in conflict. There is a belief among the Atoni Meto ethnic group that every conflict will be resolved by itself, if all residents have gathered in the traditional house. In the traditional house, the tribal chief or traditional elder will use his brilliant abilities to re-form the harmony that has been damaged by the atmosphere of conflict that occurs (Vianey et al., 2024).

The Atoni Meto ethnic community has a set of local wisdom stored in the social system and cultural system which is then manifested in religious beliefs and emotional bonds in their transcendental relationship with supernatural powers, conceptions and expressions of life and the nature of life, goals, orientations, knowledge, and frameworks of interpretation of the world. In principle, local wisdom has a very strategic role in building the civilization of a society.

Traditional rituals performed together at annual cultural events such as the Fuah Pah, Hamis Batar, Hatama Maus traditions, and other traditional rituals are sacred moments culturally, but politically they can be used as momentum to interact and communicate through a dialogical atmosphere filled with a sense of solidarity between ethnic groups. These traditional rituals are social capital and a place for interaction and communication, which if carried out routinely can maintain social cohesion and build a complete understanding of the future of the Atoin Meto ethnic group. The meaning that must be captured from this moment is; (a) Strengthening social ties between ethnic groups who are "one nation, two countries"; (b) Building effective communication between traditional leaders who are present at this momentum so as to strengthen social harmony between them; (c) A means of discussing various problems so that they can find effective solutions to resolve their internal problems; (d) An opportunity to exchange ideas and information to build understanding related to various things that support the development of border areas. (e) Even in a political context, this customary momentum can be used as a space to build cultural diplomacy between two countries without having to be intervened by a formal government approach.

By strengthening social ties between fellow Atoin Meto ethnic groups, the positive impacts that will be created include: guaranteed community harmony because both communities will agree to maintain and care for security conditions that are always considered by the state, harmonious cooperation can be built, especially sectoral issues related to education, health, economy (traditional markets, local export opportunities) that can be raised and created by the community itself according to their respective needs with the principle of "mutual benefit" and with this cultural momentum, the socio-cultural values of the community are maintained and well maintained.

Normatively, regional authority in border area affairs is stated in Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 43 of 2008 concerning State Territory and is further emphasized in Government Regulation Number 12 of 2010 concerning the National Border Management Agency (Stocks, 2016). The long span of control between the central and regional governments has created a condition of delay in every decision-making. It is undeniable that in certain conditions, fast and precise decision-making is needed to resolve several local issues. For example, in the concept of developing education and health, education and health facilities can be used together through mutually beneficial sectoral cooperation. Other needs, for example, the management of clean water sources as a vital need for the community, then its utilization can also be carried out through a cooperation forum involving the government and the community of the two regions of the country. Other authorities that can be delegated to the community, for example, guarding pillars/border markers. If so far the guarding of pillars/border markers has been carried out by border security forces, why not hand it over to the local community with a little incentive as well as a form of community nationalism commitment. The double benefit obtained is that nationalism becomes strong in line with the concept of community empowerment (incentives obtained). In addition, it is necessary to consider reducing the long span of control to the Central Government by placing professional personnel based in the regions to design policies to address local problems. For example, in the case of sectoral cooperation agreements with neighboring countries (East Timor), as much as possible it should be resolved or decided at the local level without having to wait for Jakarta's decision.

Border area management is not only the responsibility of the central government but also the regional government supported by all components of society as a reflection of the will of all

parties to advance the welfare and security and harmony of society in the border area. The desire to change the border area as Indonesia's front yard in dealing with other countries is not something that is impossible to realize if effective synergy has been formed between the central government, regional governments and components of society.

In the grand design for the Management of State Borders and Border Areas 2011-2025, it is stated that one of the basic considerations for compiling the grand design is because it pays attention to the integration of central and regional relations (Stocks, 2016). This argument is based on the reality so far where there is always a tug of war of interests between the center and regions, low regional fiscal capacity, lack of alternative sources of regional financing for border area development, regional fiscal dependence on the center, disparities between regions and between regions, inefficiency and ineffectiveness of government and regional government spending, low human resource capacity in financial management, and in some cases still faced with corrupt behavior.

Giving greater authority to local governments opens up wider space for Atoni community participation in planning, implementing and monitoring border development programs. Local community participation is very difficult if all governance policies are dominated by the central government. By bringing management power closer to local governments, policy space can be opened up to accommodate local resources and participation so that governance policies better respond to the needs of communities and development on the border.

In this context, it is necessary to consider a special forum for border area development planning that involves all elements of society both at the village and sub-district levels in the border area. It is special because the funding provided is specifically for accelerating border area development which is currently one of the development priorities. With a special forum involving border communities, the meaning of democratization at the local level can be realized democratically. Aspirations will develop through deliberation and consensus by looking at the real conditions of the problem which will later be able to be answered concretely through programs/activities that are right on target and right on location. In addition, border communities can easily explore and develop all their economic potential optimally. The local potential owned by the community is an asset as well as an economic opportunity for the community which if managed properly will provide benefits for changes in the economic life of the community.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The study of borders has always been an interesting thing to study, such as the focus of the study in this research which emphasizes the harmonization of border communities in two countries, namely Indonesia and the Democratic Republic of Timor Leste, especially Haumeniana Village with Oecusse District. The track record of harmonization between the two communities has even been long before the construction of the State, because of blood relations, and cultural structures. Cultural harmonization formed through the same ancestors between the Atoni Meto community which in its long history has three great ancestors who are brothers. This study aims to see the harmony between communities on the border of the two countries, especially those in Haumeni Ana Village and Oecusse District. Using a qualitative research approach shows that cultural harmony is built through several factors including the existence of traditional activities both related to traditional house events and also mourning events so that such things establish relationships and emotional closeness between one community and another, even with various border issues are often resolved using a customary approach, such

as illegal border crossers being handed over to the customary authorities to be resolved with customary fines in accordance with the results of the agreement mediated by the village government and also the security forces on duty in the area. The approach to solving the problems being faced is to increase and expand interactions between communities, offer inclusive values and patterns of interaction in everyday life, implement and ensure the existence of community diversity, and increase knowledge and reflection on the future with increasingly massive global challenges that require unity as a nation. In order for the suggestions and recommendations from this study to be implemented properly, the thing that needs to be considered is how the government establishes policies based on local wisdom, such as resolving any disputes that occur in the community is handed over to the customary leaders who inhabit the border area. The government as a mediator controls the mediation process carried out by the indigenous community because most dispute resolutions in the border area are resolved using a customary approach. Thus, it will create harmony between communities, the level of trust is getting stronger between the community and the government and also cooperation between the communities of the two countries runs well.

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