AFCLC

U.S. FORCES INDOPACIFIC

CULTURE GUIDE

Timor-Leste

U.S. AIR FORCE

About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.

The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 "Culture General" provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on Oceania.

Part 2 "Culture Specific" describes unique cultural features of East Timorese society. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training.

For further information, contact the AFCLC Region Team at AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil or visit the AFCLC website at https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/.

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ECFG Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste

PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing–an image, word, object, idea, or story–represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value–freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to

focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

Cultural Domains

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize behaviors and systems into categories–what the Air Force refers to as "cultural domains"–in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains–which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems and others (see chart on next page)–as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

Social Behaviors across Cultures

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural

boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more complex market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Usually, we assume that those in the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

This collective perspective forms our worldview–how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

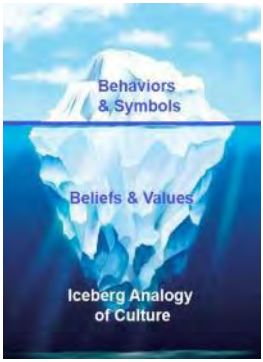
Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true–regardless of whether there is evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.

Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).



In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

As you travel through Oceania, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

CULTURAL DOMAINS

1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable, or which occurred prior to written language.

Oceania comprises some 20 sovereign nations, states, and territories that span a large portion of the Western Pacific Ocean, from Australia, Papua New Guinea (PNG), and Palau in the West to French Polynesia in the East. The region is so diverse that experts typically divide it into four sub-regions: Australia and New Zealand, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. While the people in each of the sub-regions share certain traits, all belong to the greater Oceania region. Furthermore, Oceania is characterized by distinct cultures that typically have more in common with each other than with cultures in other parts of the world. While Hawaii is notably a critical part of Polynesia, since it is a US state, it is not included in this guide.

Archaeological evidence suggests early humans first occupied Australia as early as 65,000 years ago, and parts of PNG and the Solomon Islands some 45,000 years ago. In contrast, humans only reached some islands in Polynesia as recently as 1000 BC. Historians tend to agree that early waves of migrants from Southeast Asia first settled in Australia and Melanesia, and later waves occupied Micronesia and Polynesia.

Many early inhabitants subsisted as seafaring hunter gatherers, typically consuming marine life and island vegetation. These early seafarers domesticated plants and animals, transporting

them between islands. As agricultural techniques became more advanced, residents cleared forests and transformed their island environments for cultivation and raising livestock.

Portugal's Ferdinand Magellan was the first notable European explorer to reach Oceania, when in 1521 he briefly landed on the Mariana Islands. Thereafter, English, French, German, and Spanish explorers sought to trade with and colonize the region. By the late 18th century, traders, whalers, and missionaries had settled across Oceania, bringing disease and weapons from Europe, resulting in the death of many islanders. Meanwhile, European powers and the US began to incorporate much of the region as official territories and colonies – political and social legacies that continue to influence the region today.

During the early 20th century, Japan sought to grow its influence in the Pacific Islands. When Germany withdrew its Navy from Micronesia during World War I, Japan occupied the former German colonies in 1914, incorporating Micronesia into its expanding empire as an agricultural settler colony. In the 1930s, Japan built military fortifications in Micronesia before moving into Melanesia and Southeast Asia during the Pacific War. By 1942, the Japanese military had occupied large swathes of Oceania, which became the site of some of the war's most significant and violent battles. Over 215,000 Japanese, Australians, Americans, and indigenous islanders died in Oceania between 1942-45.

Over the subsequent decades, calls for independence grew across Oceania. While Australia and New Zealand had gained independence from Britain in the early 20th century, the island nations won independence much later. Samoa was the first, gaining independence from New Zealand in 1962. Several other countries achieved independence afterwards, with Palau the most recent in 1994. Others remain US or French territories. Apart from Australia and New Zealand, which joined in 1945,

most of Oceania joined the United Nations between the late 1970s and 1990s, after decolonization processes empowered them with the territorial sovereignty required for membership.

During the mid-late 20th century, many isolated islands in the region became sites for British, French, and US atomic testing and other military operations. The nuclear and missile tests have caused permanent loss of access to traditional homelands, including the forced removal of some inhabitants, and exposure to radiation causing significant health issues.

In the early 21st century, indigenous groups across Oceania began campaigns to assert their rights and culture, largely led by Aboriginal Australians and Maori in New Zealand. In recent years, many of the smaller island nations have increased attention to climate change, as rising ocean levels will affect inhabitants of Oceania to a greater extent than other regions. Several nations have joined organizations to combat climate change and promote conservation, often collaborating to amplify the small island states' pro-environment message in global fora.

Nevertheless, the region is not always united. In early 2021, Micronesian nations withdrew from the Pacific Islands Forum, an international organization that focuses on regional issues, due to a dispute over their representation in the group. Despite the recent political clash, as of 2025, Oceania remains largely stable and focused on combating the consequences of climate change, notably the rising sea levels, bleached coral reefs, and localized disasters like increasingly powerful storms and wildfires.

2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community. European and Japanese colonial rule drastically changed society in Oceania. Further, the subjugation

of the indigenous population, import of South and East Asian workers, and arrival of European and Japanese immigrants during the 19th-20th centuries permanently altered the region's ethnic and racial makeup, which today varies by location.

While residents of Australia and New Zealand are primarily of European ancestry, those of other nations identify mostly as indigenous to specific islands. Some claim broader identities, as Melanesians, Micronesians, or Polynesians. Some nations such as Fiji and Palau also have significant immigrant populations.

Although all nations in Oceania are nominally democratic, their political structures are varied and relations with former colonial powers continue to influence present-day society. Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu are sovereign nations. Of these countries, Australia, New Zealand, PNG, Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu are constitutional monarchies with parliamentary systems. King Charles III of the United Kingdom is head-of-state, represented by a Governor-General, and an elected Prime Minister (PM) serves as head-of-government.

Tonga is also a constitutional monarchy led by a hereditary king, who is head-of-state and commander-in-chief. An elected parliament selects a PM, who is ceremoniously appointed by the King. Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Samoa, and Vanuatu are parliamentary republics. In Fiji, Samoa, and Vanuatu, a PM serves as head-of-government and a President head-of-state, known as ***O le Ao Mamalu o le Malo*** (head-of-state) in Samoa. In Kiribati and Nauru, the elected President is head-of-state and government.

The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and Palau are Freely Associated States (FAS) under three distinct Compacts of Free Association (COFA) agreements with the US. Each country's COFA outlines its unique terms with the US, while recognizing its sovereignty

and voluntary participation in the COFA, including an independent foreign policy. Under the COFA, among other terms, the US provides visa-free access to the US and payment for access to land for military installations in FAS territories.

Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), and American Samoa are US territories, though their relations with the US government vary. Guam is an unincorporated organized territory, the CNMI an unincorporated territory and commonwealth, and American Samoa an unincorporated unorganized territory. While residents of Guam and the CNMI are US citizens, those of American Samoa are considered US nationals, who may reside in the US and apply for citizenship.

Likewise, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna are French territories, whose relations with the French government vary. French Polynesia – comprising the Gambier Islands, Marquesas Islands, Society Islands, Tuamotu Archipelago, and Tubuai Islands – is a semi-autonomous overseas country. New Caledonia and Wallis and Futuna are territories known as overseas collectivities.

3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.

Many of Oceania's early inhabitants led rich spiritual lives. While little is known of early religions, many were likely polytheistic. Early inhabitants recognized gods and spirits that constructed the universe and influenced everyday life, believing in connections between the natural and spiritual worlds. Accordingly, many Oceanic people venerated ancestral spirits, which influenced outcomes in agriculture, war, pregnancy, and other events.

When European explorers reached Oceania in the 16th century, they introduced Christianity for the first time. In the 17th century, Spanish Roman Catholic missionaries operating from their base in the Philippines began gaining converts across the northern part of the region. In the late 18th century, British Protestant missionaries began proselytizing in eastern Polynesia. By the 19th century, various branches of Christianity had become well established in Oceania, as Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, and Seventh-day Adventists all established missions in the region.

Residents of several nations in Oceania rejected the colonial introduction of Christianity. Some spiritual leaders sought to isolate their communities from Christianity, while others combined local religious traditions with those of Christianity to form syncretic religions. However, in the 1970s, Christian movements opposed to traditional and syncretic religions flourished in the region. Many of these movements were Pentecostal.

Nevertheless, after centuries of colonization and missionary work, today, most people in Oceania are Christian. Over 90% of inhabitants in Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia identify as Christian. Of the small island nations, Fiji is the most religiously diverse. Although most Fijians identify as Christian, over 30% are Hindu or Muslim, primarily due to a large immigrant population. Notably, New Zealand is the only nation in Oceania in which Christianity is not the majority religion, as nearly half of New Zealanders identified with no religion.

4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).

Family life and relationships are fundamental elements of Oceanic societies. Regional inhabitants tend to maintain strong

connections with family members, supporting them emotionally and financially, while providing physical care for elderly or ailing kin if needed. Although residence patterns differ across the region, multiple generations often reside together in one household or live in close proximity. In some regions, female-headed households are common.

Most Oceania residents live in urban areas, notably 100% of Nauruans and over 92% of residents of Guam and the CNMI. However, some 74% or more of residents of PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu live in rural areas. As such, housing types vary significantly within and between nations. In much of the region, residents tend to live on one or a handful of principal islands, with the rest scarcely populated or uninhabited. Urbanization has changed life in many areas. As both men and women take advantage of the enhanced educational and employment opportunities available in urban areas, family structures have become more diverse.

Due to Oceania's diversity, courtship and marriage traditions vary significantly by group and location. While close family ties mean relatives have some influence over children's choice of spouses, men and women increasingly choose their own partners. Some couples marry in civil, religious, or traditional ceremonies, while others cohabitate but remain unwed.

5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

Some cultures in Oceania recognize a broad range of genders besides male and female. Although the cultures of Oceania tend to be patriarchal (men hold most power and authority) and privilege the male's role as provider and leader, some societies are traditionally matrilineal (inheritance, property, and the family name pass from mother to daughter), where mothers determine

a man's rank and status. In some places, primarily in Micronesia and Polynesia, society is organized into a hierarchical system based on heredity, in which rank and status are determined by sex-defined lineages. Conversely, society is more egalitarian (the principle that all people are equal) in Melanesia, where strong, persuasive men often achieve rather than inherit power.

Despite most countries' progressive gender equality laws and policies, women face continued challenges to their participation in the workforce. In much of the region, women still assume the traditional roles of wives and mothers, often having to balance both domestic duties and employment. Workforce participation rates vary by country. As of 2022, nearly as many women as men were employed in PNG and the Solomon Islands, while the ratio is closer to 50% in Fiji and Samoa.

As of late-2024, women held 46% nearly half of parliamentary seats in New Zealand, over 45% in Australia, and 9% in Fiji. Women occupied 9% or fewer of parliamentary seats in most other countries in the region. Only New Zealand has had multiple women heads-of-state. Women have been historically more involved in traditional than national political affairs.

Fertility rates have fallen significantly in recent decades, with Australia, Wallis and Futuna, and Palau averaging less than two children per woman. Women in Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Guam typically have an average of three children, though the rates have declined by about half since 1960. Abortion laws vary by country. While Australia's laws are the least restrictive, Palau and Tonga prohibit abortion with no explicit legal exception.

Australia and New Zealand are the only countries in the region that have legalized same-sex marriage. Although same-sex relations are permitted in some cultures, the governments of Kiribati, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Tuvalu criminalize homosexuality.

6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.

Oceania's linguistic diversity is unique, as the region contains more than 1,000 languages – over 20% of the world's total. PNG alone is home to over 840 languages, more than any other country in the world. Despite this linguistic variety, some linguistic groups are spoken by only a few dozen people. Consequently, some regional languages have become or soon will be extinct, as the children of native speakers opt to learn more widely spoken languages and dialects. English is commonly spoken in much of Oceania and is at least one of the official languages (in addition to indigenous languages) in most states that are not French territories.

7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) or culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

While education has improved across the region in recent years, quality and attainment vary. Social instability, poverty, economic inequality, natural disasters, and emigration negatively impact the delivery and quality of education. Generally, children from poor and rural backgrounds are less likely to attend school and more likely to receive a lower-quality education. While literacy rates in much of Oceania are above 90%, they are much lower in PNG and the Solomon Islands.

Public investment in education varies widely by location and does not always correlate to quality educational systems. In recent years, the Solomon Islands government has spent some 10-13% of GDP on education, though about one in four women remain illiterate. Meanwhile, Vanuatu spends below 5% of GDP on education and has a literacy rate of nearly 89%. Enrollment rates also vary widely. While over 96% of students of the appropriate age in Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, and New Zealand are enrolled in primary education, less than 75% are enrolled in PNG, RMI, and the Solomon Islands.

Many countries have 2-year community colleges but lack 4-year post-secondary institutions. Australia, New Zealand, and PNG have several colleges and universities, as do Guam and the CNMI. The University of the South Pacific was founded in 1968 with its main campus in Fiji and now has campuses in several other countries. Still, many residents travel to Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, or institutions outside the region to pursue post-secondary degrees.

8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most Western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. While this concept of time remains true for some countries in Oceania, in others, establishing and maintaining relationships takes precedence over meeting deadlines, punctuality, or efficiently accomplishing tasks. The workday tends to run on a similar schedule as in the US, though some businesses keep more informal hours or close for midday breaks, extending their hours into the evening. Social events often start at flexible times, after enough guests arrive.

While concepts of personal space vary by country, keeping an arm's length is the norm. Handshakes are usually the most common form of greeting, though nodding to acquaintances or

kissing close friends and family on the cheek are typical in many places. Conversational touching tends to be minimal except among close friends or family. While direct eye contact is common in places such as Fiji and PNG, intermittent or indirect eye contact is the norm in Kiribati, Samoa, and among certain groups like Aboriginal Australians.

The rhythm of daily life typically changes during national holidays, many of which reflect Christian traditions and historical events. As most countries in Oceania were colonies, many people celebrate national independence days with fanfare.

9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill, and style. Much of Oceania's art, architecture, dance, music, poetry, and sports reflect the region's Pacific location, colonial history, and modern global trends. Although dress varies by location and group, many people in Oceania follow recent US or European fashion trends and wear traditional attire only for holidays, special occasions, or ceremonies.

Music and dance vary greatly by country. Global rock and pop music, along with local variants that feature folk and country genres, are common across Oceania. Traditional music and dance in Micronesia and Polynesia tend to be connected with storytelling and poetry, while Melanesian dances usually emphasize movement, rituals, and the supernatural world. In Australia, indigenous dances are typically closely connected with music and song.

The most popular sport across the region is rugby, particularly in Australia, Melanesia, and Polynesia. National teams compete in rugby matches internationally and across Oceania. Some locals have relocated to play for international teams, becoming a mainstay of the sport. Some 20% of players in the 2011 Rugby World Cup identified as Pacific Islanders. In Micronesia, sports

introduced by Japan and the US are most popular: baseball in the FSM and Palau, and basketball in RMI. Soccer, known in many areas as football, is also widely played across Oceania. Other popular sports include cricket, swimming, and field athletics.

Traditional handicrafts such as woodcarving, leatherwork, and weaving are prevalent in many parts of Oceania. While literature was primarily an oral tradition in much of the region, popular novelists and poets have recently explored their unique history and cultural heritage. Australia's Patrick White won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973 for his psychological narrative work.

10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures, and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

While cuisine varies across the region based on local products and tastes, residents tend to rely on many of the same staple ingredients, notably seafood, starches like taro, cassava, and yams, and tropical fruits. Many dishes are cooked in coconut milk, and dried coconut is a popular ingredient. Pit-roasted pig, fish, and vegetables are common cuisine for ceremonies and celebrations in much of the region. The consumption of high-calorie, processed foods and Western-style fast food has become increasingly common in recent decades.

Health in Oceania has improved in recent decades as evidenced by decreased infant mortality rates and longer life expectancies. While Australia and New Zealand have more physicians per person than the US, all other countries have far fewer. Accordingly, many residents seek healthcare outside their home nation if immigration policies, personal finances, or government programs allow for treatment abroad. Inhabitants of isolated islands and rural areas face challenges to healthcare access.

Noncommunicable diseases, such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and chronic respiratory disease, account for most of the deaths in Oceania, though communicable diseases account for over 22% of deaths in Kiribati and the Solomon Islands and over 30% in PNG. Indigenous and low-income inhabitants often face more health challenges than their compatriots. Obesity is a significant problem – of the world's 10 countries with the highest rates of obesity, 8 are in Oceania. The availability of imported processed and preserved foods are largely responsible for Oceania's high levels of obesity.

11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. It details how countries allocate their resources by sector, trade with other countries, give or receive aid, and pay for goods and services within their borders.

Prior to colonization, most regional inhabitants subsisted on fishing, farming, and localized trade. In the colonial era, foreign governments and companies extracted natural resources such as minerals, agricultural products, oil, and fish. Today, tourism is the largest sector in much of Oceania. While Australia and New Zealand have advanced economies and financial markets, most other nations rely on foreign aid. Many inhabitants are also reliant on remittances from relatives living abroad. Economic dependence on foreign governments and organizations has caused many governments in the region to pursue rapid expansion of their tourism and extractive industry sectors.

Australia is by far the largest economy in Oceania, with GDP over $1.6 trillion in 2023. GDP per capita in Australia and New Zealand is more than double that of other countries in Oceania. Fiji, Palau, Nauru, and the US and French territories tend to have relatively high living standards, with GDP per capita generally above $10,000. On the other hand, GDP per capita in Kiribati,

and the Solomon Islands is below $3,500, where many residents live below the poverty line.

From 2020-21, Oceania confronted the collapse of the tourism industry and decreased remittances, largely due to COVID-19 pandemic. With trade and tourism rebounding, experts suggest annual GDP growth will stabilize around 3% in 2025-2027.

12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. Roads form the primary infrastructure in Oceania, though quality varies by country and tends to deteriorate in rural areas. Ports and piers are vital for local transportation and trade. Though air infrastructure is substandard in many places, airports are essential for tourism and reducing many islands' isolation.

Despite some investment in solar energy on outer rural islands, Oceania is largely dependent on fossil fuels. Apart from Australia, much of the region has limited energy resources and must import oil and gas to meet growing energy needs. Some countries, notably New Zealand, generate a large share of energy from hydropower.

New Zealand ranks highest in Oceania in a 2024 worldwide press freedom ranking. Observers generally consider media to be free in much of the region, though journalists are sometimes victims of government intimidation, threats of censorship, and eroding independence. Telecommunications infrastructure varies. As of 2022, Palau had the highest rate of mobile phone users at over 133 subscriptions per 100 people, compared to less than 40 in the FSM and RMI. Internet use ranges from about 27% in the Papua New Guinea to nearly 95% in Australia.

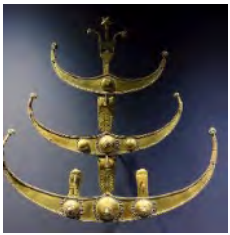
Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize Oceanic society at large, we will focus on specific features of society in Timor-Leste.

PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

1. HISTORY AND MYTH

Overview

Numerous independent Indigenous chiefdoms originally inhabited the island of Timor, until the first foreign merchants from Asia and the Middle East arrived in search of sandalwood in the 13th-15th centuries AD. Starting in the 16th century, the Portuguese Empire established trading posts on Timor and converted local chiefdoms to Catholicism. In the following centuries, inhabitants of mixed European and Timorese descent fought with the Portuguese and Dutch for control over the sandalwood trade. After the Japanese occupation of Timor during World War II, Portugal regained colonial control over the island. From 1975-99, Indonesia occupied present-day Timor-Leste despite a strong resistance movement. Instability in Indonesia and a 1999 referendum led to Timor-Leste's independence in 2002.



Early History

The first humans arrived on the island of Timor around 44,000 years ago. These early inhabitants migrated from East Asia to Maritime Southeast Asia (a group of islands in the Pacific Ocean that includes modern-day Timor-Leste, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines). The first Timorese used stone tools and sustained themselves on shellfish, fish, nuts, and sago (starch made from the trunks of palm trees). The discovery of fishhooks and large fishbones indicate that the early humans fished in deep waters. Cave paintings depicting humans with spears suggest that the first inhabitants also hunted.

Between 12,000-30,000 years ago, rising sea levels forced coastal inhabitants to move to the interior of Timor. Around 4,000-5,000 years ago, people known as Austronesians traveled

from mainland Asia and Taiwan to Maritime Southeast Asia, including Timor. Austronesian settlers brought knowledge of pottery, agriculture, and animal husbandry and mixed with the existing population of Timor.

Early Sandalwood Trade

The Timorese construction of ***tranqueiras*** (fortifications) coincided with the arrival of merchants from Asia and the Middle East in the 13th century. The presence of sandalwood – a wood used to make perfume, soap, oils, and furniture – attracted traders to Timor (see *Economics and Resources*). Several Chinese records from the 13th-15th centuries mention the island of Timor and its sandalwood forests. Similarly, merchants from the Persian Gulf and the island of Java in present-day Indonesia arrived on the western coast of Timor in search of sandalwood. The Timorese received silver, iron, porcelain, and cloth in exchange for this much sought-after resource.

During this period, the inhabitants of Timor organized themselves into many small, independent chiefdoms and kingdoms. Although each group maintained its political autonomy and distinct culture, most recognized the Wehali Kingdom as the supreme spiritual authority (see *Religion and Spirituality*). These chiefdoms and kingdoms often battled each other for territory.

Portuguese Arrival

In the early 16th century, the Portuguese Empire established trading posts in present-day India and Malaysia. From these bases, Portuguese merchants sailed to Timor to trade weapons, porcelain, and metals for Timorese sandalwood, honey, and wax. Portuguese priests of the Catholic Dominican order also traveled to Timor, converting several local chiefdoms to Catholicism (see *Religion and Spirituality*). In 1566, the Portuguese established their first permanent settlement on Solor, an island north of Timor. From Solor, merchants and priests made frequent trips to Timor.

Topass and Dutch Populations

Portuguese sailors and soldiers living on Solor married local inhabitants, granting them access to land ownership. This created a mixed Portuguese and native population known as the ***Tupassi*** ("Topasses," exact translation unknown, possibly "people of the hat"). The Topasses were Catholic and traded sandalwood on Timor. In 1613, the Dutch Empire captured the Portuguese settlement on Solor. Consequently, the Portuguese and Topasses relocated to Flores, another island north of Timor.

Conquest of Timor from Flores

In the mid-17th century, the Portuguese and Topasses began moving into Timor-Leste from Flores. Because the Dominicans had already converted many of the local chiefdoms to Catholicism, the Portuguese and Topasses encountered minimal resistance.

In 1642, the Portuguese and Topasses defeated the Wehali Kingdom which increasing their control over Timorese chiefdoms and the sandalwood trade. In the following years, the Portuguese and Topasses established their main settlement at Lifao (modern-day Oecussi, an enclave of Timor-Leste surrounded by Indonesia – see *Political and Social Relations*). Meanwhile, the Dutch controlled the western part of Timor from Kupang, a city in present-day Indonesia.

Topass Leadership

In 1629, Commander Jan de Hornay of the Dutch fort on Solor abandoned his military post and married a native woman on Flores. De Hornay's defection allowed the Portuguese to battle for and retake Solor from 1630-36. De Hornay subsequently established himself as the leader of the Topasses, and his sons António and Francisco continued the family's rule during the 17th and into the 18th centuries. At the same time, the da Costa family gained power and competed with the de Hornay family for control of the Topass population. Despite their rivalry, both families provided administrative leadership, establishing the

beginning of *Tupassi* rule and domination of the sandalwood trade.

Portuguese-Topass Rivalry

In 1701, the Portuguese installed António Coelho Guerreiro as governor of Lifao. Despite the presence of the Topasses, Guerreiro declared the city to be part of the Portuguese Empire. He also established the ***finta*** (tax) system which demanded tribute from non-Portuguese inhabitants in the form of sandalwood, honey, or food. Although they had cultural and religious ties to the Portuguese, the Topasses refused Portuguese control. As a result, Topass leader Domingos da Costa attacked Lifao and forced Guerreiro to flee in 1705.

The next Portuguese governor arrived in 1722 and faced continued attacks from the Topasses and their Timorese allies. In 1769, the Topasses finally expelled the Portuguese from Lifao. Moving east along the northern coast, the Portuguese founded a new settlement in Díli, the current capital of Timor-Leste (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Portuguese Conquest and Border Negotiations

During the late 19th century, the Portuguese expanded into the interior of Timor. Continued exploration of the island led to territorial disputes between the Portuguese and Dutch. In 1851, the Portuguese Governor José Joaquim Lopes de Lima signed a border treaty with the Dutch. The Portuguese gained control over the eastern half of the island, while the Dutch received the western side and the islands of Solor and Flores.

Because Lopes de Lima did not have permission from the King to sign the treaty, the Portuguese attempted to renegotiate throughout the 19th century. The exact boundaries remained unclear, and some Timorese chiefdoms had land on both sides of the border. A 1914 agreement finalized the border location.

Colonization of Portuguese Timor

With a general understanding of boundaries, the Portuguese formally began colonizing Timor-Leste. From 1847-1913, the Portuguese launched over 60 campaigns to conquer Timorese kingdoms. Modern guns, grenades, and boats aided the Portuguese expansion. Instead of making alliances with Timorese leaders as they had in the 17th and 18th centuries, the

Portuguese incorporated the chiefdoms into a colony. Portuguese Governor Affonso de Castro divided Portuguese Timor into 11 colonial ***distritos*** (districts). To reduce the power of native chiefs, subsequent colonial governments broke chiefdoms into smaller administrative units called ***sucos*** (villages).

Colonial Economy: In response to declining sandalwood reserves in the 19th century, the Portuguese promoted coffee production on large plantations. By the 1860s, coffee was Portuguese Timor-Leste's main export (see *Economics and Resources*). However, high taxes and the use of forced labor on coffee plantations sparked East Timorese revolts against the Portuguese. In 1887, one such revolt led to the death of the Portuguese Governor Alfredo de Lacerda Maia.

20th Century Society

In the early 1900s, most of the East Timorese population lived in rural areas and participated in subsistence agriculture; growing corn, root vegetables, and rice for personal consumption. Meanwhile, only a few thousand people lived in Díli. In 1930, the Portuguese Colonial Act brought Timor-Leste under the direct authority of Lisbon, the capital of Portugal, resulting in the restructuring of the colonial administration of Portuguese Timor. The Portuguese then classified the Timorese as ***indigene*** (Indigenous) and ***nao indigene*** (non-Indigenous). People in the *nao indigene* category, including the Topasses, became Portuguese citizens, participated in elections, and served in the colonial government. Along with Portuguese colonial officials, *nao indigene* inhabitants formed the island's political and business elite of the early 20th century, which has had long-term consequences that continue to this day.

World War II (WWII)

In 1940, the Japanese entered WWII, a conflict fought between the Allies (the US, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union) and the Axis Powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan). By the end of 1942, the Japanese had conquered most of present-day Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. While Portugal remained neutral in the war, Australian and Dutch forces invaded Timor-Leste in 1941 to prevent a Japanese occupation. Nevertheless, the Japanese captured the island of Timor a year later.

In response to the Japanese invasion, Dutch and Australian forces retreated to the mountains of Timor-Leste. Native Timorese volunteers provided food, shelter, and intelligence to the Dutch and Australian soldiers, and together, they conducted a guerrilla campaign against the Japanese. In late 1942, the Japanese formed an Army of Timorese called the Black Columns. Mostly from West Timor, these forces allied with the Japanese against the Australians, Dutch, and East Timorese.

In 1943, under pressure from the Japanese and Black Columns, the Dutch and Australian forces withdrew from Timor, allowing the Japanese to begin a brutal occupation of the island. This domination included mass killings, sexual abuse, and the destruction of over 90% of buildings. In 1945, the US dropped two atomic bombs on Japan, forcing the country to surrender. That same year, the Portuguese regained sovereignty over Timor-Leste. Meanwhile, the Dutch withdrew from their colony in West Timor which became part of Indonesia in 1949. The Japanese occupation led to the deaths of around 45,000-70,000 East Timorese, mostly through murder, starvation, and disease. An estimated 1,500 Japanese and 40 Australians died during the war on Timor.

Plans for Decolonization

From 1962-73, the United Nations (UN) supported Timor-Leste's right to self-rule despite its continued status as a Portuguese colony. In anticipation of decolonization, East Timorese political

parties formed in the 1970s (see *Political and Social Relations*). While the ***União Democrática Timorense*** (Timorese Democratic Union, or UDT) sought continued unification with Portugal, the ***Frente Revolucionária do Timor-Leste Independente*** (Revolutionary Front for an Independent Timor-Leste, or FRETILIN) wanted complete independence. Another party known as the ***Associação Popular Democrática Timorense*** (Timorese Popular Democratic Association, or APODETI) advocated for unification with Indonesia.

In 1974, the Carnation Revolution ended the 48-year Dictatorship in Portugal. The new Portuguese government promised to decolonize its overseas territories. That same year, Portugal sent Governor Mário Lemos Pires to Timor-Leste to oversee the independence process. Lemos Pires and East Timorese politicians agreed to create a transitional government composed of leaders from UDT, FRETILIN, and Portugal. They planned to hold general elections after 3 years.

International Influence

Despite the plan for gradual independence proposed by the Portuguese and East Timorese, Indonesian President Suharto sought to make Timor-Leste part of Indonesia. He believed that an independent Timor-Leste could provide refuge to Indonesian separatists or allow an enemy to invade the country. Further, Indonesia was an anti-communist ally of the US during the Cold War (1945-89), a period of geopolitical and ideological rivalry between the capitalist US and the communist Soviet Union. During this time, American and Australian leaders wanted to prevent the spread of Communism in Asia. In this context, Suharto's arguments that FRETILIN was a communist organization convinced the US and Australia to support the Indonesian annexation of Timor-Leste.

Civil War

In May 1975, an Indonesian propaganda campaign highlighting FRETILIN's communist ideology damaged relations between UDT and FRETILIN leaders. By August that year, the government collapsed after UDT staged a coup against

FRETILIN. In response, FRETILIN, which had support from the majority of the population, launched a counterattack against UDT forces. Troops that had been part of the Portuguese colonial Army formed FRETILIN's military wing called ***Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste*** (Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor, or FALINTIL). By September, FALINTIL had gained control over most of Timor-Leste which allowed FRETILIN to form a new government. The month-long civil war led to the deaths of between 1,500-3,000 people and caused about 10,000 East Timorese to flee to West Timor. Indonesian authorities forced the refugees, which included UDT leaders, to sign a declaration giving Indonesia permission to take over Timor-Leste.

Indonesian Invasion

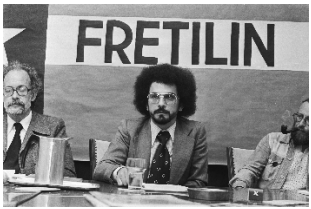
In October 1975, Indonesian troops captured several border towns in Timor-Leste. In anticipation of continued Indonesian attacks, FRETILIN leaders unsuccessfully requested a peacekeeping force from the UN. Consequently, Timor-Leste declared independence on November 28th, 1975, hoping to obtain increased international support. Led by President Francisco Xavier do Amaral and Prime Minister Nicolau Lobato, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste failed to receive recognition from the UN or any Western countries.

Indonesian Occupation and Brutality: The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste survived as an independent nation for 9 days before Indonesia launched a full-scale invasion. After 6 months of fighting, Indonesia formally declared Timor-Leste as the province of ***Timor Timur*** ("East Timor" in Indonesian). In 1976, Indonesia established a provisional government of *Timor Timur*, installing East Timorese, particularly those from the pro-Indonesia APODETI party, as administrators. During the occupation, the East Timorese suffered additional human rights abuses including massacres, torture, rape, and forced displacement. As a result, an estimated 60,000-100,000 East Timorese died during the first year of the Indonesian occupation

alone. The Indonesians moved approximately 373,000 East Timorese (about 60% of the population) to camps, and the fighting led to widespread famine. The Indonesian government also sent around 150,000 Indonesian settler-colonists to Timor-Leste and mandated the use of the Indonesian language in schools (see *Language and Communication*), seeking to crush the national unity of the East Timorese.

East Timorese Resistance

Throughout the 1970s, East Timorese guerrillas continued to fight against Indonesian forces. By 1980, the Indonesians had significantly reduced the strength of the East Timorese guerrilla forces, and an estimated 100,000-230,000 people had died. In 1978, Indonesian forces captured President Amaral and killed Prime Minister Lobato. By 1980, José Alexandre "Xanana" Gusmão had emerged as the new leader of the East Timorese resistance movement. While small-scale ambushes against the Indonesians continued under Gusmão, the new leader began incorporating a more sophisticated mix of armed resistance, international lobbying, and non-violent protest.



At the same time, East Timorese students studying in Indonesia, including Lucas da Costa, formed a clandestine resistance group known as ***Resistencia Nacional dos Estudantes de Timor-Leste*** (National Resistance of East Timor Students, or RENETIL). RENETIL organized demonstrations and mass protests in both Indonesia and Timor-Leste. Additionally, representatives of the Catholic Church and the East Timor Action Network (ETAN, a US-based advocacy group for East Timorese independence) traveled to other countries to rally support. Despite these efforts, international awareness of the Indonesian occupation remained low.

Santa Cruz Massacre: In 1991, Indonesian troops killed Sebastião Gomes, an East Timorese student activist. A few weeks later, over 1,000 citizens formed a funeral procession for Gomes at the Santa Cruz cemetery in Díli. The group quickly

began protesting Indonesian rule. Indonesian forces opened fire on the mourners, sparking a massacre that led to at least 250 deaths and 200 disappearances of East Timorese citizens.

Accounts of this event suggest extreme brutality by the Indonesian soldiers, who reportedly stoned some East Timorese to death and injected others with poison. Western journalists filmed the massacre and shared the footage with television networks worldwide. The videos sparked international outrage against the Indonesian occupation and increased support for East Timorese independence. Despite rising international pressure, Indonesian forces continued their occupation of Timor-Leste.

Continued Fight for Independence

With the newly found international attention, the East Timorese independence movement gained momentum in the 1990s. The Catholic Church and ETAN continued to attract support from abroad. As a result, two leaders of the East Timorese independence movement, José Ramos-Horta and Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, won the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts to stop the violence of the Indonesian occupation. In 1997, resistance leaders from UDT and FRETILIN joined the ***Conselho Nacional de Resistência Timorense*** (National Council of Timorese Resistance, or CNRT). The CNRT established a provisional government in preparation for future independence. Xanana Gusmão led the CNRT from prison.

Upheaval in Indonesia

During the late 1990s, economic collapse led to widespread protests against President Suharto in Indonesia. In 1998, Indonesian forces killed four student demonstrators at Trisakti University in their capital, Jakarta, sparking anti-government riots across the country. The demonstrations forced Suharto to step down. His Vice President, B.J. Habibie, assumed the Presidency and promised to change the country's stance on Timor-Leste among other domestic reforms.

Independence Referendum

In 1999, President Habibie announced that he would hold a referendum in Timor-Leste, allowing citizens to vote for continued integration with Indonesia or independence. That same year, Habibie released Xanana Gusmão from prison. After the announcement of the referendum, Indonesian forces, including Indonesian Army and pro-Indonesian residents, in Timor-Leste began a campaign to prevent voters from choosing independence. These militias burned entire villages, while murdering and kidnapping independence activists. Despite this violence, nearly 99% of citizens voted in the referendum. The results showed 78.5% of voters supported independence (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Indonesian Withdrawal: Shortly after the independence vote, the pro-Indonesian militias unleashed a wave of violence in Timor-Leste. They destroyed roads, electricity lines, water supplies, and about 70% of buildings. Additionally, Indonesian troops forcibly transported over 250,000 East Timorese to Indonesian refugee camps, mostly in West Timor. The Indonesian withdrawal led to the deaths of an estimated 1,400 people and the displacement of at least 300,000 others. The arrival of an Australian-led and US-supported International Force East Timor ended the scorched earth campaign. While some believe that the pro-Indonesian forces acted without the support of the Indonesian government, others argue that political and military leaders in Indonesia supported, or allowed, the campaign of destruction.

Transitional Government

In October 1999, the UN established the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) to stabilize the country and lay the groundwork for independence. The administration's first tasks included providing humanitarian aid and rebuilding infrastructure. UNTAET also sought to create institutions that would allow the East Timorese to establish

democracy without UN supervision. At the same time, the United Nations Mission of Support to East Timor (UNMISET) ensured security through a UN peacekeeping force.

In August 2001, UNTAET oversaw the first elections for the country's Parliament known as the Constituent Assembly (see *Political and Social Relations*). Candidates from 16 parties campaigned across the country, and some 93% of registered voters cast their ballots on the 2-year anniversary of the independence referendum. Because of its role in the resistance movement, FRETILIN won 55 of the 88 available seats. In September 2001, the FRETILIN-dominated Constituent Assembly drafted the nation's first Constitution. On May 20, 2002, Timor-Leste officially became an independent nation with Xanana Gusmão as President and Mari Alkatiri as Prime Minister. Timor-Leste became the 191st member of the UN on September 27, 2002.

Challenges of Independence

UNTAET successfully oversaw the first elections in Timor-Leste but failed to lay the foundations for a functioning economy. Due to the previous colonial exploitation of natural resources, Timor-Leste's economy in the early years of independence depended heavily on oil and gas revenues, as well as financial aid from Australia, the US, Portugal, Japan, and the European Union. Nevertheless, Timor-Leste and Australia signed the New Timor Sea Treaty in 2002, which gave Timor-Leste 90% of the royalties generated from oil in the Timor Gap (see *Political and Social Relations*). Despite foreign assistance and oil production, Timor-Leste remained one of Asia's poorest countries in the first years of independence (see *Economics and Resources*).

The lack of economic opportunities in the early 2000s drove some citizens to join opposition groups, particularly Colimau 2000, ***Sagrada Familia*** (Holy Family), and ***Conselho Popular pela Defesa da República Democrática de Timor-Leste*** (Council for the Defense of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste). Many former FALINTIL guerrilla fighters who did not

receive jobs in the national Army or police force joined these organizations in protest. These groups refused to recognize the legitimacy of the government and some participated in gang-like activity; particularly theft, blackmail, and assault.

In late 2002, a student demonstration in Díli against police brutality turned into a violent riot against the government. Rioters burned down Prime Minister Alkatiri's house, destroyed UN property, and looted Australian-owned businesses. Due to continuing lawlessness, the government requested that the UNMISET peacekeepers remain in the country.

Truth and Reconciliation: Despite the civil unrest, the Gusmão-Alkatiri government established the ***Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade, e Reconciliação de Timor-Leste*** (Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation in East Timor) in 2002. The Commission investigated human rights violations committed during the Indonesian occupation and attempted to reintegrate pro-Indonesian militia members into society. In 2005, the governments of Timor-Leste and Indonesia established the ***Comissão Verdade e Amizade*** (Commission of Truth and Friendship). Through this forum, Indonesia acknowledged its responsibility for human rights abuses during the occupation (see *Political and Social Relations*).

The 2006 Crisis

By 2005, most UNMISET security forces had left Timor-Leste. In January 2006, soldiers unhappy with favoritism in the Army submitted a petition to President Gusmão. By April 2006, these "petitioners" traveled to Díli to protest, joined by members of Colimau 2000 and many unemployed youth. Prime Minister Alkatiri called in the Army to restore order. In April, the protests escalated into violence, and government forces fired on the crowd. In May, Major Alfredo Reinado, a prominent Army leader, joined the rebel soldiers and led a 3-week campaign against government forces. During the violence, houses and businesses were looted and burned in Díli, causing

thousands of residents to flee. In response, the East Timorese government requested military assistance from Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Portugal. The foreign forces arrived in late May and restored order. Nevertheless, the violence displaced over 100,000 citizens and led to 30 deaths.

In June of that year, a civilian group accused Prime Minister Alkatiri of instructing assassins to eliminate his political opponents. Although later proven false, these allegations led to Alkatiri's resignation on June 26, 2006. José Ramos-Horta replaced Alkatiri as Prime Minister until elections in 2007. To maintain Timor-Leste's security, the UN established a new peacekeeping force known as the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT).

Modern Timor-Leste

In 2008, rebel soldiers involved in the 2006 crisis critically wounded President Ramos-Horta in an assassination attempt. His security forces killed rebel leader Reinado during the attack. That same year, rebels made an unsuccessful assassination attempt on Prime Minister Gusmão.

In 2012, political stability allowed UNMIT to withdraw from Timor-Leste. Since then, the country has had peaceful transitions of power, though key leadership positions seem to rotate among a small group of politicians. FRETILIN and ***Congresso Nacional de Reconstrução de Timor*** (National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction) have dominated politics in the modern era. Former leaders (including Xanana Gusmão, José Ramos-Horta, Mari Alkatiri, Taur Matan Ruak, and Francisco Guterres) of the resistance against Indonesian occupation remain major political figures. As of 2025, Xanana Gusmão is Prime Minister and José Ramos-Horta President. Milena Pires, appointed as Timor-Leste's Permanent Representative to the UN, was also an original member of the Constituent Assembly, where she advocated women's rights during the drafting of the nation's Constitution (see *Sex and Gender*).

Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths are usually an unverifiable story which embody a culture's values and explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of local heritage and identity. East Timorese folklore and mythology contain belief systems that have evolved over centuries (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Crocodile Creation Myth: Crocodiles are sacred creatures in Timor-Leste and often featured in origin myths. One such myth begins with a crocodile that became stranded on its way to the sea. A young boy rescued the crocodile and carried it to the water. Grateful for being saved, the crocodile promised to help the boy in the future. Years later, the boy asked the crocodile to take him on a journey around the world, and the crocodile carried him on its back for years. When the crocodile died, its body became the island of Timor. This myth explains why Timor resembles a crocodile when seen from above.

Darlau Mountain Myth: The Atsabe Kemak people, an Austronesian ethnic group from the northwestern part of Timor-Leste, believe a thick vine called ***cuha*** at the top of Darlau Mountain once connected the Earth and sky. The *cuha* allowed people from Earth to visit gods in the sky. Additionally, humans could hear the voices of ***Lelo Hine*** (sun god) and ***Lelo Mane*** (moon god). In those days, when people were sick or had other problems, they could seek help from the gods on top of Darlau.

One day, a man sent his wife to get fire from the top of Darlau. When the woman reached the top of the mountain, she heard music coming from the sky. She used the *cuha* to visit the gods and remained in the sky realm for a long time. Back on Earth, the man became angry at his wife's absence. In response, he sharpened his sword and climbed to the top of Darlau. The man cut the *cuha*, causing the sky to separate from the Earth. In Atsabe Kemak mythology, this story explains why humans no longer hear the voices of the gods.

2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Official Name
Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste

Republika Demokratika Timor Lorosa'e
(Tetun)

Republica Democratica de Timor-Leste
(Portuguese)

Political Borders
Indonesia: 157 mi
Coastline: 439 mi

Capital
Díli

Demographics
Timor-Leste's population of almost 1.4 million is growing at an average annual rate of around 1.1%. Timor-Leste has a young population, with nearly 65% below the age of 30 in 2022. Over 70% of East Timorese live in rural areas, with the remainder living in cities. The western third of the country, where the capital city Díli is located, tends to have higher population density.

Flag
Officially adopted in 2002, Timor-Leste's flag is red with a black triangle on the hoist side superimposed on a slightly longer yellow triangle, with a white five-pointed star in the center of the black triangle. Red represents the national liberation struggle, black overcoming the country's obscurantism (deliberate restriction of the spread of knowledge), yellow colonialism, and white hope for the future. The flag derives from a design used by the ***Frente Revolucionária do Timor-Leste Independente*** (Revolutionary Front for an

Independent East Timor, or FRETILIN) during the colonial resistance in the 1970s (see *History and Myth*).

Geography

Located within Southeast Asia, the island of Timor is on the eastern end of the Malay Archipelago and is the largest of the Lesser Sunda Islands. Timor-Leste is bounded by Indonesia to the West, the Banda Sea to the North, and the Timor Sea to the South. Australia lies around 250 mi South of Timor-Leste across the Timor Sea. Timor-Leste's territory consists of the eastern half of Timor Island, the Oecussi Enclave (located on the northwestern side of Timor Island geographically surrounded by Indonesia), and the offshore islands of Ataúro and Jaco. With a total area of about 5,740 sq mi, Timor-Leste is slightly larger than Connecticut.

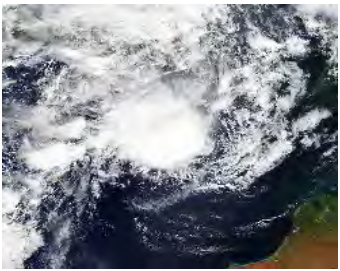
Its landscape is rugged and mountainous, with half of the land area having a slope of 40° or greater. Lowland plains are along the country's coasts. The northern coast has narrow plains with rocky headlands, while the plains on the southern coast are wider. Highland plains are located around the country, mostly near Baucau, Losalos, and Maliana. ***Foho Tatamailau*** ("Grandfather of All," Mount Tatamailau/Ramelau) is the country's highest point, reaching 9,721 ft. It is part of the Central Cordillera mountain range spanning the center of the country and holds sacred value for the East Timorese. The country has lush forests, covering approximately 35% of the land area. Historically, Timor-Leste was known for its abundance of sandalwood; although centuries of Portuguese, Japanese, and Indonesian have endangered the native species (see *History and Myth*).

Timor-Leste's rivers and lakes fluctuate between seasons (see "Climate" below). Ira Lalaro is the country's only sizable lake, ranging from 4-21 sq mi. Timor-Leste has smaller salt lakes, marshes, hot springs, and mud pools. Its rivers are short and

fast flowing. Covering almost 15% of the country, the Loes river system is the country's largest and longest (50 mi). Located within the Coral Triangle, Timor-Leste is surrounded by significant marine biodiversity, including more than 500 species of coral.

Climate

Timor-Leste has a tropical climate with high humidity and warm temperatures averaging 75.4°F in July and 77.7°F in November. June-August are the coolest months. There is minimal regional variation in temperature, although higher elevations have cooler weather. Timor-Leste has two seasons: the wet season (December-May) and the dry season (June-November) that differ by precipitation amounts. Precipitation in August-September ranges from 0.5-0.7 in and December-March between 9-10 in. The South typically has a 1-3 month longer wet season.



Natural Hazards

Timor-Leste is vulnerable to several types of natural hazards, including floods, landslides, earthquakes, tsunamis, and cyclones (tropical storms similar to hurricanes). Earthquakes are common because of the country's location near major tectonic plates. In 2021, Tropical Cyclone Seroja caused heavy rains, flash floods, and landslides across Timor-Leste, killing 42 people. The storm affected more than 31,000 residences, also damaging infrastructure, livestock, and crops.

Environmental Issues

Timor-Leste emits few greenhouse gases due to its agricultural economy (see *Economics and Resources*) and large rural population. Unsustainable agricultural practices and historical exploitation of natural resources have damaged the environment. The destruction of irrigation infrastructure during the Indonesian occupation (see *History and Myth*) also contributed to issues with water quality and access.

Deforestation, land degradation, and water scarcity are common. In a 2022 climate vulnerability index, Timor-Leste ranked 160 of 187 countries, making it one of the world's most at-risk countries. Timor-Leste has adopted several environmental policies to address challenges, including the National Determined Contribution Timor-Leste 2022-30.

Government

Timor-Leste is a semi-presidential republic that divides into 13 ***municipios*** (municipalities/districts). The *municipios* subdivide into 65 administrative posts, 442 ***sucos*** (villages), and 2,225 ***aldeias*** (hamlets). Timor-Leste is engaged in an on-going effort to decentralize and structure their subnational government. Municipal governments will consist of an elected assembly, mayor, and a municipal administration led by an appointed civil servant. The relationships between local and national governments are not formally defined. However, *suco*- and *aldeia*-level authorities are often the most visible and accessible forms of governance for the East Timorese.

Drafted in 2001 by the Constituent Assembly (body whose purpose was to draft a Constitution, see *History and Myth*) and adopted in 2002 upon independence, Timor-Leste's Constitution establishes the country's semi-presidential system, citizens' rights, and separation of powers. The Constitution was modeled after Portugal's, with certain adaptations from Mozambique's.

Executive Branch

The current President, José Manuel Ramos-Horta, took office in May 2022. The President has symbolic, legislative and diplomatic responsibilities, is head-of-state, and presides over the Council of State and Superior Council of Defense and Security. Additional presidential duties include promulgating laws, vetoing legislation, and organizing national referenda. Elected by an absolute majority vote, the President can serve up to 2

consecutive 5-year terms. A run-off election is held between the top two candidates if no candidate receives more than 50% of the vote.

By contrast, executive power is vested in the Prime Minister (PM), who is head-of-government. With the support of the Council of Ministers, the PM is responsible for directing and guiding government action and policy. The PM is appointed by the President following legislative elections. Timor-Leste's current PM, Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão of the ***Congresso Nacional de Reconstrução de Timor*** (National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction, or CNRT), took office in July 2023 (see *History and Myth*).

Legislative Branch

Timor-Leste's ***Parlamento Nacional*** (National Parliament) is a single-chamber legislature with 52-65 seats. For the period 2023-25, it has been composed of 65 Deputies. The *Parlamento Nacional* has legislative, supervisory, and political decision-making powers. Deputies are elected to the *Parlamento Nacional* through a closed-list proportional representation system to serve 5-year terms. Citizens vote for a political party rather than an individual candidate. Political parties receive seats in proportion to the number of votes they garner. A party must receive 4% of the vote to have a seat. The entirety of Timor-Leste is a single electoral district, with no requirements for geographic representation.

Judicial Branch

Timor-Leste's judicial system, as provided for by the Constitution, is not fully operational. The Supreme Court of Justice and the Supreme Administrative, Fiscal, and Audit Court have not yet been created. Currently, the judiciary consists of the ***Tribunal de Recurso de Timor-Leste*** (Court of Appeals of East Timor) and district courts. The Court of Appeals is the highest court in the country and has jurisdiction over all legal,

constitutional, and electoral matters. The Court of Appeals consists of the Court President and a varying number of judges. The Supreme Council for the Judiciary appoints the judges, and the *Parlamento Nacional* appoints one judge. The President appoints the Court President from among the judges to serve a 4-year term. Reforming the judiciary, particularly addressing its capacity issues, is a priority for the Timor-Leste government. Additionally, moving away from the Portuguese language, which favors the educated elite, is high on the reform agenda. Despite her prior imprisonment by PM Gusmão, Lúcia Lobato has been appointed to lead these efforts.

Political Climate

Since Timor-Leste achieved full independence in 2002, the country has sought to create a stable democratic political system. In 2006, fighting between rebel soldiers and government forces threatened this stability, but United Nations (UN) peacekeepers helped restore order (see *History and Myth*). Since 2012, Timor-Leste has had free and fair elections, where parties or coalitions of parties can compete for power. Timor-Leste has one of the most consolidated democracies in Southeast Asia. In Freedom House's 2024 Freedom in the World report, which quantifies the condition of political rights and civil liberties, Timor-Leste received a 72 of 100, the highest score of Southeast Asian countries, followed by the Philippines (58) and Indonesia (56).

Parties that originated during Timor-Leste's' resistance against colonization and occupation dominate contemporary politics (see *History and Myth*). In 2002, the first government of Timor-Leste was formed by FRETILIN, which was established in 1974 and led the independence movement. In 2007, Xanana Gusmão left FRETILIN, formed the CNRT, and served as its first leader. Since 2007, FRETILIN and CNRT have competed for power in elections, with other parties forming coalitions to compete for power to question the establishment.

This competition is characterized by patronage politics (exchanging of favors for political support), with leaders frequently switching loyalties for political expediency. The personalities of Xanana Gusmão of CNRT and Mari Alkatiri of FRETILIN are central to their current party's identification. Both leaders are resistance-era figures that have held repeat positions in Timor-Leste's executive branch. Alongside them, other resistance-era figures including José Ramos-Horta, José Maria Vasconcelos (also known as Tuar Matan Ruak), and Francisco Guterres (also known as Lú-Olo) have consistently held important political positions. These five figures are referred to as the "Generation of '75."

Established in 2022, the ninth government of Timor-Leste is a coalition comprising the CNRT and the ***Partido Democrático*** (Democratic Party). Although the *Parlamento Nacional* is led by Maria Fernanda Lay (CNRT), FRETILIN maintains the second most seats and heads the opposition. ***Kmanek Haburas Unidade Nasional Timor Oan*** (Enrich the National Unity of the Sons of Timor), the ***Partidu Libertasaun Popular*** (People's Liberation Party), and the ***União Democrática Timorense*** (Timorese Democratic Union) also have seats in the *Parlamento Nacional*.

The priorities of the current government are consistent with goals of most previous governments since independence: development of the oil and gas industry (see *Economics and Resources*), membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN, see "Foreign Relations" below), and improvement of social infrastructure.

Even though Timor-Leste has made great progress in their consolidation of democracy, the country still faces various political challenges. The interests of middle- and upper-class East Timorese in Díli dominate national politics, while the interests of the country's large rural and youth population are neglected. This issue is intensified by the dominance of the resistance-era political class leveraging patronage politics,

especially among those who fought in the independence movement together. Concurrently, East Timorese increasingly perceive corruption as widespread. In the 2024 Corruptions Perceptions Index, Timor-Leste ranked 73 of 180 countries, better than Indonesia (99) and the Philippines (114), but worse than Australia (10) and the US (28).

Defense

The ***Forças de Defesa de Timor Leste*** (East Timor Defense Force, or F-FDTL) is a unified military force consisting of ground, maritime, and air forces. The F-FDTL was established in 2001 from the ***Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste*** (Armed Forces for the Liberation of East Timor), the national liberation movement guerilla Army.

F-FDTL is charged with protecting the country from external threats and combating violent crime. Its role in internal security is not clearly delineated from the ***Policia Nacional de Timor-Leste*** (National Police Force of East Timor, or PNTL), occasionally causing jurisdiction issues. Since 2006, the government has been in the process of restructuring the forces, outlined by the 2007 "Force 2020" plan. The force has received training from Australian and US personnel. The F-FDTL's limited equipment consists of donations from China, South Korea, and the US.

In 2020, the government authorized the Law on Obligatory Military Service, requiring compulsory military service of 18 months for all East Timorese citizens aged 18-30.

Army: Consisting of 2,250 active-duty troops, the Army is the F-FDTL's only branch. The Army consists of 2 light infantry battalions, a military police platoon, and a logistics support company. The Naval Element comprises 250 active-duty personnel organized into 3 patrol and coastal combatants. The Air Component has 2 fixed-wing aircraft (1 intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance and 1 transport).

TIMOR-LESTE

Timor-Leste Defense Force


General


Lieutenant General


Major General


Brigadier General


Colonel


Lieutenant Colonel


Major


Captain


Lieutenant 1st Class


Lieutenant 2nd Class

Security Issues

Timor-Leste faces numerous security challenges such as resource disputes, criminal groups, political tensions, and an understaffed and overwhelmed PNTL. Retaliation is common in society, and personal disputes occasionally escalate into violence. Gender-based violence (see *Sex and Gende*r) and maritime security are also causes for concern. Given the state of the PNTL and the potential for underreported crime as context, Timor-Leste ranked third best on a criminality index score of the 11 Southeast Asian countries, behind Singapore and Brunei. Timor-Leste has no major external conflicts, and the threat of terrorism is low.

Resource Disputes: Due to barriers to accessing justice and mediation, violence is sometimes used to settle disputes over land and other natural resources. Historically, land in rural areas lacked legal status and was owned and used by local communities. The colonial Portuguese and Indonesian administrations overlooked this customary land tenure system.

Further, Indonesian occupation caused mass displacement and infrastructure damage, changing settlement patterns and land availability. Since 2002, Timor-Leste's legal system, influenced by the civil law of various countries, has complicated the country's land and property ownership system. The government has tried to mitigate these issues by introducing a land registration system (2013) and land legislation package (2017).

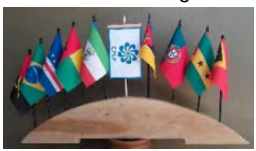
Criminal Groups: Martial and Ritual Arts Groups (MRAGs) are the country's primary type of criminal group, with some members belonging to state security forces. MRAGs have been involved in various public disturbances, including regular violent incidents and the 2006 crisis (see *History and Myth*). Additionally, MRAGs sometimes instruct their members to support political parties, intimidating rivals, and even forming parties themselves. In 2023, incidents among MRAGs throughout Timor-Leste resulted in 4 fatalities, 26 injuries, and damage to 21 homes and 10

vehicles. In response, the government banned the practice of martial arts from 2023-24. Other criminal groups include street and motorcycle gangs, and foreign criminals conducting drug trafficking, money laundering, and cybercrime according to the International Criminal Police Organization or INTERPOL.

Political Conflict: In recent years, Timor-Leste has not had any major political conflicts, although they are a vulnerability. Violence is sometimes present around elections or important political decisions, particularly among supporters of rival parties. Prior to the 2018 parliamentary elections, clashes among supporters of rival political parties resulted in 16 people injured and 2 scorched vehicles.

Foreign Relations

Since independence, Timor-Leste has pursued economic and political relations with other countries. It is a member of the UN, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Asian Development Bank, and World Trade Organization. Timor-Leste is also a member of regional and issue-oriented multilateral organizations, including the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries, the G7+ Coalition (a grouping of 20 fragile and conflict-afflicted states), and the Timor-Leste, Indonesia, and Australia Growth Triangle Economic Development Group. Timor-Leste participates in international environmental efforts, such as the Coral Triangle, an initiative on marine environmental issues, and the Our Ocean Conference.



Relations with the UN: From 1999-2002, the UN Transitional Administration in Timor-Leste oversaw the nation's transition to self-governance. Multiple UN peacekeeping forces were deployed to Timor-Leste, especially following the events of the 1999 referendum and 2006 civil unrest (see *History and Myth*). In 2020, the Timor-Leste government and the UN signed the UN Sustainable Development Framework 2022-25. Soldiers from Timor-Leste have also contributed to UN peacekeeping missions in Kosovo, Lebanon, and South Sudan. Since 2018, there has been a UN peacekeeping operations training center in Timor-Leste.

ASEAN: Since 2011, Timor-Leste has sought membership in ASEAN (made up of Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Burma, and Cambodia), by signing treaties, opening embassies in each member country, and implementing legal reforms. In 2022, Timor-Leste was granted official observer status, and, in 2023, the member states approved a road map for full ASEAN accession.

In 2025, Timor-Leste is planned to become ASEAN's 11th member. In March 2025, the Philippines publicly questioned Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN after Timor-Leste refused to grant the Philippines' request to extradite expelled Filipino lawmaker Arnolfo Teves Jr.

Relations with Indonesia: Timor-Leste has a historically violent and contentious relationship with Indonesia (see *History and Myth*). In 2002, the two countries formally established diplomatic relations. Since, they have sought to reconcile historical disagreements and establish cooperation, although tensions have sometimes been high. In 2005, Timor-Leste and Indonesia established the Commission of Truth and Friendship tasked with investigating the acts of violence around the 1999 independence referendum (see *History and Myth*).

Timor-Leste has not pursued prosecution of any Indonesian officials for their crimes against humanity, which undermines the rule of law within its society. In 2023, the two countries signed a biliteral investment treaty, aiming to develop economic zones in border areas. That same year, biliteral trade between the countries was over US $391 million, increasing by 12.3% from 2022.

Relations with the US: Since 2002, the US and Timor-Leste have had diplomatic relations. The US offers training programs for its legislators, ministerial staff, and the F-FDTL. US agencies including the Departments of State, Justice, and Defense, and the Peace Corps, have a presence in the country. Altogether, the US has provided over US $500 million in assistance to Timor-Leste. The two countries have little direct trade, although

investment opportunities between the countries are growing. Timor-Leste's Petroleum Fund (see *Economics and Resources*), which manages revenues from oil and gas, is heavily invested in US stocks and government bonds, tying the country's financial stability closely to the US economy.

Relations with Australia:
Timor-Leste and Australia officially established a close diplomatic relationship in 2002. Australia has led UN peacekeeping efforts during Timor-Leste's transition to independence and participated in subsequent deployments. Australia is Timor-Leste's largest international donor, providing an estimated US $123.3 million in total Official Development Assistance in 2023-24. Australia supports Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN, allocating US $11.8 million in funding for the effort from 2022-29. In 2023, bilateral trade between Australia and Timor-Leste totaled almost US $243 million.

However, ongoing maritime disputes over the Timor Sea have caused bilateral tension between the two countries. In 2012, the revelation that the Australian Secret Intelligence Service had spied on Timor-Leste's PM to gain an advantage in negotiations over the Timor Sea and oil fields strained relations. In 2016, Timor-Leste initiated the compulsory conciliation procedure under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea to settle the dispute with Australia. As a result, both countries agreed to the Maritime Boundary Treaty in 2018, allowing both countries to exploit the Greater Sunrise Gas Fields together (see *Economics and Resources*).

Relations with China:
In 2024, President Ramos-Horta signaled a shift toward closer ties with China, marked by critical remarks about the US and an affirmation of the "One China" policy regarding Taiwan, a reversal of his stance in 1997. China has already demonstrated its long-term interest in Timor-Leste through infrastructure investments such as roads, public buildings, and a new port. Following President Ramos-Horta's comments, the two

countries entered a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership under the Belt and Road Initiative. Timor-Leste hopes this initiative will attract investment for its Tasi Mane oil project (see *Economics and Resources*), which PM Gusmão considers his personal legacy.

Ethnic Groups

Timor-Leste is home to many ethnic groups that speak over 16 distinct languages, although some of these are not well documented. Timor-Leste's ethno-linguistic groups broadly fall into two geographic regions: Austronesian and Melanesian-Papuan. Most Indigenous groups including the Tetun (also spelled Tetum) Prase, Mambai, Tetun Terik, Baikenu, Kemak, Tokodede, Waima'a, Galoli, Naueti, Idate, Midiki, and others are of Austronesian descent. The Bunak, Fataluku, and Makasae are predominately of Melanesian-Papuan origin. Each ethno-linguistic group tends to have its own unique culture and identity and occupies certain areas of Timor-Leste.

The Tetun (or Tetum) is the country's largest ethnic group, compromising over 37% of the Indigenous population and, speaks one of the country's official languages (see *Language and Communication*). The group lives mainly around Díli and the neighboring northern coast. Although its members speak the same Austronesian language, the Tetun fall into several different groups, notably the Tetun Prasa and the Tetun Terik.

The Mambai is another large ethnic group, comprising around 17% of the population and mostly living in the central mountains. The remainder of the Indigenous population is made up of Makasae (11%), Baikenu (6%), Kemak (6%), Bunak (6%), Tokodede (4%), Fataluku (4%), Wiama'a (2%), Galoli (1%), Naueti (1%), Idate (1%), Midiki (1%), and other ethnicities (3%).

Timor-Leste also has small populations of ***mestiços*** (mixed Timorese and Portuguese origin), Chinese, Indonesians, Portuguese, and Arabs. As of 2020, there were only about 8,400 international migrants in the country or 0.6% of the population.

Timor-Leste's ethnic composition changed during Indonesian occupation. Some 250,000 East Timorese fled to West Timor, Australia, Portugal, and other countries. Since independence, particularly between 1999-2002, the majority of those who previously fled were able to return. Additionally, Indonesia implemented a transmigration program for the Indonesian ethnic Malay population to move to Timor-Leste. Between 1975-99, around 30,000 Indonesians relocated to parts of Timor-Leste. As a result, the country's Muslim population increased (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Social Relations

Traditionally, Timor-Leste was divided into small kingdoms with complex hierarchical social organizations (see *History and Myth*) that centered around kinship and community ties. ***Lulik*** (Tetun for "sacred" or "holy") refers to spiritual beliefs held by East Timorese that often determine social relationships. Particularly in rural areas, the community respects an ***uma-lulik***, a traditional sacred house in which artifacts belonging to their ancestors are kept (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

East Timorese's colonization and occupation have been central to uniting the ethnically diverse country and forming a national identity. Nonetheless, during the 2006 unrest (see *History and Myth*), a regional East and West divide emerged, perpetuated by stereotypes that Westerners are less assertive and that Easterners resisted occupation more adamantly.

Timor-Leste's society also divides along rural-urban lines. While around 55% of the population lives in multidimensional poverty, it is higher in rural areas (70%) and lower in cities (29%). Rural areas tend to have limited access to water, medical services, education, and employment. On the other hand, Díli hosts most of the country's upper class. Urban residents have greater employment opportunities and access to government services. Timor-Leste is sometimes reffered to as a "dual society" because of the notable imbalance between urban and rural populations.

3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Overview

According to a 2022 census, about 97% of East Timorese residents are Roman Catholic, 2% Protestant, and less than 1% follow other religious traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and others. Traditionally, animistic (the belief that all things have a spirit or soul) ideologies and practices have characterized the religious landscape. The blending of animism with other religious affiliations, known as syncretism, has been a common feature.

The Constitution (see *Political and Social Relations*) defines Timor-Leste as a secular state and provides freedom of conscience, worship, and religious instruction. Religious groups have to register with the government as nonprofit organizations to receive tax exemption status and government support. The Catholic Church has the dominant influence in government affairs, and designated public holidays often fall on Catholic holy days (see *Time and Space*). Religious services typically are delivered in Portuguese or Tetun (see *Language and Communication*).

Early Spiritual Landscape

The island of Timor's early inhabitants led rich spiritual lives, with local tribes (see *History and Myth*) sharing many animistic spiritual beliefs and rituals. They typically feared and worshipped ***matebian*** (ancestor) ***rai-nain*** (spirits) and believed these spirits existed through animals, stones, water, and magical objects. *Rai-nain* could either be good or evil, and early Timorese often sought their permission before entering certain natural areas such as mountains, springs, and forests. Some tribes also worshipped ***Uru-Watu*** (the Sun and Moon) as their gods.

The traditional ***uma lulik*** (sacred house) was a center for Timorese religious practices. To construct them, early Timorese asked *ra-nain* for permission to use natural materials like palm trees and bamboo. An elder ***lia-na'in*** (owner of the world) headed the sacred house as a human spiritual leader. These leaders were believed to communicate with the *matebian* to receive guidance, often in the form of songs or poems. The *lia-na'in* performed rituals, resolved conflicts, and told ancient stories.

These rituals included sprinkling water on animals before reciting prayers and killing them by piercing their heart with a sharp object. The animals' spilled blood blessed the *uma lulik*, allowing the *lia-na'in* to communicate with the *rai-nain*. Additionally, to sustain connections with nature, inhabitants offered a sheep's or cow's head to trees and waters. Following rituals, early Timorese showed gratitude to the *rai-nain* by making offerings such as ***tais*** (handwoven fabric, see *Aesthetics and Recreation*), food, and carvings.

Introduction of Christianity

In the 16th century, Dutch and Portuguese traders introduced Christianity to Timor (see *History and Myth*). However, the religion did not have much influence until 1642, when Portuguese Dominican priests began converting early East Timorese. While these conversions remained limited, Catholic priests and nuns successfully established churches and schools to baptize and educate sons of the local elite (see *Learning and Knowledge*). While some East Timorese converted, many continued to practice local religious traditions.

Religion in the early 20th Century

While under Portuguese rule, missionaries were allowed to expand their efforts. In 1899, Father Sebastião Aparício da Silva

established a mission in the remote region of Soibada. Da Silva sought to increase the population's faith, knowledge, and practical skills. He established two ***colégios*** (schools) for youth to focus on religious instruction. By 1909, the Jesuits, a Catholic order, established six schools in Soibada (see *Learning and Knowledge*). However, in 1910, following the Portuguese expulsion of the Jesuits, missionary activity ceased.

In 1940, Prime Minister António de Oliveira Salazar (see *History and Myth*) signed a concordat (an agreement between the Catholic Church in Rome and a secular government relating to matters of mutual interest), establishing a closer link between the Church and Portuguese government. The same year, Pope Pius XII (leader of the Catholic Church) authorized the establishment of the Diocese of Díli. The Diocese strengthened the Catholic presence on Timor, and in the 1960s, increased the Church's involvement in social services, education, and culture.

Religion under Indonesian rule

In 1975, Timor-Leste declared independence from Portugal, and shortly after, the country fell under Indonesian rule as a province known as ***Timor Timur*** ("East Timor" in Indonesian, see *History and Myth)*. The Indonesian Constitution prohibited polytheistic religions, requiring adherence to one of the five officially recognized religions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Due to the Catholic Church's influence, East Timorese who professed Catholicism as their faith increased from about 20% to over 90% between 1974-84.

The Catholic Church remained independent of Indonesian control and was able to proselytize (seeking to convert others to a religion, belief, or opinion) with little interference. In the 1980s, Bishop Martinho da Costa Lopes began writing letters to international organizations describing the atrocities committed by the ***Tentara Nasional Indonesia*** (Indonesian National Armed Forces, or TNI) against the East Timorese (see *History and Myth*). Many priests and nuns also became outspoken about

the violence, which often resulted in their murder. While Lopes reached out to the Vatican (the Catholic Church's headquarters), it offered limited support for fear of disrupting relations with Indonesian Catholic followers, who accounted for around 3% of Indonesia's population.

Following Lopes' resignation in 1983, Carlos Ximenes Belo became the Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Díli, and later the Bishop. Belo also spoke out against the TNI, which resulted in Pope John Paul II's visit to Timor-Leste in 1989. During his visit, the Pope spoke against human rights violations, though he did not mention the Indonesian authorities. For his activism, Belo received the 1995 Nobel Peace Prize, sharing the award with José Ramos-Horta. In 2020 the Vatican imposed disciplinary sanctions against Belo after receiving allegations of his committing child abuse in the 1990s. While Belo remains a symbol for the unification of the Catholic Church and Timor-Leste's independence, the Vatican has forbidden him from having any contact with the East Timorese people.

Religion Today

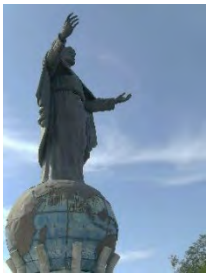
Between 1999-2002, freedom of religion generally was practiced throughout the country and regulated by the United Nations Transitional Administration in Timor-Leste (UNTAET), which oversaw the country's transition to independence (see *History and Myth*). UNTAET also promoted religious diversity, encouraging individuals to practice their faith without fear of persecution. Timor-Leste's subsequent Constitution criminalizes religious discrimination, with individuals who incite or encourage it facing imprisonment of 4-12 years. Likewise, written and social communications used to spread violence based on race, color, ethnicity, or religion carries a prison sentence of 2-8 years.

Following the departure of UNTAET in 2002, the Catholic Church maintained a signifigant influence in social services, peacebuilding, and community support. In an effort to address disparities resulting from years of conflict, the Church oversaw

the construction and operation of numerous school buildings (see *Learning and Knowledge*) and medical facilities. The Church also focused on rebuilding church buildings, providing East Timorese a sense of stability and community, especially for those who experienced significant trauma (see *History and Myth*).

The Catholic Church remains actively engaged in education, healthcare, social welfare, and public issues. The Constitution recognizes the Church's contribution to the country's liberation and grants it autonomy, allowing it the right to establish and oversee schools, receive tax benefits, and protect its cultural heritage. In addition, Catholic religious leaders often preside over government ceremonies.

The Catholic Church accounts for over 1,300,000 East Timorese followers, representing around 97% of the population. Nevertheless, it is common practice for members to only attend church for special events such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals (see *Familiy and Kinship*). The country is divided into three dioceses: the Archdiocese of Díli; the Diocese of Maliana; and the Diocese of Baucau. In 2019, the Diocese of Díli was elevated to an Archdioces and its Bishop, Virgílio do Carmo da Silva, became an Archbishop.



In 2022, Pope Francis made Silva a Cardinal, a title that includes electing the Pope and providing counsel for him and the government of the Roman Catholic Church throughout the world. The Pope also visited Timor-Leste as part of his apostolic journey to Asia and Oceania in 2024. Upon Pope Francis' death in 2025, the East Timorese Catholic community came together to remember him, attendance numbering more than 1,500 at one cathedral with hundreds more in the surrounding streets.

Syncretic Faith: According to the Timor-Leste government, most Christian East Timorese continue to blend Catholicism with traditional spiritual beliefs, a syncretic practice commonly referred to as ***Catholulik***, a fusion of Catholic faith and *uma lulik*.

During the colonial period, many East Timorese remained animist, while incorporating limited Catholic rituals and beliefs. East Timorese generally recognize significant milestones like birth, marriage, and death with traditional ceremonies alongside Catholic rites (see *Family and Kinship*). Additionally, many festivals and celebrations (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*) blend traditional dances and rituals with Catholic prayers and icons. They refer to the country as ***rai lulik*** (sacred land) and maintain sacred natural sites, where they practice Catholic worship. Likewise, Catholic priests are often referred to as ***amo lulik*** (masters of the sacred). ***Tara Bandu*** (a belief system of communal conservation, literally "mark a prohibition," similar to a "no fishing" sign) is widely practiced in Timor-Leste. Seeking harmony with nature and peace within the community, *Tara Bandu* blends customary law, spiritual beliefs, and religious prayers.

Other Religions: During Indonesian rule, military forces stationed in Timor-Leste established Protestant churches. Despite many Protestants leaving the country following the country's independence, there is still a small group of followers. Timor-Leste is home to about 28,000 Protestants, who primarily live in the Kupang area and account for around 2% of the population. These followers include Methodists, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and non-denominational congregations.

Additionally, ethnic Malay immigrants from Indonesian islands brought Islam to Timor-Leste. While some East Timorese converted and a small population of Arab Muslims immigrated to the country, the number of Islamic followers remains low. The country is home to around 2,800 Muslims, many of whom live in the capital city, Díli. While Hinduism accounts for less than 1% of the population, President José Ramos-Horta praised it for contributing to global peace, tolerance, and cultural diversity in 2024. Other minority religions that account for a small number of followers include Buddhism, the Bahá'í Faith, Chinese folk religion, and others.

4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Overview

The family is the center of East Timorese life and provides emotional, economic, and social support. Their families are typically close-knit and involved in members' life decisions. Family networks often extend beyond immediate relatives to include distant relatives, close neighbors, and comrades during the resistance (see *History and Myth*), and friends.

Residence

Timor-Leste began to urbanize in the 19th century, though rapid movement into cities did not occur until after the country gained its independence in 2002 (see *History and Myth*). As of 2023, some 32% of East Timorese live in cities and about 20% in the capital, Díli. While electricity and indoor plumbing are widely available, there exists a lack of access to safe sanitation services. Economic issues, poor government planning, and inadequate infrastructure have resulted in the lack of potable water, mostly in rural areas.

Rural: While rural homes historically have used materials such as bamboo, mud, and wood, today, concrete and brick are becoming more common. Traditional roofs made of palm leaves, thatch, or grass are still prevalent in many areas. Rural residents tend to engage in subsistence farming, growing crops primarily for personal consumption rather than for sale (see *Political and Social Relations*). This practice typically requires 2-5 acres of land to cultivate gardens and raise livestock. While overall, rural residences have access to basic drinking water services, reliance on surface water and lack of sanitation remain significant challenges. As of 2020, about 78% of the rural population had access to clean drinking water, but only about 22% had facilities for basic hygiene.

Urban: In cities, houses and townhouses are more common than apartments. Most homes are rectangular and consist of 3-4 bedrooms. Cities such as Díli and Baucau, lack roads and

adequate building standards. Additionally, rapid urbanization has led to makeshift settlements that lack basic services such as water supplies, waste management, and electricity.

Family Structure

Traditionally, the father is the primary breadwinner and head-of-household, while the mother is responsible for domestic tasks and childcare. In some urban areas, traditional attitudes are changing, and more women are working outside the home (see *Sex and Gender*). In rural areas, most women engage in agricultural activities like tending crops, feeding livestock, and collecting wood. Households tend to be multigenerational and include extended family members, with other relatives living nearby. Traditionally, newly married women are expected to move in with their husband's family and become part of their in-law's family network. Likewise, younger generations are expected to care for their aging parents and relatives.

Children

Couples traditionally had 5-7 children, though average childbirth rates have decreased over the last 2 decades (see *Sex and Gender*). Older siblings and extended family members often assist with childrearing. From a young age, children are expected to help with household chores such as washing dishes and clothes. Children also commonly engage in community activities like sports and games.

Birth: After giving birth, most East Timorese women follow traditional practices to ensure the well-being of mother and baby. These practices involve keeping the mother warm, due to the belief that heat expels bad blood. She typically remains indoors for at least 40 days to protect herself and her newborn. During this period, the mother consumes warm foods and drinks (see *Sustenance and Health*) such as ***kaldu*** (chicken soup), ***batar-da'an*** (sweet corn stew), warm water, and sometimes alcohol. While some mothers are aware of the potential harm alcohol can cause to their newborns, they often wear tight clothing around their chest, believing it will prevent the alcohol from passing to

the baby while breastfeeding. Bathing in warm water is also common, though the mother's hair is not washed in the initial days after birth. Fires are frequently lit in enclosed areas around the mother and baby to create a heated environment. Due to isolation and limited access to healthcare facilities, formal postnatal care is uncommon.

Naming: While naming conventions vary (see *Language and Communication*), children are often named after Catholic saints or other Biblical figures (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Additionally, some children are named after a previous family member or ancestor.

Rites of Passage

East Timorese Christians mark life's milestones with rites of passage (see *Religion and Spirituality*). For example, Christian families tend to baptize babies within a few weeks of birth. These children tend to go on to celebrate Catholic communion and confirmation rites of passage at ages 10 and 14-16, respectively.

Dating and Courtship: Couples typically begin dating in their teens, often meeting at school, through friends, or leisure activities. Relationships are usually kept private until both partners are committed, as many consider dating to be a serious activity resulting in marriage. Couples tend to avoid public displays of affection, even after marriage.

Weddings: Before the wedding, couples take part in an engagement ceremony. This event typically begins with the groom's family presenting the bride with gifts such as ***tais*** (woven fabric, see *Aesthetics and Recreation*) or jewelry. They also pay the bride's parents an agreed-upon ***barlake*** (dowry), which usually consist of livestock, alcohol, or money. Traditionally, the *barlake* is paid-in-full before the wedding, although some families opt to pay it over time. The bride's parents usually give the groom a gift, like a ring, to symbolize the bond between the two families.

Traditional marriages are conducted by a ***lia-na'in*** ("owner of the world," a spiritual leader, see *Religion and Spirituality*), though

most East Timorese also have a religious ceremony performed by a priest. The ceremony usually occurs in a church, followed by a large celebration with family, friends, and neighbors. The festivities include food, drinks, music, and dancing. Traditional attire is often worn (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*), with men and women donning ***kaibauk*** (headdresses) and ***sarongs*** (a long piece of cloth wrapped around their waist or chest). After the wedding, the groom is referred to as a ***mane foun*** (new man), and the bride is referred to as ***feto foun*** (new woman).

Divorce

While it is not a common practice in Timor-Leste, exact divorce figures are unknown. It carries a social stigma that can create significant economic pressures, especially for women. Married women, who become part of their husband's family, often find it difficult to return to their birth family after divorce.

Death

After death, East Timorese typically keep the deceased's body in their home for 1-3 days. During this period, friends and family visit to pay their respects and bring gifts and food to the family. A funeral usually takes place shortly after death, comprising ***haha metan*** ("black words," or funeral rites and rituals) to ensure the deceased's spirit rests. Family and friends accompany the coffin, singing Christian hymns and reciting prayers. After the burial, many mourners return to lay flowers on the grave.

The ***ai-funan moruk*** (bitter flowers) ceremony is held 7 days after the burial, with the ***ai-funan midar*** (sweet flowers) held 14 days afterwards. The family of the deceased holds a 40-day vigil to ensure their relative's spirit has transitioned from this life to the next and avoid offending them. Additionally, their graves often feature a mix of Catholic and animist symbols, reflecting the blend of religious and cultural influences (see *Religion and Spirituality*). About a year after the funeral, the ***Kore Metan*** (taking off the black) ceremony is held to mark the end of the mourning period. During this observance, family and friends repay any outstanding debts and share stories of the deceased's life.

5. SEX AND GENDER

Overview

Historically, the Timor-Leste social system was mostly patriarchal (men hold most power) and patrilineal (inheritance, property, and the family name passes from father-to-son). However, a few ethno-linguistic groups were matriarchal and matrilineal (mother-to-daughter). During the struggle for independence and subsequent transition to a sovereign nation (see *History and Myth*), Timor-Leste made progress towards securing women's rights. Nonetheless, East Timorese women encounter obstacles to equal participation in political, economic, and social spheres. In a 2022 gender inequality index, Timor-Leste ranked 103 out of 165 countries, higher than neighboring Indonesia (109) but lower than the US (44).

Gender Roles and Work

Domestic Work: Since the end of the Indonesian occupation (see *History and Myth*), East Timorese women have more roles outside the home. The loss of husbands and male family members made many women the sole provider for their family. Despite this change, the dominant social expectation in Timor-Leste remains that women are responsible for childcare and domestic work, while men work outside the home. In 2023, East Timorese women spent an estimated 17% of their day on unpaid care and domestic work, while men spent 7%. This is comparable to the average daily time spent in Eastern and Southeastern Asia for women (15%) and men (6%).

Labor Force: As of 2024, some 30% of women worked outside the home, compared to 42% of men. Female labor-force participation in Timor-Leste is significantly lower than Indonesia (53%), the US (57%), and Australia (57%). They often hold informal and low-wage jobs such as housekeeping and caregiving. These roles offer few protections, making women more vulnerable to exploitation and unfair treatment. As of 2022, women account for around 25% of employees in a managerial position and head about 32% of companies in the country.

Gender and the Law

Since its establishment, the government of Timor-Leste has worked to institutionalize women's rights. During the drafting of their Constitution, a Gender Constitution Working Group was established to ensure that women's rights were included. When the Constitution was adopted and implemented in May 2002, it stated that there should be no discrimination against men and women in all spheres of life. It also guarantees that every citizen has the right to work and choose their profession, regardless of gender. In 2008, Timor-Leste's Secretariat for Equality and Inclusion was established and is responsible for promoting and supporting the role of women in Timor-Leste through revising laws, policies, government programs, and budgets.

Timor-Leste's Labor Code entitles mothers to 12 weeks of maternity leave (10 weeks must be taken after delivery), and fathers receive 5 days paternity leave. The employer pays both. Timor-Leste's minimum legal age of marriage is 17, although exceptions are made for age 16 with parental consent.

Gender and Politics

East Timorese women gained the right to vote in 2002, and in 2012, an amendment to the electoral law mandated the national party lists include at least 33% females. This gender quota has been successful in increasing women's representation at the national level. As of 2024, women comprise 38.5% of the National Parliament, higher than the US (29% in the House and 26% in the Senate) and the Southeast Asia average (23.3%).

Additionally, Maria Fernanda Lay became Timor-Leste's first female President of the National Parliament in 2023. Timor-Leste has yet to have a female President or Prime Minister. Women represented about 5% of ***suco*** (village) and 3.8% of ***aldeia*** (hamlet) chiefs in 2019.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Among the crimes reported to the police in Timor-Leste, GBV is the largest category. Around 59% of females aged 15-49 have experienced physical or sexual violence by their partners. The

high levels of intimate-partner violence are rooted in widespread social acceptance. In 2023, some 69% of women aged 15-49 thought that it is justified for a husband to hit or beat his wife under certain circumstances. Timor-Leste has adopted some laws and initiatives to address GBV. In 2010, The Law of Domestic Violence criminalized this activity. In 2012, the country released its first National Action Plan on GBV. In 2022, the third plan was released, the National Action Plan for GBV 2022-32.

Sex and Procreation

Timor-Leste has a relatively high fertility rate, though it has declined in the 21st century. From 2002-22, Timor-Leste's fertility rate decreased from 6 births per woman to 3, higher than Indonesia (2.2), Australia (1.6), and the US (1.5). Timor-Leste's adolescent fertility rate was 28 births per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 in 2022, same as Indonesia (28) but higher than the US (14).

The country's high adolescent fertility rate is connected to the persistence of child marriage. Around 15% of women aged 20-24 years old were in a marriage or union before age 18.

East Timorese women face barriers to accessing resources for their healthcare (see *Sustenance and Health*). As of 2022, some 23% of women aged 15-49 declared an unmet need for family planning, double the rate for Southeast Asia (11%). Abortion is permitted in Timor-Leste if necessary to save the woman's life, safeguard her health, or for fetal impairment.

Homosexuality in Timor-Leste

Same-sex marriage or other unions are not recognized in Timor-Leste, although homosexuality has been legal in the country since 1975. Timor-Leste has no broad legal protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation.

At this time, the US State Department has a Status of Forces Agreement in place for Timor-Leste. Service members will be held accountable to the Uniformed Code of Military Justice for violations regarding same-sex marriage.

6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Language Overview

Timor-Leste's Constitution recognizes Tetun (or Tetum) and Portuguese as official languages. Both languages are used in education, government, media, and society. Citizens tend to use Tetun more frequently than Portuguese. Their Constitution also recognizes Indonesian and English as working languages for civil and business matters. Additionally, residents usually speak an Indigenous language as their mother tongue.

Tetun

This language belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian branch of the Austronesian language family. Residents tend to speak the Tetun Díli dialect which developed in Díli during Portuguese colonial rule (see *History and Myth*). Since the mid-19th century, Tetun has served as Timor-Leste's ***lingua franca*** (Frankish tongue, a language used for communication between people who do not share a mother tongue). Around that same time, Portuguese Catholic missionaries began using Tetun for religious instruction (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Like English, Tetun uses the Latin alphabet and incorporates words from Portuguese and Indonesian. As of 2022, around 70% of East Timorese over the age of 5 can read and write in Tetun, with over 99% of citizens between the ages of 5-24 able to do so.

Portuguese

Português (Portuguese) belongs to the Romance branch of the Indo-European language family. Merchants, priests, and colonial administrators from Portugal brought Portuguese to the island of Timor in the 16th century (see *History and Myth*). Upper-class East Timorese learned Portuguese until the end of colonial rule in 1975. As of 2022, around 40% of people over the

age of 5 can read and write in Portuguese. Although the government mandates the use of both Portuguese and Tetun in schools, only about 59% of people ages 5-24 understand Portuguese. This policy creates other problems, particularly in areas where the local language is not Tetun, as many children understand only their Indigenous language (see *Learning and Knowledge*). Nevertheless, the country continues to use Portuguese primarily in government.

Although Portuguese uses the same alphabet as English, only foreign words, for example **kilómetro** (kilometer), contain the letters "k," "w," and "y." The language has four additional consonant sounds: "ç" (pronounced like the "s" in bus), "ch" (pronounced like the "sh" in shave), "nh" (pronounced like the "ni" in onion), and "lh" (pronounced like the "lli" in billion). Besides some minor pronunciational differences, the Portuguese spoken in Timor-Leste is the same as the Portuguese used in Portugal.

Indonesian

As of 2022, about 30% of people in Timor-Leste speak Indonesian, which is also known as "Bahasa Indonesia." Although Indonesian tends to be a secondary language, it is the mother tongue of the approximately 8,000 Indonesian citizens living in Timor-Leste.

During the Indonesian occupation from 1976-99 (see *History and Myth*), Indonesian was Timor-Leste's official language. Consequently, citizens who grew up during this period typically speak Indonesian. Today, some East Timorese associate the Indonesian language with the brutality of the Indonesian occupation. Nevertheless, Indonesian remains an important language for business in parts of Timor-Leste.

Other Languages

In 2022, around 15% of citizens could read and write in English. Some schools and private tutors offer English classes. Additionally, foreign companies and development organizations tend to operate in English.

There are also over 30 Indigenous languages in Timor-Leste. While most come from the Austronesian language family, others belong to the Papuan family. Residents typically speak one of these Indigenous languages in their villages and use Tetun to communicate with people from other ethnic groups. The most spoken Indigenous languages are Mambae (about 273,000 speakers), Makasae (about 156,000 speakers), and Kemak (about 83,000 speakers).

Communication Overview

Communicating competently in Timor-Leste requires some knowledge of Tetun or Portuguese and the ability to interact effectively using language. This notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). These forms of communication ensure statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

Communication Style

East Timorese tend to be friendly and indirect communicators. To avoid causing disappointment, residents generally provide positive answers to questions. For example, they sometimes say “yes” when they actually mean “no.” Accordingly, a person’s tone and body language are generally more important than the literal meaning of their words.

They tend to be more comfortable with silence than Americans, even pausing before answering a question to indicate that they have considered their response carefully. Interrupting a speaker and talking loudly are considered rude in Timor-Leste. Additionally, East Timorese tend to avoid bragging or drawing attention to themselves in public.

Eye contact is important to them, as it conveys respect and attentiveness. The amount of personal space depends on the situation. Among friends and family, East Timorese tend to maintain less than an arm’s length of separation. More personal space is given to strangers, elders, and those of higher status.

Light touching tends to occur among friends and family but rarely between acquaintances (see *Time and Space*).

Greetings

Although standard greetings vary by region and context, a handshake with direct eye contact is acceptable in most situations. East Timorese handshakes do not involve any up-and-down movement but are simply a grasp of hands.

Men typically greet male friends and relatives with a handshake. Women usually greet female friends and family with a light kiss on the cheek. Male and female friends tend to shake hands or give a light kiss on the cheek. To show respect, children generally greet elders by bowing and kissing the back of the older person's hand.

Greetings are typically accompanied by the Portuguese-influenced Tetun phrases ***bondia*** ("good morning," from the Portuguese ***bom dia***), ***botardi*** ("good afternoon," from the Portuguese ***boa tarde***), and ***bonoiti*** ("good evening/night," from the Portuguese ***boa noite***). Friends and family commonly ask each other **diak ka lai**? ("how are you?" in Tetun). Upon encountering a neighbor, East Timorese typically say ***ba neebe*** ("where are you going?" in Tetun). ***Adeus*** (goodbye), ***até amanyá*** (see you tomorrow), and ***até logu*** (see you later today) are common ways of saying goodbye in both Tetun and Portuguese. On the phone, locals typically verify the identity of the other person calling before saying hello.

Names

A typical East Timorese name contains first and middle names followed by at least one surname. First names commonly come from Portuguese and have Christian origins, such as ***Maria*** (Mary), ***José*** (Joseph), and ***João*** (John). They tend to use shortened forms of their names as nicknames. For example, Isabel becomes "Iza" and António "Atoi." The prepositions ***de***, ***da***, ***das***, ***do***, and ***dos*** ("from" or "of" in Portuguese) feature in some Portuguese surnames like "da Silva" or "dos Santos."

Indonesian and Indigenous surnames are also common. Women generally take their husband's surname, and children their father's surname.

Forms of Address

While forms of address depend on age, status, and relationship; they are generally formal and courteous. In casual conversation, people of the same age typically place ***maun*** ("brother" in Tetun) or ***mana*** ("sister" in Tetun) in front of the person's first name. When addressing older people or those of higher status, East Timorese put ***senyór*** ("sir" in Tetun) and ***senyora*** ("madam" in Tetun) before the person's first name. For older acquaintances of lower status, East Timorese use ***tiu*** ("uncle" in Tetun) and ***tia*** ("aunt" in Tetun). The term ***alin*** ("little brother/sister" in Tetun) is used for younger people regardless of family relationship.

Conversational Topics

After initial greetings, East Timorese typically engage in conversation about family, current events, and the weather. While the Indonesian occupation can be a sensitive topic, they are generally willing to discuss their country's history with foreign visitors.

Gestures

East Timorese often use hand gestures while speaking. Residents tend to point with an outstretched arm and indicate an affirmative response by raising their eyebrows. Touching people on top of the head and using the left hand to pass objects are considered disrespectful gestures.

Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/ and click on "Resources" for access to language training and other resources.

Useful Tetun Díli Words and Phrases

English	Tetun Díli
Hello	Olá / Elo
Yes	Sím
No	Lae
Thank you	Men say “Obrigadu” / Women say “Obrigada”
Please	Favór ida
You’re welcome	Nada
Excuse me	Lisensa / Kolisensa
Sorry	Deskulpa
What’s your name?	Ita nia naran saida?
My name is ____	Hau naran ____
Where are you from?	Senyór/a hosi nebee? (formal) / Maun/mana hosi nebee? (informal)
How are you?	Senyór/a diak ka lae? (formal) / Maun/mana diak ka lae? (informal)
I am well	Balun diak / Balun aat
I am from America	Hau hosi Amérika
Where are you going?	Baa nebee?
Good morning	Bondia
Good afternoon	Botardi
Good evening / Good night	Bonoiti
See you tomorrow	Até amanyá
See you later	Até logu
Goodbye	Adeus / Hare dalan didiak
I do not speak Tetun	Hau la hatene Tetun
I don’t understand	Hau la komprende
How do you say ___ in Tetun?	___ iha tetun dehan saida?
How much does it cost?	Ida hira?
Do you speak English?	Ita hatene Ingles ka lae?
What is this?	Nee saida?
Yesterday	Horiseik
Today	Ohin loron
Tomorrow	Aban
Where is the bathroom?	Hariis fatin iha neebe?
Can I wait for the bus here?	Bele hein mikorlet iha ne'e ka lae?
What time does the bus arrive?	Bus too tuku hira?
How far is it?	Dook ka lae?
Car	Kareta
Taxi	Taksi
Bus	Bus / Mikrolét

Useful Portuguese Words and Phrases

English	Portuguese
Hello	Olá
Yes	Sim
No	Não
Thank you	Men say “obrigado” / Women say “obrigada”
Please	Por favor
You’re welcome	De nada
Excuse me	Com licença
Sorry	Desculpe / Perdão
What’s your name?	Como é que te chamas?
My name is ___	O meu nome é___
Where are you from?	De onde você é?
I am from the US	Eu sou dos EUA
How are you?	Como estás?
I am well	Estou bem
Nice to meet you	Prazer em conhecer você
Goodbye	Tchau
Good morning	Bom dia
Good day / Good afternoon	Boa tarde
Good evening / night	Boa noite
I don’t speak Portuguese well	Não falo bem português
I would like a ___	Eu gostaria de um ___
I don’t understand	Eu não entendo
How much is this?	Quanto custa?
What is this?	O que é isto?
Do you speak English?	Você fala inglês?
How do you say ___ in Portuguese?	Como você diz ___ em português?
Yesterday	Ontem
Today	Hoje
Tomorrow	Amanhã
Where is the bathroom?	Onde fica a casa de banho?
How do I get to ___?	Como chego ao (à) ___?
Is it very far?	É muito longe?
Where does this bus go?	Para onde vai esse ônibus?
What time does the bus come?	A que horas chega o autocarro?
Where is the taxi stand?	Onde é que fica o ponto de táxis?
Taxi	Táxi
Bus	Autocarro / Microlet
Bus stop	Paragem de autocarro

7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 68.1%
- Male: 71.9%
- Female: 64.2% (2018 estimate)

Early Education

Before the development of formal education, early East Timorese informally transmitted values, skills, beliefs, historical knowledge, and a sense of community to younger generations. Parents taught their children practical skills for daily life such as farming, hunting, and fishing. The entire community also aided in teaching children social norms and values. To understand spiritual beliefs and social responsibilities, children participated in communal rituals and ceremonies (see *Religion and Spirituality*). These events emphasized the importance of nature, as well as respect for elders and ancestors.

Portuguese Education

In the 16th century, Portuguese missionaries began traveling to the island of Timor at large to spread Catholicism (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Various Catholic orders established schools to educate the sons of the local elite in religion and basic literacy. These schools promoted religious conversion and aimed to teach local youth the Portuguese language (see *Language and Communication*). However, this instruction primarily served colonization efforts rather than expanding East Timorese education (see *History and Myth*).

In 1899, Jesuit missionaries arrived in Soibada with the goal of teaching the Indigenous people faith, knowledge, and practical skills. They established two ***colégios*** (schools) for Soibada's youth. To help sustain the remote schools' facilities, vocational schools opened to teach carpentry, masonry, and agriculture. However, upon the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1910, educational activities ceased. Outside of Soibada, most East Timorese youth

did not attend formal schooling, instead, following traditional instruction practices through the late 19th century.

By 1909, the Portuguese had established 17 public schools with around 1,000 students. School enrollment gradually increased in the 1920s-30s, though access to school buildings remained limited. The Portuguese delegated the central administration of education to the Catholic Church, which constructed and operated school buildings. Instruction primarily emphasized religious education and Catholic values. It also included subjects like math, geography, and history, with a focus on literacy to facilitate reading religious texts. Despite these efforts, the majority of East Timorese remained illiterate.

After World War II (see *History and Myth*), the Portuguese aimed to strengthen Timor-Leste's role as a colony at large by expanding public education (see *Economics and Resources*). In 1952, they opened the first public secondary school, the ***Liceu Dr. Francisco Machado*** (Dr. Francisco Machado Lyceum), named after the Portuguese Minister for the Colonies. The purpose of the school was to prepare the population for lower-level public administration roles. Throughout the 1960s and early 70s, enrollment in primary and secondary education increased to about 60,000 students. Nevertheless, the Portuguese did not prioritize education, and around 93% of the population remained illiterate in 1973.

Education under Indonesian Rule

During Indonesian occupation (1975-99, see *History and Myth*), the government recognized education as a means of promoting Indonesian culture and history. They introduced mandatory primary public education for children ages 7-12 to ensure their assimilation into society. The government initiated an "Education for All" program to establish school buildings nationwide, even in remote areas. To staff the schools, Indonesian teachers immigrated to Timor-Leste, working under the fear of losing their jobs. Most were Indonesian soldiers, primarily focused on instilling obedience and teaching Indonesian history.

In the 1980s, Indonesia enacted a national curriculum emphasizing history, geography, and culture from the Indonesian perspective. Additionally, the language of instruction was changed from Portuguese to Bahasa Indonesian. In 1986, the government established the ***Universitas Timor Timur*** (University of East Timor), offering courses in teacher training, management, and agriculture. Higher education expanded further in 1990 with the establishment of the ***Politeknik Díli*** (Díli Polytechnic).

In 1994, compulsory education extended to 9 years for children ages 7-15, which significantly increased enrollment rates across all levels but the quality of education remained low. Furthermore, schools lacked classroom materials and qualified teachers. Additionally, some East Timorese hesitated to send their children to Indonesian schools due to the political indoctrination.

After the referendum in 1999, the Indonesian Army and pro-Indonesian militias launched a campaign of destruction and violence across Timor-Leste (see *History and Myth*). Many teachers became targets of intimidation, with most fleeing the country out of fear. Similarly, student activists from *Universitas Timor Timur* fled, protesting Indonesian occupation and bringing international attention to its atrocities. By the end of the destruction, only about 5% of the country's educational institutions remained. The school system, along with the government and legal system (see *History and Myth*), required complete reconstruction.

Education After Independence

Between 1999-2002, the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) oversaw the country's transition to independence (see *Political and Social Relations*). Following independence, UNTAET prioritized resources to help rebuild the educational system by constructing schools, distributing textbooks, and training teachers. At the same time, the Catholic Church pursued reopening its schools, while local communities – often with support from NGOs – established

informal, ad hoc schools. By 2001, these combined efforts had enrolled approximately 240,000 students in primary and secondary education. Portuguese and Tetun were reinstated as the official languages of instruction, in an effort to standardize education regardless of students' Indigenous mother tongues.

In 2002, the fledgling Timor-Leste government aimed to make education more accessible, improve literacy, and expand higher education. In 2008, the Basic Law of Education passed, mandating universal public education for all citizens, with an emphasis on equal opportunity and access to quality education. As a result, literacy in Portuguese and Tetun increased from about 50% in 2007 to around 70% by 2020, though this figure does not reflect literacy in other Indigenous languages spoken across Timor-Leste.

Modern Education

Today, the government provides for education, which is compulsory for children ages 6-14. Most students attend government-run schools, although some enroll in private, often religious, schools. In 2019, about 13% of primary-age students attended private, fee-based schools, higher than the US (9%) but significantly lower than neighboring Indonesia (23%) and Australia (30%). While most public schools follow the national curriculum, some private schools that cater to wealthier families teach according to the curricula of global educational programs. The quality of education tends to be much higher at private schools. All public and religious schools require uniforms, though some private institutions do not.

The Ministry of Education oversees all school accreditation and assures educators meet national benchmarks. While Timor-Leste has improved its educational system in the past 2 decades, it continues to face significant challenges: insufficient teaching materials, inadequate facilities, and a shortage of trained teachers. Urban-rural disparities magnify these issues, leading to high failure and dropout rates, especially among children in rural and poor urban areas. The COVID-19 pandemic further impacted students in these communities, with the

majority lacking access to Internet services for remote learning (see *Technology and Material*), resulting in decreased enrollment in 2020 and 2021.

A country with a diverse cultural history and over 30 active languages (see *Language and Communication*), Timor-Leste faces the challenge of choosing the language of instruction. Consequently, the government launched the Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education project in 2012, aiming to instruct young students in their native languages. This approach improved literacy and retention rates, while helping teachers develop effective instructional methods.

In 2020, the government amended the education law to mandate the use of Portuguese in schools. Other policies aimed at improving educational equality include the National Policy Framework for Preschool Education (2014) and the Inclusive Education Policy (2017).

Pre-Primary: Public schools in Timor-Leste offer preschool education for children ages 3-5 to prepare them for primary school, especially those who are socio-economically disadvantaged. Despite the existence of a national curriculum, preschool educators still lack teaching materials, hindering effective implementation. Some rural communities have even established community pre-schools as an alternative delivery model for early learning.

Early childhood programs emphasize developing cognitive and social skills through drawing, singing, and playing. Instruction also focusses on language development in Tetun and Portuguese (see *Language and Communication*). In 2020, some 28% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in pre-primary education.

Primary Education: This level comprises 6 grades divided into 3-year cycles starting at age 6. The curriculum typically includes language, history, math, social studies, and science. Other

lessons focus on peacebuilding, tolerance, conflict resolution, and inclusion in order to cultivate a culture of peace and understanding (see *Political and Social Relations*). During the first 2 years of primary school, instruction is offered in Tetun (see *Language and Communication*), with an emphasis on reading and writing. Starting in grade 3, Portuguese is introduced, gradually increasing through grade 6. Upon completion of primary education, students are granted a ***certificado de conclusão do ensino primário*** (certificate of completion of primary education). In 2018, some 92% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in primary education.

Secondary Education: Lower secondary education comprises grades 7-9, continuing primary school with general education courses. Students who complete this level receive a ***diploma de educação básica*** (certificate of basic education). Upper secondary education offers either academic or vocational programs and is optional for children ages 15-17. The academic track typically includes math, science, literature, and social studies, resulting in a ***diploma de ensino secundário*** (high school diploma). The vocational track provides students with skills and training for specific trades like agriculture, engineering, and business, leading to certificates in those fields. As of 2018, about 63% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in secondary education.

Post-Secondary: While all of Timor-Leste's universities are located in Díli, several offer satellite campuses in other locations. The National University of Timor-Leste is the country's only public university, founded in 2000 to replace the *Universitas Timor Timur*. There are also a number of private universities like the Díli Institute of Technology, Timorese Catholic University, and the ***Universidade da Paz*** (University of Peace). These institutions offer programs in various fields like business, technology, science, and education. International universities in Australia, Portugal, and Indonesia offer partnerships with East Timorese universities to promote educational development and global cooperation.

8. TIME AND SPACE

Overview

East Timorese tend to value interpersonal connections and formality in business. They typically have a relaxed attitude towards time and punctuality.

Time and Work

The workweek in Timor-Leste generally runs from Monday-Friday, with most business occurring between 8am-5pm. Though hours vary by store size and location, shops are usually open weekdays from 8am-6pm. Some stores close for lunch between 12pm-2pm. Open-air markets selling produce, fish, meat, and other foods typically open every day from 8am-7pm (see *Sustenance and Health*). Shopping centers and grocery stores normally have longer hours, opening from 9am-9pm, 7 days-a-week. Banks open Monday-Friday between 9am-4pm (see *Technology and Materials*). Post office hours vary by location, but service is generally available between 8am-5:30pm on weekdays. Government offices also typically open from 8am-5:30pm on weekdays. In general, businesses close on public holidays.

Working Conditions: Timor-Leste's Labor Code mandates that a workweek does not exceed 44 hours. Its law also provides workers with a range of protections such as sick leave, severance pay, overtime restrictions, retirement pensions, and government-provided healthcare (see *Sustenance and Health*). Mothers may take 2 weeks of paid maternity leave before giving birth and 10 additional weeks after. Fathers receive 5 days of paternity leave. Additionally, workers must receive at least 12 days of paid vacation per year. In 2025, the minimum wage was US $115 per month. As of 2024, about 77% of the employed population worked in the informal sector, which typically has lower wages than the formal sector and limited enforcement of labor laws (see *Economics and Resources*).

Time Zone: Timor-Leste adheres to Timor-Leste Time (TLT), which is 9 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 13 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). Timor-Leste does not observe Daylight Saving Time.

Date Notation: Like the US, Timor-Leste uses the Western (Gregorian) Calendar. Unlike Americans, East Timorese typically write the day first, followed by the month and year.

National Holidays

- January 1: New Years
- March 3: Veterans Day
- March/April: Good Friday
- March/April: Easter
- May 1: Labor Day
- May 20: Independence Restoration Day
- June: Corpus Christi
- August 30: Popular Consultation Day
- November 1: All Saints' Day
- November 2: All Souls' Day
- November 3: National Women's Day
- November 12: National Youth Day
- November 28: Independence Day
- December 7: Memorial Day
- December 8: Immaculate Conception
- December 25: Christmas
- December 31: National Heroes' Day
- Variable dates: Idul Adha and Idul Fitri

The dates of holidays listed with 2 months are contingent on when Easter Sunday occurs, which is the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the vernal (spring) equinox.

Time and Business

Timor-Leste's business culture emphasizes personal relationships and politeness. Business meetings are typically scheduled less than 1 week in advance and confirmed 1 day prior. East Timorese prefer to establish a friendly relationship with someone before conducting business. Participants tend to arrive late to meetings and engage in casual conversation before turning to business matters. Additionally, they usually wait for the most senior participants to arrive before starting the meeting. As a result, meetings typically begin and end later than scheduled.

Public and Personal Space

East Timorese generally maintain an arm's length of distance or less while conversing with friends and family. They tend to give more personal space to strangers and elders.

Touch: A firm handshake, with no up and down movement, and direct eye contact is the standard greeting in professional situations. Touching in formal settings is rare (see *Language and Communication*).

Eye Contact: Maintaining eye contact during conversation demonstrates attentiveness, interest, and respect (see *Language and Communication*).

Photographs

Some government buildings and military installations limit photography. Foreign nationals should ask permission before photographing local nationals and sacred houses (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

Driving

Road and weather conditions sometimes can make driving in Timor-Leste challenging. Despite significant improvements, roads still tend to be unpaved and poorly maintained outside of Díli. Additionally, heavy rains often make mountain roads impassable. Unlike Americans, East Timorese drive on the left side of the road. In 2021, Timor-Leste had an estimated 12 road fatalities per 100,000 people, about the same as the 2023 US average (12.2) but lower than Southeast Asia in 2021 (16).

9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

Overview

Timor-Leste's clothing, holidays, sports, music, dance, and art reflect its rich history – including Indigenous, Portuguese, and Indonesian influences; Catholic traditions; and its recent transition to independence.

Dress and Appearance

East Timorese tend to dress in casual warm-weather clothing throughout the year, with most urban residents following Western fashion trends. Older East Timorese tend to dress more conservatively than younger residents. While revealing clothing is discouraged, strapless tops and shorts are becoming more common for women in urban areas. In business settings, men typically wear collared shirts with slacks, while women wear blouses with pants or knee-length skirts. Except for some government positions, men's suits and other formal wear are uncommon in Timor-Leste.

Traditional: East Timorese typically only don traditional dress for cultural performances and rites of passage (see *Family and Kinship*). However, in rural areas, some residents incorporate traditional clothing into their daily wear. Men and women traditionally wear ***tais*** (a handwoven cotton cloth, see "Folk Art and Handicrafts" below), along with ***manu fulun*** (a headdress made from rooster feathers). The women's version, known as ***feto tais***, is typically worn as a strapless, tubular dress, while the men's version, called ***mane tais***, is tied around their waist.

Both genders wear the ***kaibauk*** (a silver headdress shaped like the horns of a water buffalo) and ***belak*** (a round bronze disc worn on the chest) during rituals and ceremonies. Traditionally, these items were part of warrior regalia, although today, they symbolize authority, honor, and leadership. Also common is jewelry such as ***mutisalah*** (traditionally orange, or orange-red, bead necklaces), which symbolize status and wealth. These necklaces are traditionally passed down through generations.

Recreation and Leisure

East Timorese tend to spend their free time with family and friends hosting barbeques, watching movies or soccer games, and playing cards. Likewise, families participate in ***festa*** (parties) to share a meal, pray, or dance. On weekends, some East Timorese ***lao pasiar*** (go for a walk) to the beach.

Holidays and Festivals: East Timorese celebrate a variety of events, several reflecting the country's recent history, cultural influences, and Catholic roots (see *Religion and Spirituality*). All Soul's Day on November 2nd is a national holiday to honor and remember deceased loved ones. In the days leading up to the holiday, residents clean graves and adorn them with flowers and candles. On the holiday, families attend church before sharing a meal at their loved one's grave. In addition, East Timorese place nuts and alcohol at the grave as an offering to the deceased.

In March, Catholics make a pilgrimage to the country's highest point, the summit of Mount Ramelau known as ***Foho Tatamailau*** ("Grandfather of All," see *Political and Social Relations*). The site is dedicated to the Virgin Mary, where a white alabaster statue in her image was erected in 1997. The pilgrimage is also made in October, when a mass is held in the early morning hours at the site.

National holidays are also important to the East Timorese. Restoration of Independence Day, celebrated on May 20th, marks independence from Indonesian occupation in 2002 (see *History and Myth*). This day honors the nation's struggles and the contributions of those who fought for its independence. Celebrations include music, food, parades, speeches, cultural performances, and masses at cathedrals and churches. On November 28th, East Timorese celebrate Proclamation of Independence Day, which commemorates the declaration of independence from Portuguese rule in 1975 (see *History and Myth*). This day features flag-raising ceremonies, military parades, speeches, food, music, and dance. Other holidays such as Memorial Day on December 7th and National Youth Day

on November 12th honor those who lost their lives during the fight for independence.

Sports

East Timorese participate in a wide variety of sports including track and field, basketball, horse racing, soccer, cycling, futsal (an indoor game with five players on each team, similar to soccer), volleyball, and boxing. Although Timor-Leste first participated in the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens and the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, the country has not medaled.

Domestically, East Timorese men often participate in ***futu manu*** (cockfighting), which is deeply rooted in East Timorese culture. Traditionally, the sport symbolizes masculinity, competitiveness, and communal bonding. Nightly fights between roosters are held, with winners earning money from the betting and losers taking their entrant home to feed their family.

Soccer: Introduced by Portuguese colonists in the 19th century (see *History and Myth*), soccer is Timor-Leste's most popular sport, with both children and adults playing recreationally. The country's national team nicknamed ***Lafaek*** (The Crocodiles, see *History and Myth*) or ***O Sol Nascente*** (The Rising Sun) has participated in international competitions. In 2008, the team scored their first point in a FIFA match with a 2-2 tie against Cambodia. Notable players include striker Emílio da Silva and forward Mouzinho Barreto de Lima.

Music

East Timorese music reflects the country's rich history, Indigenous traditions, and colonial influences. It features several instruments such as the ***babadok*** (a small wooden drum played by women), guitar, ***lakadou*** (a bamboo instrument), ***kafu'l*** (flute), and gongs. Singing is especially important in East Timorese culture, as it traditionally was seen as a way of communicating with ancestors. Traditional songs frequently incorporate lyrics with themes of nature, love, spirituality, community, and historical events.

Today, East Timorese music blends traditional elements with contemporary genres like pop, rock, and reggae. In the 1990s, the Díli Allstars band formed, blending reggae and traditional East Timorese sounds. The band is known for its support of East Timorese independence and activism to promote peace. In 1999, their song ***Liberdade*** (Freedom) became an unofficial anthem for the East Timorese independence movement (see *History and Myth*) and played a significant role in raising awareness for the country's struggles. Revolutionary lyrics are still popular in music today.

Dance

Traditionally, women performed the ***Likurai*** dance to welcome soldiers home from battle. The soldiers would bring the heads of their enemies and display them around the village compound. Dancers would then surround the compound beating *babadok* and stomping their feet. Unmarried women perform the *Likurai* as a courtship dance. Today, it is featured at festivals and celebrations, where dancers wear traditional dress.

Another important dance is the ***Tebe Tebe*** (to kick with feet), usually accompanied by traditional music. Both men and women participate in it by holding hands while rhythmically stomping with a coordinated beat and occasionally clapping. The dance is used to express joy and victory, often performed during cultural events and official ceremonies like national holidays, church events, and to welcome special guests. Similar to *tebe tebe*, ***Tebedai*** involves more intricate footwork and is usually reserved for rituals and formal ceremonies.

Literature

East Timorese works are rooted in its oral traditions; which include legends, poems, and songs and are often used during rituals (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Portuguese and Indonesian colonization influenced East Timorese literature; which typically contains themes of patriotism, freedom, and East Timorese heritage. In 1975, East Timorese poet Francisco Borja da Costa wrote ***Pátria*** (Fatherland), celebrating Timor-Leste's

independence from Portugal. When Indonesia invaded (see *History and Myth*), Costa was executed, and the regime suppressed much of the country's culture and language. Today, *Pátria* is Timor-Leste's national anthem.

In 1996, Luís Cardoso published ***Crónica de Uma Travessia*** (Chronicle of a Crossing), which explores themes of identity, exile, and the struggle for independence and marks the first time someone from Timor-Leste authored a book. The novel received international acclaim and influenced contemporary East Timorese literature. In addition to his political career, Xanana Gusmão (see *History and Myth*) wrote the poem "Grandfather Crocodile." The piece compares Timor-Leste's creation myth of a crocodile sacrificing himself to form the island of Timor (see *History and Myth*) to the country's sacrifices for independence.

Dadolin Murak published a poetry collection titled ***Lilin Referendu*** (Candle Referendum), reflecting on the suffering endured during the occupation, celebrating independence, and expressing hope for the children. Another notable contemporary writer, Abé Barreto Soares, authored poems and songs celebrating East Timorese identity and freedom. They also reflect his experience growing up in Timor-Leste during Indonesian occupation, living in exile, and return.

The Uma Lulik

A cornerstone of East Timorese culture is the ***uma lulik*** (sacred house), a traditional community meeting and prayer house (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Originally constructed by the Fataluku people (see *History and Myth*), these houses symbolize a link between families and their ancestors. While the structures vary in style and shape, they all serve the same purpose: to bond families from generation-to-generation. Traditionally, members of the tribe who possessed spiritual knowledge selected natural materials like palms, wood, and bamboo as building materials. During construction, rituals were performed along with music and dances to bless the house. Every 10-20 years, new generations would reconstruct the buildings to feature their own physical and spiritual

influences. While some traditional *uma lulik* still stand in Indigenous villages, most today are replica houses. These newer models are meant to preserve and honor the craftsmanship of the Fataluku people.

Folk Arts and Handicrafts

Timor-Leste has a rich history of arts and crafts, particularly weaving, woodwork, jewelry making, and pottery. Some Indigenous groups weave baskets from natural materials like palm leaves, reeds, and bamboo. These baskets hold significant cultural and symbolic meaning due to their association with prosperity and abundance. Additionally, baskets are essential for East Timorese daily activities such as carrying corn or coffee beans (see *Sustenance and Health*).

Likewise, traditional pottery techniques are used to make household items like clay pots for daily use. Some crafts such as traditional jewelry and wood carvings are often family heirlooms with ancestral significance and used during ceremonies and rituals. Intricately carved wood designs depict spirits, nature, and daily life, preserving East Timorese culture and heritage.

Tais: To create *tais*, cotton is naturally dyed from plant extracts in a process known as ***kesi futus'*** (tie-dye). The fabric is then handwoven using simple equipment like a backstrap loom. This type of loom allows the weaver to control the tension of the fabric by attaching it to their lower back with a strap. While men can participate in its creation, weaving *tais* is a role reserved for women, who pass their knowledge and skills to the next generation.

Tais can vary in colors and motifs, which represent different cultural identities and social classes. It plays a pivotal role in East Timorese culture and is used for ceremonies, festivals, rites of passage (see *Family and Kinship*), and currency. The fabric is often gifted as part of a woman's dowry (see *Family and Kinship*) and are a symbol of familial ties. In recent years, industrial alternatives and preferences for modern clothing have replaced local materials and threatened this traditional practice.

10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

Sustenance Overview

In Timor-Leste, meals are often important social events. East Timorese cuisine combines the country's agricultural traditions with Portuguese and Southeast Asian influences.

Dining Customs

East Timorese usually eat three meals per day. ***Matabisu*** (breakfast) tends to be light and eaten between 7am-8am. ***Almoso*** or ***haan meiudia*** (lunch) is the heaviest meal and eaten between 12pm-1pm. Generally, ***haan kalan*** (dinner) is served after 7pm. Throughout the day, some East Timorese consume ***bua malus***, a stimulant made from areca nuts (palm tree seeds), betel leaves (palm tree leaf), and lime powder. Although chewing *bua malus* is a widespread custom in Timor-Leste, it can lead to oral cancers according to the American Dental Association.

When invited to an East Timorese home, guests typically bring fresh produce, chocolate, or wine. Gifts for celebrations such as birthdays or baptisms (see *Family and Kinship*) should be wrapped and presented to the recipient with both hands. East Timorese usually open gifts without the guests present.

In general, guests arrive late and take off their shoes before entering the house. Prior to eating, the host typically pours drinks and offers *bua malus* to guests. Although guests usually receive their food first, it is polite to wait for the host's permission to begin eating. In more traditional families, senior male members of the household eat with the guests while women and children wait. East Timorese tend to eat with a spoon in the right hand and fork in the left. In rural areas, people observing traditional dining customs sit in a circle on the floor and eat with their right hand.

East Timorese commonly also pray before eating. Guests should sample all dishes offered to them, as declining food is

considered impolite. After the meal, people usually linger for conversation, drinks, and dessert. Guests typically remain seated until the host leaves the table.

Diet

Due to the country's colonial history, East Timorese cuisine blends local ingredients with Portuguese and Southeast Asian influences (see *History and Myth*). Generally, meals are simple; highlighting grains, root vegetables, legumes, fruit, and bread. The availability of foods depends on the season and harvest quality. In general, food is more abundant during the harvest season from May-October than in the rainy season between November-March. Additionally, weather events like floods and droughts impact food supplies (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Meals tend to include starches and a vegetable. While rice and corn are the most common starches, other options include sweet potatoes, yams, potatoes, and cassava (also known as "yuca," a starchy root vegetable boiled or ground into flour). Instant noodles are also popular, particularly those made by the Indonesian company ***Indomie***.

Common vegetables include leafy greens, gourds, pumpkin, carrot, cabbage, and tomato. Proteins such as beans, fish, chicken, pork, and eggs are other typical side choices. Some residents rarely eat meat and fish because of the high prices of these items, though local fish markets offer access to freshly caught seafood at reasonable prices.

East Timorese typically flavor food with chilis, shallots, garlic, onions, coconut water, basil, and tamarind (tree pod with a sweet and sour pulp). While wheat bread is popular, other varieties are made with corn, including ***batar belar*** (flat corn bread). Pepper, ginger, turmeric, lemongrass, and citrus are also used in East Timorese cuisine. ***Ai manas*** (spicy sauce made from chilis, onion, lime, and salt) and ***budu*** (fermented fish sauce with lime, onion, and chilis) usually accompany lunch and dinner plates. They also eat ***aifuan*** (fruit) such as

papaya, banana, mango, melon, and jackfruit (a large fruit with a mild flavor and meaty texture).

Rural East Timorese typically grow food for consumption on their land. Near the coasts, men often fish for additional income or to obtain seafood. Similarly, women and children collect shellfish, octopus, crabs, and seaweed along the beach during low tide (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*). Children, especially boys, hunt small birds with slingshots and cook them.

Meals and Popular Dishes

For breakfast, East Timorese typically eat ***sasoru*** (rice porridge sometimes made with carrots, mustard greens, or spinach). ***Paun*** (bread roll) with fruit jam and honey is another common dish. Other options are bananas, cassava, or eggs.

Their lunches usually contain rice or corn with ***modo-fila*** (stir-fried vegetables). ***Batar daan*** (boiled corn) is a common dish consisting of corn, mung beans (mild green legumes), pumpkin, and leafy vegetables. ***Ikan pepes*** (fish in leaves) is a whole fish flavored with tamarind cooked in palm or banana leaves. Some residents also cook ***ikan tukir*** (fish inside of bamboo) and ***katupa*** (rice flavored with coconut cooked in a woven palm leaf box). ***Laksa*** is a spicy noodle soup found across Southeast Asia and ***bakso*** a meatball and noodle soup also common in Indonesia.

Dinner options tend to be similar to lunch. Additional dishes include ***feijoada*** (a Portuguese stew of beans, sausage, and pork) and ***caril de galinha*** (chicken curry made with coconut milk, chilis, and tamarind). For special occasions, residents usually prepare ***tukir naan karau*** (slow-roasted beef or goat with lemongrass curry) or ***tukir naan bibi*** (lamb or beef grilled in bamboo served with cassava).

Bibingka (cake made from rice, coconut milk, and sugar) and ***rujak*** (fruit salad with a sweet and spicy dressing) are common sweet dishes of Southeast Asian origin. ***Tapai*** is a sweet, slightly alcoholic fermented rice ball. East Timorese commonly

eat the Portuguese ***pastel de nata*** (“cream pastry,” a tart with a flaky crust and creamy egg filling) for dessert or as a snack.

Beverages

Kafé (coffee) is a major part of Timor-Leste’s economy and culture (see *Economics and Resources*). East Timorese tend to drink coffee in the morning or during the day with friends and family. Others drink ***xá*** (tea) or chew *bua malus*. Residents typically add sugar to coffee and tea. Juices and smoothies are common as well; particularly those made from tamarind, avocado, mango, banana, papaya, or orange.

East Timorese commonly drink ***serveja*** (beer). The top domestic brand is ***Liurai*** (Chieftain), although the Indonesian beer **Bintang** (Star) is also common. Stores and restaurants also sell wine from Europe and Australia. East Timorese frequently brew ***tua mutin*** (palm wine) and ***tua sabu*** (palm brandy) in recycled water bottles.

Eating Out

Restaurants in Timor-Leste range from upscale establishments specializing in foreign and local cuisine to inexpensive food stalls. In Díli, restaurants serve Thai, Indian, Chinese, Indonesian, Portuguese, and Japanese food. Markets open daily and sell fresh produce, fish, meat, and bread (see *Time and Space*). Informal restaurants and stalls sell grilled meat and fish with tamarind and lemongrass sauces. Small family-run shops called ***warungs*** sell Indonesian food and convenience store items. Tipping is welcome but not expected.

Health Overview

While East Timorese tend to live long and healthy lives, they face high rates of tuberculosis and circulatory disease. Between 2000-23, life expectancy at birth in Timor-Leste increased from about 58 to 68 years, lower than the US (79), Southeast Asia (72), and Indonesia (71). During the same period, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) decreased by about half from around 79 deaths per

1,000 live births to 38, although higher than the US (5), Southeast Asia (18), and Indonesia (17).

Traditional Medicine

This treatment method consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills that are derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Because of difficulties accessing government healthcare facilities, rural East Timorese tend to use traditional medicine as an alternative to modern treatments. Timor-Leste's traditional medicine includes herbal remedies, massage, and spiritual healing. Residents typically make medicinal teas, powders, oils, and chews from leaves, bark, and roots.

East Timorese tend to use plant remedies to treat infections, fertility issues, stomach problems, and diabetes. Additionally, traditional healers called ***liman badain*** perform massages with herbal ointments to treat muscle and bone injuries. Another traditional healing method involves consultation from a ***matandook*** ("far sighted/visionary," or shaman) who attempts to communicate with ancestral spirits and supernatural forces to cure a person's illness (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Healthcare System

The Health System Law of 2004 established Timor-Leste's national healthcare system which provides care to citizens, residents, and stateless persons. The ***Ministério da Saúde*** (Ministry of Health) sets national healthcare policies and oversees medical services across the country.

Timor-Leste's medical system has three tiers. "Community health centers" and "health posts" provide primary care at the local level, while five regional hospitals deliver specialized care at the district level. For complex procedures, patients receive treatment at the national hospital in Díli, though lacking by western standards. Additionally, limited pharmaceutical supplies are a concern nation-wide. Throughout the country, the ***Servisu Integrado du Saúde Comunidade*** (Integrated

Community Health Service) provides primary care and health education in villages that lack access to hospitals and clinics.

Timor-Leste's healthcare system does not require contributions from employees or employers. As a result, medical services performed in public hospitals and clinics do not have out-of-pocket expenses. The government covers most health services such as physical examinations, hospital visits, lab tests, surgeries, specialist appointments, emergency treatment, and medications. International agreements allow East Timorese patients to travel to Australia, Singapore, and Indonesia for medical treatment without out-of-pocket costs. Although public healthcare provides universal coverage, some residents, particularly foreign nationals, purchase private health insurance to access private facilities.

In 2021, Timor-Leste spent around 11% of GDP on healthcare, lower than the US (17%) but higher than East Asia and the Pacific (7%) and Indonesia (4%). In 2020, Timor-Leste had 0.8 physicians per 1,000 people, lower than the US (3.6) and East Asia and the Pacific (2.1) but higher than Indonesia (0.7).

Healthcare Challenges

The leading cause of death in Timor-Leste is tuberculosis, which accounted for about 17.5% of deaths in 2021. Stroke was the next leading cause of death that year (12.9%), followed by heart disease (10.9%). Despite significant progress, malnutrition remains a problem. As a result, in 2020, about 47% of children under 5 experienced stunted growth.

Additionally, Timor-Leste has one of Southeast Asia's highest maternal mortality rates with 413 deaths of mothers per 100,000 live births in 2022. As of 2023, Timor-Leste reported approximately 23,000 cases of COVID-19, resulting in about 138 deaths. An estimated 80% of the population received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccination. About 60% received two doses.

11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

Overview

For centuries, Timorese subsisted with farming and fishing. Beginning around the 13th-15th century, Asian and Middle Eastern merchants arrived on Timor Island, attracted by its abundant supply of sandalwood. Traders considered sandalwood a luxury item and used it in perfume, soap, essential oils, and furniture. Sandalwood was exchanged for ceramics, silks, porcelain, metals, and horses. Interaction with foreign traders was mostly limited to Timorese chiefs or community leaders in coastal areas.

In the 16th century, Europeans began to arrive, also attracted by its sandalwood. The Portuguese arrived first, followed by the Dutch East India Company (a powerful trading company backed by the Dutch Empire). As both countries set up trading posts on the island, they competed for dominance. At the end of the 18th century, the Portuguese founded the settlement of Díli (the current capital city). From Díli, they moved into the interior of the eastern side of the island. The Dutch primarily settled in West Timor. Exact boundaries between Dutch and Portuguese settlements were ambiguous until an 1851 border treaty and subsequent 1941 United Nations (UN) agreement (see *History and Myth*).

Portuguese colonial administration of Timor-Leste primarily focused on regulating the sandalwood trade and converting the Indigenous population to Catholicism (see *Religion and Spirituality*). In the 19th century, extensive trade of sandalwood had significantly depleted the supply. In response, the Portuguese encouraged coffee cultivation as a cash crop. By the 1860s, coffee was the country's main export, accounting for more than 50% of goods leaving their shores. Portuguese landowners owned coffee plantations, while the Indigenous East Timorese provided the labor.

At the turn of the 20th century, Timor-Leste was characterized by significant social and economic stratification. The colonial administration formed the country's elite, while most East Timorese resided in rural areas and practiced subsistence agriculture (farming for personal consumption). Portuguese investment into infrastructure and social services was limited due to their interests in the nation's natural resources. Their rule was interrupted during World War II, when the Japanese invaded and occupied the country from 1942-45 (see *History and Myth*). After World War II ended, the Portuguese re-established their colonial control over Timor-Leste, continuing the same economic divisions that exist to this day.

On 28 November 1975, Timor-Leste declared independence from Portugal, and 9 days later, Indonesia invaded the country (see *History and Myth*). Reported motivation of Indonesia's occupation was its interest in Timor-Leste's offshore oil wealth (see "Industry" below). Prominent international companies – such as Royal Dutch Shell, Woodside Australian Energy, Santos, and CoconoPhillips – had been exploring for oil resources in the Timor Sea in the 1960s-70s.

During the occupation, Indonesia negotiated for ownership of the oil fields. As a result, the 1989 Timor Gap Treaty created a zone of cooperation for joint petroleum development between Australia and Indonesia, with each country receiving 50% of the revenues. In the 1990s, development of the Kakatua and Bayu-Undan oil fields began.

In 1999, Indonesia's occupation ended after 78.5% of East Timorese voted for independence in a referendum (see *History and Myth*). Immediately following the referendum, anti-independence militias launched a scorched earth campaign in Timor-Leste, killing around 1,500 people, displacing three-fourths of the population, destroying infrastructure, and burning 75% of buildings. After international

peacekeepers helped to stop the violence, Timor-Leste initiated its recovery from centuries of foreign domination and embarked on establishing a functional economy. From 1999-2002, the UN Transitional Administration of East Timor governed the country's transition to independence. Foreign assistance poured in, including an estimated US $2 billion spent on the UN mission alone. From 1999-2002, multilateral aid averaged US $300 per East Timorese citizen each year.

In 2002, Timor-Leste developed new institutions and joined multilateral economic organizations such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Major drivers of Timor-Leste's economic growth have been public spending; particularly on infrastructure projects, administration, and the petroleum sector. To ensure sustainable management of the country's petroleum revenues, the National Parliament created the Petroleum Fund (PF) in 2005. The PF is a state-owned investment fund that receives revenues from oil and gas and invests them overseas. With withdrawals based on a calculated Estimated Sustainable Income to ensure a long-term balance, the PF funds most of Timor-Leste's government.

Today, the country has one of Southeast Asia's lowest GDP per capita at US $1,500 in 2023, only higher than Myanmar (US $1,233). Despite recent economic shocks from the COVID-19 pandemic and Tropical Cyclone Seroja (see *Political and Social Relations*), Timor-Leste's GDP of around US $2.1 billion grew by 3.3% in 2024 and is predicted to grow by 4.0% in 2025.

Despite the recent economic growth, Timor-Leste's economy faces key challenges of unsustainable dependence on petroleum revenues and public spending. In 2024, the PF accounted for 83% of total public expenditure. However, the future of the PF is questionable, as production has decreased at Timor-Leste's oil fields. As of 2024, the PF

had a balance of US $8.2 billion but is expected to be depleted by 2034. Additionally, Timor-Leste faces a job shortage, and many East Timorese are impoverished (see *Political and Social Relations*). Only around 30.5% of Timor-Leste's working age population is considered active in the labor market, and informal employment accounted for over 70% of all jobs. The majority of East Timorese grow food as subsistence farmers, fish, attend school, or are not paid for work.

Services

Comprising some 68% of GDP and 30% of employment in 2023, the services sector is Timor-Leste's largest. Most of the country's services are in the public sector such as governance, administration, and security. In 2023, public services accounted for around 35% of non-oil GDP. The expansion of private sector services is ongoing.

Tourism: Timor-Leste's tourism sub-sector is small but growing. Tourists visit Timor-Leste's beach attractions and cultural sites. According to the most recent estimate, tourism supports about 4,300 jobs. In 2019, the country had more than 38,000 leisure travelers, spending over US $23 million. Timor-Leste's national tourism policy, Growing Tourism to 2030 - Enhancing National Identity, aims to generate US $150 million and create 15,000 jobs by 2030.

Industry

Timor-Leste's industrial sector accounts for about 24% of GDP and 11% of employment. Oil and gas are the most significant sub-sectors; however, production has declined in recent years. Construction and other public-sector industries are prominent. In 2018, Heineken (a Dutch-owned beer company) opened a brewery near Díli, one of the first foreign investments in the country's manufacturing sector.

Oil and Gas: Production began at the Bayu-Undan oil field in 2004. Timor-Leste ranks 65th in oil and 46th in gas production

globally. Despite being a relatively small player in the international market, oil and gas revenues are vital to the country's economy. Production peaked around 2012-13 and is expected to cease completely by 2026. From 2011-15, production from the Kitan oil field added to the country's capacity. In 2024, government revenue from oil was only $85.4 million, a significant decline from $1.1 billion in 2022.

The Greater Sunrise Field is Timor-Leste's only known untapped reserve. Development of this oil field has been delayed by Indonesian occupation and maritime disputes with Australia. The 2018 Maritime Boundary Treaty between Australia and Timor-Leste (see *Political and Social Relations*) established an agreement for the exploitation of the Greater Sunrise field, including provisions for revenue sharing and joint management of the resources.

A joint venture among Timor-Leste's TIMOR GAP (56.56%), Australia's Woodside Petroleum (33.44%), and Japan's Osaka Gas (10%) currently oversees this development. TIMOR GAP's plan is part of their broader Tasi Mane Project, a plan for the development of the oil and gas industry on Timor-Leste's South coast (see *Political and Social Relations*). These goals include an undersea gas pipeline that will run from the Greater Sunrise Field to a plant and terminal in the city of Baucau.

Agriculture

This sector accounts for up to 16.9% of GDP and employs around 37% of the workforce. Most of Timor-Leste's agricultural activities are for subsistence. About two-thirds of East Timorese households engage in farming, even if they also do other work. Small farmers produce coffee, cacao, coconut, cinnamon, and food crops (corn, rice, cassava, sweet potato, and mung bean) and sell them in the local economy. Cattle, chickens, and pigs are raised in rural areas. An estimated 7.5% of Timor-Leste's land is arable.

Coffee: Timor-Leste's largest export crop is coffee, distributing about US $16.2 million of coffee in 2021. Coffee production contributes to the livelihoods of approximately 35% of the population. Timor-Leste grows arabica, robusta, and its own hybrid coffee beans. In 2017, the international coffee brand Starbucks exported coffee beans from East Timorese producers to feature in its specialty blends.

Currency

Since 2000, the US dollar has been the official currency in Timor-Leste. Prior to the change, many different currencies were used, notably the Portuguese Timorese Pataca and the Indonesian Rupah. The US dollar ($ or USD) is issued in six banknotes (1, 5, 10, 20, 50, and 100) and seven coins known as "centavos" (1, 5, 10, 25, 50, 100, and 200). Centavos are equivalent to US cents (100 equal 1 USD).

Foreign Trade

Exports, which totaled some US $163 million in 2023, consisted of crude petroleum, natural gas, coffee, scrap iron, and telephones, sold to China (46%), Singapore (25%), Japan (15%), Indonesia (5%), the US (3%), and others (6%). Imports totaled nearly US $910 million in 2023 and consisted of refined petroleum, rice, cars, plastic products, and trucks from Indonesia (34%), China (26%), Singapore (9%), Taiwan (5%), India (4%), and others (22%).

Foreign Aid

Timor-Leste is a recipient of foreign aid, which primarily supports governance, civil society, agriculture, public health, and business development. In 2022, Timor-Leste received almost US $224 million in Official Development Assistance, with primary donors being Australia (US $72 million), the US (US $30 million), Japan (US $20 million), European Union (US $18 million), and the Republic of Korea (US $15 million), among others (US $69 million). In 2024, Timor-Leste entered a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China under the Belt and Road Initiative (see *Political and Social Relations*).

12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

Overview

In 2002, Timor-Leste inherited minimal intact physical infrastructure from colonial rule (see *History and Myth*). Since then, the government has made its development a priority, constructing new power plants, highways, airports, and marine ports. The government's Infrastructure Fund, created in 2011, had received US $3.1 billion by 2020. While its Constitution guarantees press freedom, journalists often face pressure from both the government and the Catholic Church.

Transportation

Travel by car, bus, motorcycle, and walking are common forms of transportation in Timor-Leste. Buses are available around the country, connecting most cities and towns. The country's primary form of public transport is ***microlets*** (colorful small vans that hold about 12 people). *Microlets* follow a regular route, although they do not have set schedules or stops. In 2024, Timor-Leste, with Asian Development Bank investments, launched the Timor-Leste Public Transportation Master Plan to improve public transportation. Taxi services are accessible across the country. Limited rural infrastructure restricts road travel, so motorcycles and walking are most common.

Roadways: Timor-Leste has an around 5,406-mi-long roadway network, consisting of 895 mi of national roads, 463 mi of district roads, 444 mi of urban roads, 1,056 mi of core rural roads, and 2,548 mi of non-core rural roads. According to the Asian Development Bank, only 5-10% of the national road system is in good condition, with about 60% of national, 76% of district, and 60% of core rural roads in poor condition. Roads on the northern coast and around Díli are generally in better condition, while those in the interior and on the southern coast are worse. Improvement and expansion of the road network is a continuous process. Since 2011, the percentage of roads considered to be in poor condition has reduced by one-third. However, the country's mountains and monsoon climate (see *Political and Social Relations*) makes road maintenance challenging.

Ports and Waterways: Timor-Leste's internal navigable waterways are limited, as most rivers are short-flowing and temporary (see *Political and Social Relation*s). Timor-Leste has maritime access to both the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Inaugurated in 2022, the Tibar Bay Port is the country's primary port. It replaced the Port of Díli, now receiving all the country's marine imports and exports.

Airways: Timor-Leste has nine airports, of which four are international and five domestic. President Nicolau Lobato International Airport (DIL) is the country's main airport and the only one that hosts scheduled international flights. In 2019, it handled 187,000 passengers. ***Aero Dili*** (Air Díli) is the national flag carrier of Timor-Leste. In August 2022, *Aero Dili* completed its first international flight to Kupang, Indonesia. It currently operates flights to Oecussi, Bali (Denpasar), and Singapore.

Energy

In 2021, Timor-Leste's energy supply was 93% oil and 7% renewables, with bioenergy making up all the renewable sources. Despite Timor-Leste's own oil and natural gas resources (see *Economics and Resources*), 94% of the energy supply was imported. In the same year, Timor-Leste's electricity came entirely from fossil fuels, with no renewable sources used. The Hera and Betano Power Plants together supply all of mainland Timor-Leste's electricity. Almost 100% of East Timorese had access to electricity in 2022, increasing from only 21% in 2002. Timor-Leste's electricity grid is highly centralized but not fully modernized, causing issues with voltage drops and frequent services outages that also affect monetary transactions like ATMs, point of sale purchases, and more.

Media

Despite constitutional protections for free speech and press, the Timor-Leste government has curbed these rights through defamation laws. Media outlets are also vulnerable to pressure from government officials and the Catholic Church. In 2014, the government enacted a law restricting who could be recognized as a journalist and created a state-controlled press council,

effectively silencing unapproved voices. Nevertheless, a 2024 world press freedom index placed Timor-Leste at 20 of 180 countries, the best of the Southeast Asian countries.

Print Media: Timor-Leste's press includes print and online outlets in Tetun, Portuguese, and English. *Timor Post*, *Dili Post*, *Suara Timor Lorosae*, and *Independente* are leading publications. *The Dili Weekly* is a popular English-language newspaper. *Tatoli*, also known as ***Agência Noticias de Timor-Leste*** (Timor-Leste News Agency) is the state-run news agency. Due to cost and distribution challenges, printed publications are less common outside of Díli.

TV and Radio: ***Radio e Televisão de Timor-Leste*** (Radio and Television of Timor-Leste) is Timor-Leste's national radio and television broadcaster. In rural areas, social media and online news platforms are often the primary sources of information. There are also several community radio stations. The political party ***Frente Revolucionária do Timor-Leste Independente*** (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor – see *Political and Social Relations*) runs Radio Maubere, while the Catholic Church oversees Radio Timor Kmanek.

Telecommunications

As of 2022, Timor-Leste has about 100 mobile subscriptions and 0 fixed telephone subscriptions per 100 inhabitants. As of 2019, 2G and 3G services reached 96% of the population. Meanwhile, 4G, 5G, and LTE services are growing. In 2024, the country's first submarine fiberoptic cable was installed, with some of the country's martyr's names given to the cable repeaters such as Maria Udu Bele, Rosa Bonaparte Soares, Dulce Maria da Cruz, Fernando de Araújo, Agustinho do Espírito, Santo, José da Silva, Venâncio Ramos Amaral Ferraz, and Dinis Carvalho da Silva.

Internet: Around 34% of Timor-Leste's population were regular internet users in 2023. In the same year, Timor-Leste had only 0.01 fixed broadband subscriptions per 100 people. Broadband coverage is low, and most East Timorese access the internet with their mobile phones.

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