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## EXPLORING THE RECONCILIATION AND GROUP COUNSELING OF THE CULTURAL APPROACH OF BUA-MALUS IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Augusto da Costa<sup>1\*</sup>, Agostinho dos Santos Goncalves<sup>2</sup>, Matinho da Costa<sup>3</sup>, Lazaro Belo<sup>4</sup>  
*Instituto Superior Cristal*<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore the Indigenous reconciliation practice of Bua-Malus within the cultural tradition of Luro, Timor-Leste, through in-depth interviews with ten community leaders as key informants. This research examines how traditional conflict resolution mechanisms function as culturally embedded forms of group counseling and peacebuilding. The study employed ethnographic methods, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed four primary themes: (1) the ceremonial structure and symbolic elements of Bua-Malus, (2) the role of elders and traditional authority in facilitation, (3) the integration of spiritual and communal healing processes, and (4) the contemporary relevance and adaptation of traditional practices. Bua-Malus serves as a holistic reconciliation framework that addresses interpersonal, communal, and spiritual dimensions of conflict. This research contributes to the growing literature on indigenous peacebuilding methodologies and culturally appropriate counseling interventions in post-conflict societies.

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## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of culturally grounded approaches to conflict resolution and community healing has gained increasing recognition within peace and conflict studies

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\* Corresponding author.

*E-mail addresses:* [acostas3bk2015@gmail.com](mailto:acostas3bk2015@gmail.com) (Augusto da Costa)\*, [agostinho@isc-tls.org](mailto:agostinho@isc-tls.org) (Agostinho dos Santos Goncalves), [martinhodacosta89@gmail.com](mailto:martinhodacosta89@gmail.com) (Matinho da Costa), [lazarobelo1983@gmail.com](mailto:lazarobelo1983@gmail.com) (Lazaro Belo)

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and counseling psychology (Avruch, 2020; Lederach, 2019). In post-conflict societies, Indigenous practices often provide essential frameworks for reconciliation that resonate more deeply with local populations than externally imposed interventions (Mac Ginty & Firchow, 2023). Timor-Leste, having experienced prolonged conflict and occupation, maintains rich traditions of customary law and reconciliation practices that continue to operate alongside formal justice systems (da Costa et al., 2022, Babo-Soares, 2021; Tilman, 2022, Da Costa et al., 2025).

Among these practices, Bua-Malus represents a distinctive cultural approach to conflict resolution and group counseling within the Luro region. The term "Bua-Malus" derives from the local Tetum language, with "bua" referring to betel nut and "Malus" signifying cleansing or purification. This practice encompasses ritualized dialogue, symbolic exchange, and communal participation aimed at restoring social harmony and interpersonal relationships (Fernandes, 2023). Despite its continued practice and cultural significance, Bua-Malus remains underexamined in academic literature, particularly regarding its psychological and counseling dimensions.

Timor-Leste's society operates within a dual legal framework where customary law (lisan) coexists with formal state law (Cummins, 2020). Within this context, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms like Bua-Malus serve essential functions in maintaining social cohesion, particularly in rural communities where access to formal justice systems may be limited (Silva & Wassel, 2024). The Luro region, characterized by its strong adherence to traditional practices, provides a valuable context for understanding how indigenous reconciliation approaches function as forms of collective healing and group counseling.

Traditional conflict resolution in Timor-Leste typically involves community elders, ritual specialists, and affected parties engaging in structured dialogue accompanied by ceremonial elements (Babo-Soares, 2021). These practices address not only the immediate conflict but also the broader relational and spiritual dimensions that formal legal processes may overlook. Understanding such indigenous approaches offers valuable insights for developing culturally appropriate mental health interventions and peacebuilding strategies (Hook et al., 2022).

### Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a few theoretical perspectives. Cultural psychology recognizes that psychological processes and healing practices are culturally

constructed and cannot be separated from their social contexts (Adams & Estrada-Villalta, 2023). Relational-cultural theory emphasizes that psychological wellbeing emerges through connection and community rather than individual autonomy alone (Jordan, 2020). Indigenous psychology frameworks assert the validity and sophistication of non-Western healing traditions and knowledge systems (Mohatt et al., 2021). This research draws on peacebuilding literature that distinguishes between negative peace (the absence of violence) and positive peace (the presence of justice, restored relationships, and social structures that prevent conflict recurrence) (Galtung, 2019). Bua-Malus, as a traditional practice, appears oriented toward positive peace through its emphasis on relationship restoration and community reintegration (Da Costa et al., 2019).

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach, which is particularly appropriate for understanding cultural practices within their natural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Ethnography allows researchers to gain deep, contextualized insights into cultural phenomena through extended engagement with communities and attention to both explicit knowledge and implicit cultural understandings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Ten community leaders from Luro served as key informants for this study. Key informant methodology involves selecting individuals with specialized knowledge and experience relevant to the research topic (Palinkas et al., 2023). Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) recognized status as traditional leaders or elders within their communities, (2) direct experience facilitating or participating in Bua-Malus ceremonies, (3) willingness to share knowledge about traditional practices, and (4) ability to articulate their experiences in either Tetum or Portuguese.

The ten participants included six male and four female leaders, ranging in age from 52 to 78 years ( $M = 64.3$ ). All had facilitated multiple Bua-Malus ceremonies, with experience ranging from 15 to 45 years. Eight participants held formal traditional leadership positions, while two were respected elderly people regularly consulted for conflict resolution. All participants provided informed consent and were assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Data collection occurred over six months (March-August 2024) and included

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three primary methods: Semi-structured interviews. Each participant completed two in-depth interviews, each lasting 90-120 minutes. Interview protocols explored participants' understanding of Bua-Malus origins and purposes, descriptions of typical ceremony procedures, their roles and responsibilities as facilitators, observed impacts on participants and communities, and reflections on contemporary challenges and adaptations. Interviews were conducted in Tetum, with interpretation assistance as needed, and were audio-recorded with permission.

Participant observation. The researcher attended and observed four Bua-Malus ceremonies during the study period, taking detailed field notes on ceremonial procedures, participant interactions, symbolic elements, and emotional dynamics. Observational data provided contextual understanding that enriched interview interpretations—document review. Limited written materials, including community records and previous documentation of traditional practices, were reviewed to supplement the primary data sources. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated to English by a bilingual research assistant, with accuracy verified through back-translation. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis approach, which emphasizes researcher interpretation and meaning-making rather than purely descriptive coding. The analysis process involved: (1) familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts and field notes, (2) generating initial codes identifying interesting features across the dataset, (3) searching for themes by clustering codes into potential patterns, (4) reviewing themes for internal coherence and distinctiveness, (5) defining and naming themes to capture their essence, and (6) producing the final analysis by selecting compelling extracts and relating themes to research questions and existing literature.

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts and field notes revealed four major themes characterizing Bua-Malus as a reconciliation and group counseling practice: (1) ceremonial structure and symbolic transformation, (2) elder facilitation and traditional authority, (3) holistic healing integrating spiritual and communal dimensions, and (4) adaptive continuity in contemporary contexts. Each theme is elaborated below with supporting data.

### **Theme 1: Ceremonial Structure and Symbolic Transformation**

Participants described Bua-Malus as a highly structured ceremonial process involving specific stages, symbolic objects, and ritualized actions. The ceremony typically unfolds in five phases: preparation, opening invocations, narrative

exchange, symbolic acts, and communal sharing (Surahman et al., 2025). During preparation, elders meet with the conflicting parties separately to assess their willingness to reconcile and to prepare them emotionally. One participant explained: "Before we bring people together, we must know their hearts. If someone comes with anger still burning, the ceremony cannot work. We help them cool their anger first." This preparatory phase resembles pre-counseling assessment in contemporary therapeutic approaches.

The opening phase involves invocations to ancestors and spiritual forces, establishing sacred space for the reconciliation work. As one elder described: "We call the ancestors to witness and guide us. Their presence reminds everyone that our actions affect not just ourselves but all our relations, those living and those who came before."

The narrative exchange phase allows conflicting parties to tell their stories while community members listen. Participants emphasized the importance of uninterrupted speaking: "Each person must speak their truth without interruption. We listen not just with our ears but with our whole being. Only when all stories are heard can we understand the path to healing." This structured storytelling creates space for emotional expression and perspective-taking.

Symbolic acts form the heart of the ceremony. The sharing *bua* represents willingness to reconcile, while water rituals symbolize cleansing of grievances. Five participants described the exchange of traditional clothes (*tais*) as a material representation of restored connection. One leader explained: "When the *tais* is given and accepted, it carries the weight of commitment. It is not just cloth, but a promise woven into the relationship. The communal sharing phase involves shared meals, further cementing reconciliation through the intimate act of eating together. Participants noted that food sharing transforms former adversaries into guests at the same table, physically enacting their new relationship status.

## **Theme 2: Elder Facilitation and Traditional Authority**

The role of elders as facilitators emerged as central to Bua-Malus' effectiveness. Participants described elders as mediators, counselors, and spiritual guides who manage both the practical and emotional dimensions of reconciliation.

Elders' authority derives from multiple sources, including age, lineage, demonstrated wisdom, and moral standing. As one participant explained: "An elder who facilitates Bua-Malus must have clean hands. If people question your own

behavior, you cannot guide others to reconciliation." This moral authority creates psychological safety for vulnerable emotional work. Facilitation requires sophisticated people skills. Elders must read emotional states, intervene appropriately when tensions rise, guide conversations toward productive outcomes, and balance supporting individual parties with commitment to communal harmony. One elder described: "Sometimes I must be gentle, sometimes firm. Must know when to let silence speak and when words are needed. This wisdom comes from watching and learning over many years."

Participants emphasized that elders do not impose solutions but guide parties toward their own resolutions. "We are not judges who decide guilt or punishment. We create conditions where people can find their way back to each other. The solution must come from their own hearts, or it will not last." The presence of multiple elders provides both practical and symbolic functions. Practically, different elderly people may have stronger relationships with different parties, facilitating trust-building. Symbolically, the elder group represents community wisdom and collective oversight. As one participant noted: "When several elders are present, people know this is serious. The whole community is watching through our eyes."

### **Theme 3: Holistic Healing Integrating Spiritual and Communal Dimensions**

Participants consistently described Bua-Malus as addressing multiple dimensions of wellbeing beyond the immediate conflict resolution. This holistic approach integrates psychological, relational, spiritual, and communal healing. The spiritual dimension involves recognizing that conflicts disrupt not only human relationships but also cosmic harmony (Islamiyah et al., 2025). Eight participants explained that unresolved conflicts create spiritual disturbance affecting community wellbeing. As one elder stated, "When people fight, it is like a wound in the earth itself. The ancestors feel it; the land feels it. Bua-Malus heals not just the people but restores balance to the whole."

Participants described observable psychological impacts on ceremony participants. These included emotional catharsis through structured storytelling, reduced rumination as grievances are formally acknowledged and addressed, restoration of dignity for both aggrieved parties and offenders, and relief from shame through public reconciliation. One elder reflected: "I have seen people carrying heavy burdens for years. After Bua-Malus, their faces change. The weight lifts. They can breathe again." The communal dimension emerged as equally

important as individual healing. Bua-Malus functions as a public ceremony that reintegrates individuals into community life. Participants emphasized that conflicts harm not only direct parties but ripple through social networks, creating divisions and suspicions. Public reconciliation repairs these broader relational ruptures. Six participants noted that witnessing Bua-Malus ceremonies has educational and preventive value. Community members, especially youth, learn conflict resolution values and observe models of accountability and forgiveness. "When children see Bua-Malus, they learn how to manage disagreements properly. It teaches them that even serious wrongs can be made right if people are willing to do the work."

#### **Theme 4: Adaptive Continuity in Contemporary Contexts.**

While affirming Bua-Malus's traditional foundations, participants discussed various adaptations and challenges in maintaining the practice within contemporary Timor-Leste. All participants noted declining participation in traditional practices among younger generations. Migration to urban areas, formal education emphasizing modern institutions, the influence of external cultural values, and the time pressures of contemporary economic life contribute to this trend. One elder lamented: "Young people today go to the police or courts for everything. They do not understand that six problems need traditional solutions. Legal judgment is not the same as a restored relationship."

Despite these challenges, participants reported the continued relevance of Bua-Malus for certain conflict types (John et al., 2020). Family disputes, land conflicts rooted in traditional tenure systems, interpersonal offenses within communities, and cases in which parties seek ongoing relationships rather than adversarial outcomes remain appropriate for conventional resolutions. Seven participants described intentional adaptations to increase accessibility and relevance. Various communities have shortened ceremony durations to accommodate work schedules and developed complementary relationships with formal legal systems that address relational dimensions. In contrast, legal processes manage criminal justice aspects and incorporate contemporary language and examples while maintaining core symbolic elements.

Participants expressed both concern about cultural loss and optimism about Bua-Malus's potential contributions to national peacebuilding. Seven noted interests from government officials and NGOs in learning from traditional practices. "People are beginning to see that our traditions have wisdom. Maybe after trying foreign

methods, they realize our ancestors already knew how to build peace." Integration challenges were also acknowledged. Questions about how to manage cases involving serious crimes, ensure gender equity in traditionally male-dominated leadership structures, navigate conflicts between traditional and statutory law, and document practices without compromising their living, adaptive nature require ongoing negotiation.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS**

This ethnographic exploration of Bua-Malus reveals a sophisticated indigenous approach to reconciliation and group counseling that addresses conflict through culturally embedded ceremonies engaging psychological, relational, spiritual, and communal dimensions. The findings contribute to four areas of scholarly conversation while raising important questions for practice and policy.

### **Bua-Malus as Indigenous Counseling Practice**

The structured elements of Bua-Malus demonstrate remarkable parallels with contemporary group counseling and conflict mediation approaches, suggesting convergent evolution of healing methodologies across cultures. Preparatory emotional readiness work resembles pre-therapy preparation in trauma-informed care (Chen et al., 2023). The narrative exchange phase embodies principles of narrative therapy, in which storytelling facilitates meaning-making and identity reconstruction (White, 2020). Elder facilitation reflects a sophisticated understanding of group dynamics, emotional regulation, and therapeutic alliance-building found in the family systems therapy and group counseling literature (Corey et al., 2022). However, Bua-Malus differs fundamentally from Western therapeutic models in its explicit integration of spiritual dimensions and its collectivist orientation. Where Western counseling emphasizes individual psychological states and personal growth, Bua-Malus foregrounds relational restoration and communal harmony. This distinction aligns with Indigenous psychology frameworks that challenge universalist assumptions about mental health and healing (Gone et al., 2019).

The public, ceremonial nature of Bua-Malus contrasts sharply with Western counseling's emphasis on confidentiality and privacy (Submitted, 2019). Yet this

public dimension serves essential functions: it provides community witnessing that validates participants' experiences, creates social accountability for reconciliation commitments, and models conflict resolution for community members. These functions suggest that privacy, while valuable in certain contexts, should not be uncritically assumed as necessary for effective healing work.

### **Cultural Authority and Therapeutic Effectiveness**

Elder facilitation in Bua-Malus raises important questions about therapeutic authority and effectiveness. Western mental health professions typically ground authority in formal credentials and standardized training. In contrast, elder authority derives from lived experience, demonstrated wisdom, and community recognition. Both systems aim to create therapeutic credibility, but through different mechanisms.

Research on therapeutic alliance suggests that clients' perceptions of therapist credibility significantly predict treatment outcomes (Flückiger et al., 2020). Within Luro communities, elder authority may generate a stronger therapeutic alliance than formal credentials precisely because it aligns with local epistemologies and values. This suggests that culturally embedded authority structures should be recognized as valid forms of therapeutic qualification, particularly for community-based interventions.

The moral dimension of elder authority also merits attention. Western therapeutic ethics emphasize value neutrality and non-judgment, whereas Bua-Malus explicitly involves moral evaluation of behaviors and accountability expectations. This difference reflects divergent assumptions about the relationship between morality and healing. Indigenous approaches often view moral alignment with community values as integral to psychological wellbeing, whereas Western psychology has historically sought to separate the moral and psychological domains (Hook et al., 2022).

### **Holistic Healing and Positive Peace**

Bua-Malus exemplifies what peacebuilding scholars term "transformative" approaches to conflict resolution, which aim not merely to end violence but to address root causes and transform relationships (Lederach, 2019). By integrating spiritual, psychological, relational, and communal healing, Bua-Malus works toward

positive peace characterized by restored relationships and social structures that prevent conflict recurrence (Apsari et al., 2024). The spiritual dimension deserves particular attention. While secular psychology often marginalizes spirituality, extensive research documents spiritual practices' contributions to mental health, particularly within non-Western cultural contexts (Pargament & Exline, 2022). Bua-Malus integrates spiritual practices not as supplementary elements but as core healing mechanisms. The invocation of ancestors and cosmic harmony addresses existential dimensions of conflict that purely interpersonal interventions may overlook. The communal healing dimension addresses what traumatic individuals increasingly recognize: individual trauma occurs within social contexts, and individual healing requires communal response (Afuape, 2021). Conflicts create communal trauma by disrupting social bonds, eroding trust, and dividing loyalties. By engaging the whole community in reconciliation processes, Bua-Malus treats the communal body rather than just individual people.

### **Implications for Post-Conflict Societies**

These findings have significant implications for peacebuilding and mental health interventions in post-conflict societies. First, they suggest that external interventions should engage rather than replace Indigenous practices. International development organizations increasingly recognize local ownership and cultural appropriateness as determinants of intervention sustainability (Mac Ginty & Firchow, 2023). Bua-Malus demonstrates that sophisticated conflict resolution methodologies already exist within traditional practices and can be strengthened rather than supplanted.

Second, integration between traditional and modern systems requires careful negotiation that respects Indigenous knowledge while addressing contemporary challenges. Participants identified five areas requiring integration, including handling serious crimes, ensuring gender equity, and navigating legal pluralism. These challenges are not unique to Timor-Leste but characterize some societies with legal pluralism (Benda-Beckmann, 2023). Successful integration requires ongoing dialogue between traditional leaders, legal professionals, and community members rather than top-down imposition of external models.

Third, documentation and education about Indigenous practices can support

intergenerational transmission while adapting to contemporary contexts. Several participants expressed concern about youth disconnection from traditional knowledge. Creating educational programs, developing practice guidelines that balance flexibility with clarity of core principles, and supporting youth participation in ceremonies alongside elders could strengthen cultural continuity.

### **Gender Considerations**

While this study did not focus specifically on gender, the predominance of male participants (6 of 10) and male traditional leaders raises important questions about gender dynamics in Bua-Malus. Traditional leadership structures in Timor-Leste are often male-dominated, reflecting broader patriarchal social organization (Niner, 2023). However, the inclusion of female elders in this study suggests five female participants in facilitation roles. Future research should explicitly examine how gender shapes experience and access Bua-Malus, particularly for conflicts involving gender-based violence. The question of whether traditional practices adequately address power imbalances between men and women requires careful attention. Seven informants argue that customary law can perpetuate gender inequality (Silva & Wassel, 2024), while others note that Indigenous practices offer more accessible justice for women than formal systems (Cummins, 2020). This complexity requires nuanced analysis that neither romanticizes tradition nor dismisses Indigenous knowledge.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Five limitations qualify for these findings. (1) The information focuses on community leaders' perspectives, providing insight into facilitation processes but less information about participants' experiences. (2) The six-month timeframe limited observation of long-term outcomes. (3) While this study focused on Buanomar, Luro. (4) The study did not systematically assess psychological outcomes using standardized measures. (5) The researcher's Timorese identity, while facilitating cultural understanding and access, may have influenced what participants chose to share and how data were interpreted.

Future research directions include comparative studies examining Bua-Malus alongside other indigenous and Western conflict resolution approaches to identify shared principles and distinctive elements, experimental or quasi-experimental

designs assessing psychological and relational outcomes of Bua-Malus participation, participatory action research involving communities in designing integration strategies between traditional and modern systems, and examination of how Bua-Malus principles could inform culturally adapted group counseling interventions.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. This ethnographic study illuminates Bua-Malus as a sophisticated indigenous approach to reconciliation and group counseling within Luro traditional practice. The practice demonstrates principles that align with contemporary counseling and peacebuilding theory while maintaining distinctive cultural groundings that enhance relevance and effectiveness within local contexts.
2. These findings contribute to Indigenous psychology and peacebuilding literatures by documenting a specific traditional practice in detail and demonstrating its theoretical sophistication.
3. The study suggests that mental health and peacebuilding interventions in post-conflict societies should engage Indigenous practices as sources of wisdom rather than obstacles to progress.
4. Documentation of *Bua-Malus* may support intergenerational transmission and cultural preservation while creating space for adaptive evolution. Traditional practices need not remain static to retain their cultural authenticity; rather, thoughtful adaptation in response to changing contexts demonstrates cultural vitality.

Bua-Malus exemplifies the broader principle that diverse cultures have developed sophisticated approaches to perennial human challenges of conflict, healing, and social cohesion. In an increasingly interconnected world facing complex conflicts, engagement with this diversity of wisdom traditions is not merely respectful but essential for developing efficient approaches to building peace and promoting wellbeing

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