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## History of Manufahi District during the Leadership of Dom Boaventura: Indigenous Resistance and Colonial Transformation in Timor-Leste

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### Abstract

*This article examines the historical transformation of Manufahi District during the leadership of Dom Boaventura, one of the most influential indigenous leaders in Timor-Leste's anti-colonial resistance. The study explores the socio-political structure of Manufahi within the liurai system, the impact of Portuguese colonial policies, and the dynamics of indigenous resistance that culminated in the Manufahi Rebellion (1911–1912). Using a qualitative historical approach, the research draws on archival sources, colonial records, oral traditions, and scholarly literature to reconstruct the historical trajectory of Manufahi in the early twentieth century. The findings indicate that Manufahi functioned as both a political center and a symbol of strong customary authority, where traditional leadership systems were deeply embedded in the social structure of society. Dom Boaventura emerged as a unifying figure who successfully consolidated fragmented local authorities to resist colonial policies such as forced taxation, corvée labor systems, and Portuguese administrative domination. The rebellion can be understood not only as an armed conflict but also as an assertion of indigenous sovereignty and cultural identity among the local population. Although the uprising was ultimately suppressed by Portuguese military forces, it left a lasting historical legacy that continues to shape collective memory and nationalist discourse in contemporary Timor-Leste. This study contributes to postcolonial historiography by highlighting the role of indigenous leadership in shaping resistance movements in Southeast Asia.*

**Keywords:** Manufahi, Dom Boaventura, Timor-Leste, colonialism, indigenous resistance, liurai system

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### 1. Introduction

The history of Timor-Leste has been profoundly shaped by centuries of colonial domination and indigenous resistance, particularly under Portuguese rule, which lasted for more



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than four hundred years. Colonial governance in Timor was characterized by a system of indirect rule, in which traditional leaders were incorporated into the colonial administrative structure while simultaneously being subjected to increasing control and exploitation. One of the most significant episodes of resistance was the Manufahi Rebellion (1911–1912), led by Dom Boaventura, the liurai of Manufahi, which is considered one of the largest organized uprisings against Portuguese colonial authority in eastern Timor. This event reflected not only a military confrontation but also a form of social, political, and cultural resistance rooted in indigenous authority structures. Scholars emphasize that such resistance movements emerged from the interaction between local governance systems and the disruptive forces of colonialism. In this context, the Manufahi Rebellion serves as a crucial case for understanding anti-colonial resistance dynamics in Southeast Asia, while also highlighting the fragility of colonial control when confronted with unified indigenous leadership. Therefore, this historical episode occupies an important place in Timorese historiography (Taylor, 1991; Gunn, 1999; Jolliffe, 1978).

The Manufahi District, located in the central-southern region of Timor-Leste, was historically organized according to the liurai system, a traditional governance model based on kinship relations, ritual legitimacy, and territorial authority. Prior to colonial intervention, this system functioned as a decentralized yet relatively stable political structure that regulated social order and land distribution. However, the establishment of Portuguese colonial administration brought significant changes to this system through the introduction of taxation, forced labor (*corvée*), and administrative centralization. These policies undermined the legitimacy of local rulers and created tensions between indigenous authorities and colonial officials. As a result, traditional governance structures became arenas of conflict and resistance. The transformation of Manufahi under colonial rule demonstrates how external political systems can disrupt and weaken indigenous governance frameworks. This process contributed to increasing social instability, eventually leading to armed resistance. These dynamics have been widely discussed in both colonial and postcolonial scholarship (Bovensiepen, 2015; CAVR, 2005; Andrade, 2011).

Despite its historical significance, much of the existing literature tends to treat the Manufahi Rebellion as a singular military event rather than a complex socio-political transformation involving indigenous governance systems, cultural identity, and colonial restructuring. This limited perspective reduces the rebellion to a moment of violence rather than recognizing it as part of a broader and more sustained process of structural resistance. Contemporary postcolonial studies suggest that indigenous uprisings should be understood within broader frameworks of political anthropology and historical sociology. In the case of Manufahi, resistance was directed not only against colonial authority but also represented an effort to preserve traditional socio-political order. Thus, the rebellion reflects a deeper conflict between indigenous sovereignty and colonial state formation. Understanding this complexity requires integrating colonial archival sources with indigenous oral traditions. Such an approach enables a more comprehensive interpretation of resistance movements in Timor-Leste, allowing the Manufahi Rebellion to be understood as a socio-political transformation rather than merely an armed conflict (Fanon, 1963; Taylor, 1991; Gunn, 1999).

The main research questions of this study focus on understanding the internal structure of Manufahi society and its interaction with colonial power. First, how did the socio-political structure of Manufahi operate under the liurai system prior to colonial intervention? Second, which colonial policies such as taxation, forced labor, and administrative restructuring—triggered resistance in the region? Third, how did Dom Boaventura mobilize local social and political structures to unify fragmented indigenous leaders? Fourth, what are the long-term historical implications of the Manufahi Rebellion for national identity and collective memory in Timor-Leste? These questions aim to reconstruct the historical dynamics of resistance from both indigenous and colonial perspectives, while also highlighting the roles of leadership,

governance, and social organization in shaping anti-colonial movements. By addressing these questions, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Timor-Leste's colonial history and situate Manufahi within broader discussions of indigenous resistance in Southeast Asia (Jolliffe, 1978; CAVR, 2005; Bovensiepen, 2015).

The objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive historical analysis of Manufahi during the leadership of Dom Boaventura by integrating colonial archival sources, indigenous oral traditions, and contemporary historical interpretations. This interdisciplinary approach enables a more balanced reconstruction of historical events that have often been dominated by colonial narratives. By examining both structural conditions and human agency, the study seeks to reveal how indigenous leadership responded to colonial domination. It also highlights the role of Dom Boaventura as both a political leader and a symbolic figure of resistance. Furthermore, this study contributes to postcolonial historiography by challenging Eurocentric interpretations of Timorese history. Ultimately, it argues that the Manufahi Rebellion should be understood as part of a broader struggle for autonomy and cultural survival among indigenous communities. The findings are expected to enrich academic debates on colonial resistance in Southeast Asia and beyond (Andrade, 2011; Gunn, 1999; Taylor, 1991).

## 2. Literature review

Colonial governance in Timor-Leste under Portuguese rule was primarily organized through a system of indirect rule that depended heavily on indigenous authorities to manage rural regions. Instead of establishing a fully centralized administrative apparatus, the Portuguese relied on local rulers (liurai) as intermediaries between the colonial state and indigenous populations. This arrangement enabled colonial authorities to exercise control over vast and geographically dispersed territories with relatively limited administrative capacity. However, it also produced a dual-layered authority structure that frequently generated friction between colonial officials and indigenous elites. Scholars note that this governance model was simultaneously pragmatic and exploitative, as it depended on the legitimacy of traditional leadership while gradually weakening it through taxation, coercion, and administrative intervention. In practice, indigenous leaders were absorbed into the colonial hierarchy but remained subordinate to Portuguese political and economic interests. This inherent contradiction became a significant catalyst for the emergence of local resistance. Ultimately, the reliance on indigenous elites exposed the structural fragility of Portuguese colonial rule in Timor-Leste (Taylor, 1991; Gunn, 1999; CAVR, 2005; Andrade, 2011).

The liurai system constituted a pre-colonial and early colonial political order in Timor-Leste grounded in kinship relations, customary law, and ritual legitimacy. Within this framework, authority was not merely political but also spiritual, as leadership was closely connected to ancestral traditions and ritual responsibilities. Each liurai governed a defined territorial domain, maintaining authority through kinship alliances, marriage ties, and customary obligations. This decentralized structure allowed for a high degree of local autonomy while sustaining relative social stability across diverse communities. However, the establishment of Portuguese colonial administration disrupted these indigenous governance systems by redefining authority within colonial legal and bureaucratic frameworks. Despite these disruptions, the liurai system persisted as a key source of legitimacy and a mechanism of resistance against colonial interference. In several instances, colonial authorities attempted to integrate liurai leaders into administrative roles, which often led to internal divisions within indigenous political structures. The endurance of the liurai system reflects its profound cultural and social rootedness within Timorese society (Bovensiepen, 2015; CAVR, 2005; Andrade, 2011).

Resistance movements in Southeast Asia during the colonial era were generally shaped by localized leadership structures rather than centralized nationalist ideologies. Postcolonial perspectives argue that resistance should not be interpreted solely as organized nationalism, but

also as fragmented and culturally embedded responses to colonial domination. Frantz Fanon emphasizes that colonial resistance arises from lived experiences of oppression and structural violence, often manifesting through local forms of organization and leadership. In many Southeast Asian contexts, traditional rulers played a central role in mobilizing communities against colonial taxation, forced labor, and political marginalization. These movements were not always unified under a single ideological framework; instead, they were driven by localized grievances and existing social structures. Nevertheless, they collectively contributed to broader anti-colonial struggles that later influenced national independence movements. Studying these patterns highlights the importance of indigenous agency within colonial settings. Therefore, resistance in Southeast Asia must be analyzed through both political and cultural perspectives (Fanon, 1963; Taylor, 1991; Gunn, 1999; Jolliffe, 1978).

Dom Boaventura is widely regarded as one of the most prominent indigenous leaders in Timor-Leste's anti-colonial history, particularly for his leadership in the Manufahi Rebellion (1911–1912). As a liurai, he possessed both political authority and ritual legitimacy, enabling him to unite various local groups under a coordinated resistance movement. His leadership emerged in response to escalating colonial pressures, including taxation policies, forced labor systems, and administrative centralization imposed by the Portuguese authorities. Although historical accounts often emphasize his role as a military leader, recent scholarship suggests that his authority was deeply embedded within the socio-political and cultural fabric of indigenous society. Nevertheless, comprehensive academic analyses of his leadership strategies and political organization remain limited in global historiography. Much of the existing literature tends to frame the rebellion primarily as a military confrontation rather than a broader socio-political transformation. This gap indicates the need for more nuanced interpretations that incorporate oral histories and indigenous perspectives. Accordingly, Dom Boaventura's role should be understood within a wider framework of indigenous resistance and colonial contestation (Jolliffe, 1978; Gunn, 1999; CAVR, 2005; Bovensiepen, 2015).

### **3. Theoretical framework**

Postcolonial theory offers a critical lens for examining the dynamics of colonial domination and indigenous resistance in Timor-Leste. Building on Frantz Fanon's concept of colonial violence, this perspective underscores that colonialism operates not only as a political and economic system but also as a psychological structure that shapes identity, culture, and social relationships. Fanon argues that colonial rule generates systemic violence in both physical and psychological forms, resulting in profound alienation among colonized peoples. Within this theoretical framework, resistance is understood as a dual process that involves both armed struggle and the recovery of cultural identity. In the context of Manufahi, the resistance led by Dom Boaventura can thus be interpreted as a response to both material exploitation and symbolic forms of domination. Postcolonial theory further highlights how colonial historiography often marginalizes indigenous voices in the construction of historical narratives. Therefore, reinterpreting historical events from the perspective of the colonized is essential for reconstructing a more accurate understanding of the past. This study employs this framework to examine resistance as a multidimensional phenomenon (Fanon, 1963; Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994).

Political anthropology is applied in this study to analyze the liurai system as a traditional political institution that combines governance, ritual authority, and social organization. In many indigenous societies, political power is inseparable from cultural and spiritual legitimacy, as it is embedded within kinship relations and customary law. In Timor-Leste, the liurai system represents a decentralized governance structure in which authority is legitimized through ancestral lineage and ritual practices. Prior to colonial intervention, this system played a fundamental role in maintaining social cohesion and regulating relations between communities.

However, the introduction of colonial administration disrupted these indigenous structures by imposing external legal and bureaucratic systems that weakened traditional authority. Scholars of political anthropology argue that such disruptions often lead to the restructuring of traditional power relations and may give rise to resistance movements. Within this context, the liurai system functioned not only as a political structure but also as a cultural foundation for resisting colonial domination. This analytical framework enables a more comprehensive understanding of indigenous governance and authority systems (Bovensiepen, 2015; Geertz, 1980; Keesing, 1989; CAVR, 2005).

Historical sociology provides an analytical approach for examining long-term structural transformations in Timor-Leste resulting from colonial intervention. This perspective focuses on how colonial policies reshaped indigenous political institutions, economic systems, and social hierarchies over time. In the case of Manufahi, Portuguese colonial rule introduced taxation systems, forced labor (*corvée*), and administrative centralization, all of which significantly altered traditional governance structures. These changes generated increasing tensions between colonial authorities and indigenous communities, eventually leading to organized resistance. Historical sociology emphasizes that such transformations do not occur abruptly but evolve through gradual processes of institutional disruption, adaptation, and restructuring. The interaction between indigenous systems and colonial structures produced hybrid forms of governance that were often unstable and contested. This approach also allows for tracing continuities between colonial transformations and contemporary social identities in Timor-Leste. Therefore, it is an essential framework for analyzing both conflict and long-term social change in colonial contexts (Skocpol, 1979; Mann, 1986; Taylor, 1991; Gunn, 1999).

#### **4. Research methodology**

Data for this study were gathered from a variety of sources in order to ensure historical richness and methodological triangulation. The first category comprises Portuguese colonial archives, which contain official documentation on administration, taxation systems, military operations, and governance structures in Timor-Leste during the colonial era. These archival records are crucial for reconstructing the colonial viewpoint on indigenous resistance, particularly the Manufahi Rebellion. However, such sources often reflect a Eurocentric bias and therefore require careful critical analysis. The second category includes historical documents and missionary records, which provide complementary information regarding social conditions, religious influences, and interactions between colonial agents and indigenous communities. The third source consists of oral history interviews with local informants, including community elders and holders of indigenous knowledge in Manufahi. These oral accounts offer alternative interpretations that are frequently absent from colonial written records. Lastly, secondary academic literature was utilized to situate the findings within broader historiographical debates and existing scholarship (Taylor, 1991; Gunn, 1999; CAVR, 2005; Bovensiepen, 2015).

The collected data were analyzed through a combination of historical interpretation, triangulation, and thematic content analysis to ensure analytical rigor. Historical interpretation was used to reconstruct the chronological sequence of events related to the Manufahi Rebellion and the leadership of Dom Boaventura. Triangulation was applied to cross-check and validate information derived from colonial archives, missionary records, oral testimonies, and scholarly literature, thereby reducing bias and strengthening the credibility of the historical reconstruction. Thematic content analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns related to colonial governance, indigenous resistance, and socio-political transformation. Through this process, key themes such as power relations, cultural disruption, and indigenous agency were systematically categorized and interpreted. The combination of these analytical methods allows for a more comprehensive understanding of historical complexity. This approach is widely recognized and supported within historical and qualitative research methodologies (Flick, 2014; Bowen, 2009; Taylor, 1991; Gunn, 1999).

This research is centered on Manufahi District, Timor-Leste, a region of significant historical importance that played a central role in indigenous resistance during the Portuguese colonial period. Located in the central-southern part of the country, Manufahi has long been associated with strong liurai leadership structures and organized forms of resistance. The district became the focal point of the Manufahi Rebellion (1911–1912), led by Dom Boaventura, which is regarded as one of the most important anti-colonial uprisings in Timorese history. The geographical and socio-political characteristics of Manufahi make it a key site for examining the interaction between colonial authority and indigenous governance systems. Its mountainous terrain also contributed strategically to the organization and sustainability of resistance movements. Moreover, Manufahi continues to hold symbolic significance in shaping national memory and identity in contemporary Timor-Leste. Studying this region provides valuable insight into how specific localities become arenas of historical conflict and political transformation. Therefore, Manufahi functions in this study as both a physical location and a symbolic site of historical analysis (Taylor, 1991; Jolliffe, 1978; CAVR, 2005; Bovensiepen, 2015).

## **5. Results and discussion**

Prior to the establishment of Portuguese colonial administration, Manufahi was governed through a hierarchical yet decentralized liurai system that structured its political, social, and ritual life. Within this system, authority was not derived solely from coercive power, but was deeply grounded in customary law, kinship relations, and ancestral legitimacy. The liurai functioned simultaneously as political leaders and ritual custodians, responsible for preserving balance between the human and spiritual realms. Land tenure and territorial authority were closely tied to lineage systems, reinforcing both social cohesion and collective identity. Decision-making was generally consultative, involving elders and subordinate leaders within the community. This governance arrangement provided a degree of flexibility while maintaining cohesion across various *sucos* and *aldeias*. At the same time, it produced intricate networks of allegiance that could be activated during periods of conflict. Such indigenous governance structures are widely acknowledged as fundamental to the socio-political organization of pre-colonial Timorese society (Bovensiepen, 2015; CAVR, 2005; Taylor, 1991; Gunn, 1999).

The intervention of Portuguese colonial rule significantly disrupted these indigenous governance systems in Manufahi through the introduction of taxation, forced labor (*corvée*), and administrative centralization. These measures were primarily designed to extract economic resources and reinforce colonial authority over rural populations. The imposition of taxation weakened traditional leadership by redirecting allegiance from liurai authorities to colonial administrators. Similarly, forced labor policies exacerbated social tensions by compelling indigenous communities to work under coercive conditions with little or no compensation. Administrative reforms replaced customary governance mechanisms with colonial bureaucratic structures that disregarded local legitimacy and authority. As a result, deep tensions emerged between colonial officials and indigenous rulers, many of whom either resisted or were forced into reluctant cooperation. The erosion of traditional governance structures played a direct role in intensifying regional conflict. These colonial practices are widely recognized as key catalysts of resistance movements in Timor-Leste (Taylor, 1991; Gunn, 1999; CAVR, 2005; Andrade, 2011).

Dom Boaventura rose to prominence as a central indigenous leader during a period marked by escalating colonial pressure and increasing social fragmentation in Manufahi. As a liurai, he possessed both political authority and ritual legitimacy, which enabled him to unify diverse groups under a coordinated resistance movement. His leadership was defined by his capacity to consolidate fragmented liurai factions into a more cohesive opposition against

Portuguese colonial rule. This process of unification was not only political in nature but also symbolic, drawing upon ancestral legitimacy and shared cultural identity. His authority was further reinforced by his position as a cultural figure embodying local values of resistance and sovereignty. The integration of spiritual legitimacy with political leadership illustrates the close relationship between ritual authority and mobilization in indigenous societies. Under his leadership, resistance became more organized and intensified significantly. Scholars therefore regard him as a pivotal figure in the history of Timorese anti-colonial struggle (Jolliffe, 1978; Gunn, 1999; Bovensiepen, 2015; CAVR, 2005).

The Manufahi Rebellion (1911–1912) stands as one of the most extensive and well-coordinated indigenous uprisings against Portuguese colonial authority in Timor-Leste. It involved thousands of participants drawn from various local communities engaged in coordinated resistance activities across the region. Rather than being an isolated outbreak, the rebellion represented the culmination of long-standing grievances related to colonial taxation, forced labor systems, and political marginalization. Economic exploitation significantly contributed to widespread discontent among indigenous populations, while cultural and political exclusion intensified perceptions of injustice and loss of autonomy. The uprising also demonstrated the mobilization of traditional authority structures in response to external domination. Although ultimately suppressed, the rebellion revealed the capacity of indigenous societies to organize large-scale collective resistance. Historical accounts also suggest that it influenced subsequent adjustments in colonial governance strategies (Taylor, 1991; Gunn, 1999; Jolliffe, 1978; CAVR, 2005).

The Portuguese colonial military response to the Manufahi Rebellion was marked by overwhelming force and strategic superiority. Colonial forces conducted systematic military operations aimed at dismantling resistance networks and re-establishing control over the region. The deployment of superior weaponry and coordinated military tactics contributed to the swift suppression of the uprising. However, this military campaign also resulted in substantial casualties and widespread destruction of local settlements. In the aftermath, the colonial administration introduced stricter governance measures to prevent future rebellions. These included enhanced surveillance, tighter regulation of liurai authority, and intensified administrative oversight. The suppression of the rebellion represented a turning point in the evolution of colonial governance in Timor-Leste. Scholars note that such coercive responses ultimately reinforced long-term structures of domination while further constraining indigenous autonomy (Gunn, 1999; CAVR, 2005; Taylor, 1991; Andrade, 2011).

Although the Manufahi Rebellion ended in defeat, its historical significance in shaping collective identity in Manufahi and Timor-Leste remains deeply influential. The rebellion has come to symbolize indigenous resistance against colonial domination and external control. The memory of Dom Boaventura continues to inform nationalist discourse and cultural identity in contemporary Timor-Leste. The event is frequently invoked in political narratives emphasizing resistance, sovereignty, and cultural resilience. Moreover, the rebellion contributed to the formation of a collective historical consciousness that connects past struggles with modern independence movements. Its legacy has also shaped local understandings of leadership and authority. This illustrates how historical events continue to influence identity formation long after their occurrence. Scholars argue that such collective memories play a vital role in postcolonial nation-building processes (Bovensiepen, 2015; CAVR, 2005; Taylor, 1991; Gunn, 1999).

## **6. Conclusion**

The leadership of Dom Boaventura in Manufahi represents a significant and transformative moment in the history of anti-colonial resistance in Timor-Leste. As a liurai, his position reflected not only political leadership but also cultural and ritual authority within indigenous society. Therefore, the Manufahi Rebellion cannot be understood merely as an

armed conflict, but rather as a broader socio-political struggle against Portuguese colonial domination and the disruption of local cultural order. This event reflects the profound tensions between indigenous governance systems and imposed colonial administrative structures.

This study demonstrates that indigenous leadership structures played a central role in mobilizing collective resistance and maintaining social cohesion under colonial pressure. The rebellion also illustrates how local systems of authority could be mobilized as instruments of organized resistance. Rather than being an isolated event, this uprising formed part of a longer historical process of colonial contestation in Timor-Leste. Although it was ultimately suppressed, the rebellion did not lose its significance; instead, it strengthened its symbolic meaning within collective historical memory.

To this day, the legacy of Dom Boaventura remains an important foundation for the formation of national identity and historical consciousness in Timor-Leste. His leadership continues to be remembered as a symbol of unity, resistance, and the resilience of indigenous society in the face of colonial power.

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