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Petroleum Planning as State Building in Timor-Leste

Judith Bovensiepen and Maj Nygaard-Christensen

This article examines the aesthetics and contestations surrounding the planning of a far-reaching petroleum infrastructure and development scheme on the south coast of Timor-Leste. The scheme, known as the Tasi Mane project, is symptomatic of the central role that oil and gas revenues have come to play in the country's development. The article explores how promises of prosperity mobilise visions of societal improvement that were once associated with independence and examines some of the social and political effects that the anticipation of petroleum wealth and infrastructure engenders. While the availability of revenues from oil and gas generate modernist imaginaries of prosperity, the Tasi Mane project can itself be seen as a technology of state building. This process is, however, fraught with contradictions, since a state's legitimacy and autonomy are dependent on recognition by others.

Keywords: Oil and gas; Resource Curse; Post-Conflict Reconstruction; Political Authority; State Building; Sovereignty

Introduction

This article examines the interconnection between resource management, state building and sovereignty in Asia's newest nation, Timor-Leste. It offers a case study of government plans to develop a large-scale, multi-million-dollar petroleum infrastructure project along the south coast, known as the Tasi Mane project. The project has given rise to two radically different appraisals: one that sets the project as the catalyst for a grand, national-level development process, and another that highlights the project's

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strong potential for failure. The project is envisioned by government leaders as a key driving force of economic growth and development. By directing oil and gas resources from the Timor Sea and elsewhere onshore to the Timorese south coast for processing, the Tasi Mane project is said to create local employment opportunities, boost the national economy, and develop the south coast which has largely been cut off from international and national development projects. Domestic critics and external commentators, however, predict its inevitable failure in economic, environmental and development terms.

Rather than lining up with these narratives of either success or failure, this article takes a cue from Weszkalny's work (2014) on the effects brought on by the anticipation of oil. The article examines the expectations surrounding both the material arrival of petroleum through the planned pipeline as well as the anticipated development effects engendered by the aesthetic crafting of the Tasi Mane project. We will show how these expectations and hopes themselves have concrete social and material effects, even while the Tasi Mane project remains in suspension. More specifically, the article argues that the planning of this large-scale petroleum infrastructure site and the aesthetic framing of petroleum-fuelled high-modern development work to project and to establish political authority and sovereignty in a context of purported state fragility.¹

Petroleum resources located in the Timor Sea, where maritime borders between Timor-Leste and Australia had been unsettled until March 2018, illustrate what Bridge and Le Billon (2013) describe as a rapidly changing global geography of petroleum extraction. For nearly half a century, petroleum extraction occurred in concentrated centres such as the Middle East. However, petroleum is increasingly extracted in unconventional and highly disputed petroleum fields, typically in areas marked by weak state structures and/or unsettled questions of ownership (2013, 13). In such areas, the story of petroleum is summarised through the discourse of the 'resource curse' and often forms part of a broader narrative of state failure. In Timor-Leste, civil society groups as well as external analysts commenting on the Tasi Mane project highlight the adverse effects of petroleum dependency, cite low oil prices, express doubts about the quantity of Timor-Leste's onshore and offshore resources, and point to the environmental unsustainability of the project (e.g. Cryan 2015; La'o Hamutuk 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Fundasaun Mahein 2013).

On the basis of such critiques, and with the Timorese government's impressive plans for a radically remade, urbanised, and industrialised south coastal landscape, complete with grid-planned new cities, Scott's (1998) notion of high-modernist, state-planned development schemes offers a tempting reading. Such an approach would foreground the project's vulnerability to failure in economic or human development terms and ultimately provide a study of failed state management. In this manner, Meitzner Yoder (2015, 303) argued that the implementation of a special economic zone in Timor-Leste's enclave of Oecusse, another recently initiated mega-project, could lead to the erasure of Oecusse's specificity as a place. Not disregarding such views, nor the persuasive and legitimate warnings issued by civil society representatives, we wish however to take a somewhat different approach, with the aim of

exploring some of the other effects of mega-project planning in independent Timor-Leste. More specifically, we wish to turn the idea of state-driven development (and failure) on its head, and instead suggest that the planning of the Tasi Mane project is instrumental in the social production of the state itself.

Attending to the spectacle of petroleum planning in Timor-Leste, we thus propose that the Tasi Mane project might be understood not so much as an instance of state-planned development in Scott's sense, but rather as a project aimed at manifesting and *producing* statehood in a country that, according to popular complaints, has suffered from the absence of functioning state institutions and which external accounts portray through the discourse of state failure (Cotton 2007; contrast with Pereira 2014; RDTL 2014). Our argument thus reverberates with studies of how oil interacts with and produces particular political institutions, practices, and ideas in both destructive and 'politically productive' ways (see also Barry 2013; Coronil 1997; Mitchell 2011; Weszkalnys 2011, 2014, 217, 2015).

Such work encourages a more open-ended approach than the resource curse literature's focus on petroleum's ultimately destructive qualities, allowing us to explore the broader effects of petroleum planning in Timor-Leste. Following Mitchell (1991) who emphasises *both* the ideal and material dimensions of the state, we argue that the government's petro-visions form part of the ideological process of state building. Moreover, we show that as a 'key technology of state building' (Roll *in press*), the Tasi Mane project lays bare the inherent contradictions of this process, exemplified by what Rutherford (2012) calls the 'paradox of sovereignty'. Sovereignty, defined as 'supreme and absolute power' (Rutherford 2012, 10), both drives and underpins state building. Due to Timor-Leste's newly achieved independent nationhood following colonial rule, occupation, and UN administration, popular and political desires for a self-relying and externally acknowledged sovereign nation are particularly urgent. However, the desire for full autonomy at once implies an exemption from external relations *and* depends on recognition by other nations, and thus remains an always unobtainable ideal (Rutherford 2012, 4). This paradoxical dual desire for full sovereignty and external recognition, we suggest, lies at the heart of the Tasi Mane project and political attempts to bring it to completion. The project is thus both shaped by and co-producing of a field of intense contestation where international borders, resource ownership, and state capacity to successfully convert resources into national wealth and development are all at stake.

We begin by situating the Tasi Mane project in the context of post-occupation state building, illustrating how both proponents and critics of the project cement the idea of the state as a unified institution. Subsequently, we tease out how the infrastructure project planning exposes the tensions between attempts to assert national sovereignty and the need to be acknowledged by a perceived 'international community'. In the third part, we analyse the visions and utopian hopes mobilised by state planners through the aesthetic crafting of the Tasi Mane project. And finally, we examine the material and social effects that the very planning of petroleum-infrastructure have, even prior to the project's actual realisation.

Petroleum-Fuelled Development as a Technology of State building

Timor-Leste achieved independence in 2002 after a period of UN transitional administration that followed the country's 1999 separation from Indonesia. Prior to Indonesia's 1975 invasion and subsequent occupation, eastern Timor and the Oecusse enclave were under Portuguese colonial administration.

The end of the Indonesian occupation initiated one of the most comprehensive state-building processes to date. Between 1999 and 2002, this process was managed by UNTAET, the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor, which had the unique role of being the key driver of state building while simultaneously acting as the state administration itself (Downie 2007, 29). Behind this background, and with no previous independent state structures as references, UNTAET became tasked with establishing a political system, formulating electoral processes and holding national elections, setting up financial systems, drafting foreign policies, establishing a civil service and training its staff, as well as training journalists, health workers, teachers, lawyers, court officials, police and political leaders (Downie 2007, 30). In the post-intervention years, the paradox of foreign-led establishment of state institutions has continued to shape and challenge domestic political attempts to produce state authority and uphold the idea of a sovereign state. As a result of rule by three successive foreign entities, Timorese leadership is acutely sensitive to the need to establish and strengthen domestic institutions.

Since 2006, state-building efforts have been primarily funded by international aid and the Timor-Leste Petroleum Fund, a sovereign wealth fund established in 2005 to contain the surplus of Timor-Leste's oil and gas income. After initial plans to use only the interest generated by the fund so that it would not exceed the Estimated Sustainable Income level (ESI), plus non-oil revenues, the state budget became increasingly dependent on petroleum fund revenues, particularly after 2012 (Nixon 2012, 150; La'o Hamutuk 2014, 2017).

In spite of continued calls to diversify the heavily petroleum-reliant economy, the centrepiece of Timor-Leste's National Strategic Development Plan for 2020 (RDTL 2011) is the 'petroleum corridor', which aims at bringing oil and gas from offshore fields in the Timor Sea to Timor-Leste's southern shores. In interviews, senior figures in the Timor-Leste petroleum industry and Ministry for Petroleum and Natural Resources (active in 2015–16) outlined that the Tasi Mane project is part of the government's key political strategy to secure a more stable and domestically driven development process.

The Tasi Mane project is to spread over three clusters that span 160 km: Suai, Betano and Beço. It stipulates the building of a supply base, an airport, a port and industrial estates in Suai; a liquified natural gas (LNG) plant in Beço, where the pipeline from the Timor Sea will reach shore; another international airport, a refinery and petrochemical plant, as well as a petroleum industry administration city (Nova Betano) in Betano (La'o Hamutuk 2013a; RDTL 2011). Several sources from the government and business community have argued that the idea to spread the petroleum

industry over three clusters was a political decision, so that diverse regions would benefit from the development, and possibly to avoid creating ‘enclaves’ as commonly occurs in oil-rich regions (Ferguson 2005). The project also involves building a multi-lane highway to connect the different sites. Some of the residents along the highway route and around the sites of the new facilities might be relocated to grid-planned new cities. The Tasi Mane project thereby promises to open up an isolated and abandoned area to radical exposure to externally led development and investment.

Civil society critiques of the planned petroleum project have mirrored academic discourses of the resource curse, which highlights the negative economic development and political volatility endangered by oil dependence (Sachs and Warner 2001; cf. Weszkalnys 2011). Civil society representatives have thus argued that the project is holding back efforts to create a diversified and sustainable economy, may harm the environment and may cause a rise in political corruption (La’o Hamutuk 2013b; Fundasaun Mahein 2013; Scheiner 2014). Moreover, some political analysts have suggested that Timor-Leste’s oil-producing fields will be empty by 2024 and that resources from the Petroleum Fund will be exhausted by 2030 (La’o Hamutuk 2013a, 2015, 2018). Whilst the recently agreed Greater Sunrise resource sharing agreement (Leach 2018) is likely to provide the Timor-Leste government with significant future revenue, this is unlikely to last more than a generation (La’o Hamutuk 2018). Moreover, some observers express concern over financial viability or how tenders for the construction will be allocated, while others emphasise its potentially detrimental environmental impact (Fundasaun Mahein 2013), the patrimonialist and clientelist networks that oil dependency fosters (Neves *in press*; Scambary 2015) and the possibility of dispossession and impoverishment (Cryan 2015).

Rather than taking state existence for granted as a concrete entity, Abrams (1988) in his critical essay ‘The Difficulty of Studying the State’ points to the processes through which the *idea* of the state is promoted. The state, in this sense, is an ideological construct, since the idea that the state has a concrete existence is an illusion. Mitchell (1991) developed this argument further to stress that the ideological processes that produce the state involve not just ideal, but also material dimensions. In continuation of this, we suggest that the Tasi Mane project works to cultivate the projection of the *idea* of the state onto the political post-conflict landscape of Timor-Leste. Even prior to being realised, the project contributes to the material manifestation of the state, thereby producing concrete political and institutional effects. The planning of grand development schemes like the Tasi Mane project are particularly effective at this, since they are premised on the idea of an already-existing unified political body capable of managing and converting the nation’s resources into national development, thus concealing the very processes through which the state is socially produced. This is not merely a top-down, government-driven process. Rather, as we will see in the final part of the article, this manifestation of the state is also produced through local enterprises and small-scale business ventures initiated by citizens who align with and thus co-produce the government’s development vision of a remade south coast.

In arguing that the Tasi Mane project is central to the ideological and material production of the state, we draw on Kate Roll ([in press](#)), who has examined the generous veteran pension scheme that has been implemented in Timor-Leste since 2002 and is largely financed from the Petroleum Fund. Roll argues that the veteran scheme is a 'technology for state-building', which 'consolidate[s] power with the state, moving from multiple sites of legitimate force and authority towards a Weberian monopoly, while also continuing to draw upon the symbolic power of the resistance movement and its leadership' (Roll [in press](#)). The additional effort that needs to go into the ideological production of the state in a post-conflict situation such as Timor-Leste draws attention to the constructed nature of the state, and to the inherent contradictions of this process. The management of resource wealth has become a crucial dimension in political leaders' attempts to secure recognition and legitimacy, both domestically as well as externally (see also, Meitzner Yoder, this special issue).

Sovereignty and Dependence

Rutherford (2012, 1) has stressed 'the uneasy relationship between sovereignty and audience', showing how in their quest for sovereignty, governments turn to one another for recognition. In that way, sovereignty simultaneously implies mastery over others and exemption from the constraints of social relations (Rutherford 2012, 4), yet is only achieved through recognition from others and is thereby inherently relational (Rutherford 2012, 21). The historically unprecedented external contributions to Timor-Leste's foundation as an independent nation, in the form of UNTAET and subsequent donor contributions, has exacerbated this 'paradox of sovereignty' (Rutherford 2012, 2012), and the ambivalence with which Timorese leaders and constituents relate to neighbouring countries and external influence over political processes.

Although countries such as Australia have acted as key donors for Timorese state building, they have also been among the most critical of Timorese political development and state management. Both the International Force for East Timor (INTERFET) that responded to violence conducted by Indonesian forces and pro-Indonesia militia groups in 1999, and the International Stabilisation Force (ISF) put in place to curb civilian violence in 2006, were under Australian military command. After initially being welcomed in Timor-Leste, the Australian presence was increasingly seen as politically biased and subjected to critiques that conjured up the familiar trope of occupation. Gradually, and particularly after the 2006–07 political crisis, criticism grew in Timor-Leste against what came increasingly to be viewed as international interference in domestic political affairs. In this context, critics like Neves have argued that donor spending undermined state sovereignty by creating new forms of dependence on foreign donors and limiting full Timorese participation in the nation-building process (Neves 2006, 18).

In November 2014, several Portuguese legal advisors were expelled from Timor-Leste. There were suggestions that this was related to their ruling in favour of the energy company ConocoPhillips, which the Timor-Leste government claimed owed

additional taxes (e.g. Paul 2014). This expulsion raised concerns amongst the ‘international community’ that the ‘rule of law’ was under threat. Because of the relational nature of sovereignty, acts to assert sovereignty (by expelling legal advisors) ended up reproducing the discourse around ‘weak’ democratic institutions.

The Tasi Mane project should be understood in the context of this complex history of foreign involvement. Key to the project is the plan to bring LNG from Greater Sunrise oil and gas fields onshore, to the Timorese south coast, in an LNG plant to be built in Beaçó. According to the median line principle, Greater Sunrise oil and gas fields—valued at several billion US dollars—would belong mostly to Timor-Leste. However, at the time the Tasi Mane project was initiated, Australia was refusing to negotiate a permanent maritime boundary between both countries. After Timor-Leste regained independence, Australia had focussed on a resource sharing agreement, CMATS (‘Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea’) that would provide Timor-Leste merely with 50 per cent of the revenues from Greater Sunrise. The agreed settlement was challenged when espionage accusations emerged in 2013. Australian Security Intelligence Organisation agents, posing as aid workers, had bugged the Timor-Leste government offices while doing renovations. The Australian government had thus secured itself an unfair economic advantage in negotiations with Timor-Leste (see Bovensiepen 2016). When this news emerged, the East Timorese government took the Australian government to the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague to challenge the treaty. In short, although Australia has acted as a key donor to the Timorese development process, its external involvement has often been understood as simultaneously undermining of national sovereignty.

In December 2013, demonstrations occurred outside the Australian embassy in Dili in reaction to what is broadly regarded in Timor-Leste as illegitimate Australian claims to oil and gas in the Timor Sea, which go back to the time of Indonesian occupation (Aditjondro 1994; McGrath 2017). Around the time of the protests, graffiti and stencil images appeared on the wall adjoining the Australian embassy in Dili, positioned along the main road that connects the airport with the city centre. One stencil pictured a kangaroo holding a black bag on which the word ‘OIL’ was printed (see Figure 1). Another showed two crocodiles pointing spears at a pair of kangaroos, and behind the crocodiles an oil drum seeping blood (see Figure 2). Alongside the stencils, a text written in Tetum read, ‘Our blood runs from the mountains to the sea’. Referencing the sea, the text paralleled Timor-Leste’s struggle with Australia over ownership of Timor Sea oil with the struggle for independence from Indonesia, largely waged from the mountainous interior and positioned the country’s claim over national resources within a broader history of struggle against foreign occupiers and neo-colonialism. Some read it further as a reference to WWII, when Portuguese Timor became a battleground between Japanese and Australian soldiers, of which the latter benefitted from the aid of Timorese helpers. This historical relationship with Australia demonstrates how current negotiations over resource ownership form part of a long and complex history of both conflict and cooperation with foreign powers.



Figure 1 Political Graffiti in Dili.

In February 2016 another series of protests against Australia's 'occupation' of the Timor Sea took place in Dili, part of a broader campaign to settle Timor-Leste's southern boundary and to force Australia back to the negotiating table. Protests were not limited to the streets of Dili, but were also waged on social media. According to political leaders behind the Tasi Mane project, the idea for an onshore petroleum industry has roots in the resistance against Indonesia and is likewise envisioned as part of a general national strategy to secure full sovereignty over the country's borders and over Greater Sunrise oil and gas resources (see also Bovensiepen, *in press*).

In March 2018, after considerable national and international pressure, the Timor-Leste government achieved a groundbreaking agreement that settles the maritime boundary between Timor-Leste and Australia along the median line, which means that most of Greater Sunrise oil and gas fields legally belong to Timor-Leste. Beyond clarifying oil field ownership and resource sharing, of central concern is *where* processing will take place: in the sea on a floating platform, onshore in Timor-Leste with facilities yet to be built (as envisaged in the Tasi Mane project plans), or onshore in Australia with existing facilities in Darwin. At the time of writing, questions around the location of processing LNG from the Greater Sunrise fields in the Timor Sea have not been settled.



Figure 2 Political Graffiti in Dili.

Initially, Woodside Petroleum had planned to process the resources from the Greater Sunrise oilfields via a floating platform. However, political leaders in Timor-Leste insisted on a pipeline that would bring oil and gas onshore for processing. These plans are understood within the historical context of the resistance struggle, as illustrated by the suggestion made by a member of Timor-Leste's oil industry in an interview that 'what we fought for is to own and manage our own oil'. Such claims effectively frame the struggle for oil as part of a longer struggle for full political sovereignty. The repeated humiliations by the Australian government only increased this desire, as the onshore petroleum infrastructure promises to produce visible signs of sovereignty (Bovensiepen *in press*).

Against this background, the Tasi Mane project can thus be understood as a nationalist project that appeals to popular desires for a strong state capable of managing the nation independent of foreign powers. Government plans to bring petroleum onshore and build an independently managed petroleum industry—not offshore on faraway oil platforms in the sea, but onshore for everyone to see—showcases state potency and links up with popular ideas about what a truly independent and sovereign nation might look like.

However, such attempts to distance Timor-Leste from foreign dependence are not clear-cut. They occur alongside a preoccupation with international recognition. The

country's first appearance on the Failed States Index in 2007 led to growing domestic concerns about the country's international standing and has caused much disagreement amongst politicians. For example, Agio Pereira (2014), the former Minister of State and of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers of Timor-Leste has forcefully argued against the notion of Timorese state failure. Against this prognosis he cites Timor-Leste's oil wealth and the Tasi Mane project, which are held up as evidence of ongoing processes of nation building. Such responses from members of the Timor-Leste government illustrate that external descriptions of Timor-Leste as 'failed' do not go unnoticed; instead, they are seen in the context of continued external interference in Timorese politics that questions the Timorese state's capacity for self-governance and thus undermines full independence. Hence, broader questions of sovereignty and self-rule are at stake in these contrasting scenarios of Timor-Leste's future—cast either as a weak, oil-dependent country or a resource-rich nation.

By March 2015, all of the striking political graffiti that covered Dili's walls had been covered with white paint, supposedly in anticipation of an international conference. The covering over of political graffiti, similar to the discourses about political legitimacy and state authority, are made with constant reference to 'an imagined international audience' (Rutherford 2003, 13). In Timor-Leste, this sense of an 'authorizing foreign gaze' (Spyer 2008, 31) that acts as witness to the unfolding of domestic political events (Strassler 2004, 705) has transformed understandings of political legitimacy and authority. Particularly, it has led to a preoccupation with the international standing and foreign connections of political leaders, so that international recognition in itself has come to work as a form of legitimisation of political leadership (Bovensiepen 2014; Nygaard-Christensen 2012).

The management of oil wealth is similarly entangled with the production and assertion of political authority, and illustrates the tensions inherent in the idea and practice of sovereignty pointed to by Rutherford (2012). Reminiscent of Gupta's (1995) argument on how discourses on corruption allow people to imagine the state, government visions of the Tasi Mane project as well as civil society critiques of the project contribute to this ideological formation of the state. Drawing on the history of the resistance, while at the same time needing to go beyond this history to legitimise itself, the state not only needs to be recognised by Timor-Leste's citizens, but is also constrained by its ambivalent foreign relations.

Aesthetic Crafting of the Future

During the 2012 elections, the government distributed brochures containing descriptions of the planned Tasi Mane project, images of computer-generated plans for construction, and photographs of Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão in a close embrace with 'ordinary folks'. The ideas of modernity promoted by the government through the distribution of plans for 'new cities' and industrialised areas on the south coast resonated with popular ideas of subterranean wealth as a potential source of radical societal transformation and future prosperity. Indeed, since its founding, CNRT officials

have appealed to voters through the production of what Kammen (2009) has called 'utopian visions'.

The 2007 launch of Gusmão's CNRT party, just in time to allow it to compete in that year's parliamentary elections, was followed by the display of similar imagery of campaign banners that decorated Dili's streets. The election posters pictured high modern skyscrapers, shopping malls, and airports on banners that were easily mistaken for architectural renderings of planned buildings and striking in their contrast to the actual poverty-stricken appearance of Dili. Likewise, brochures and images of the Tasi Mane project are remarkable in their contrast to the south coast, which has been disconnected from most development projects that have instead focussed on more easily accessible areas.

Yet merely belittling or disregarding such visions of future prosperity undermines both their relation to popular desires for a radically improved society and their connection to concrete practices (see also Bovensiepen 2016; Kammen 2009; Nygaard-Christensen 2010; Wieszkalnys 2014). Writing about capitalism, Mulgan (2013, 114) notes how 'the very extremism of possible worlds' conjured up by utopian scenarios 'feeds back usefully into the more prosaic and incremental world of everyday practice'. Indeed, the ideas set in motion by the prospect of oil wealth, and by visions of Timor-Leste as the next Dubai or Singapore, have shaped citizens' everyday lives and affected the management of domestic, national and global resources.

While CNRT officials initially referred to the 2007 campaign banners as 'just dreams' or 'visions' of what Timor-Leste might look like, they soon came to be replaced by actual building plans on fenced-off building sites in the capital once the new government alliance with CNRT at its centre had commenced. In the following years, Dili became the site of a building boom with hotels, a post office, grand government buildings, and a new presidential palace. While the UN and Australia had a central role in the democratisation and state-building process of the early years of independence, the building boom that followed was achieved with the support of Asian donors (mainly China) and the proliferation of new business alliances and contracts with Indonesian and Chinese investors: building plans in front of the new post office showed a Korean flag next to the flag of Timor-Leste; China was contracted to build a large presidential palace and the highway that will connect the different clusters of the Tasi Mane project (see Figure 3.); and an Indonesian company was contracted to build the new, tall Ministry of Finance.

The building boom taking place since 2007 has been enabled by funds from Timor-Leste's petroleum fund, which also funded other benefits for the local population, including health clinics and hospitals, new schools, near universal electricity services and telecommunications, and an array of social transfers and pensions. The material reconstruction of the capital appears to model the city along the lines of new Asian market economies in the region through the building of white, often multi-story concrete-structured housing, new shopping malls, hotels, and political offices. These projections of what Timor-Leste might look like and practical attempts to realise them in the post-occupation years are not only oriented towards the future, but have roots in resistance imaginaries of independence.



Figure 3 Highway Construction.

No broad and sustained debates about independent nationhood took place during the occupation years, despite continued resistance against Indonesian rule (see Bexley and Tchailoro 2013; Moxham 2008, 7). Instead, such negotiations were actively suppressed and postponed until after independence due to the need for a united resistance movement (Bexley and Tchailoro 2013). As a result, independence came to be imagined more vaguely as a form of ‘anti-past’ (Gluck 2003)—an inversion of everything wrong during the Indonesian regime, from violence to poverty (Nygaard-Christensen 2010, 68). Both political and popular discourses about Timorese nationalism came to be premised on the idea of radical transition to a better society. Imaginaries of independence during the resistance were those of a prosperous nation where ‘everyone would live in a “white” (i.e. modern) house in the cities’ (Kammen 2009, 391) or a ‘return’ to an idealised ancestral past free from foreign control or influence. Similarly, Traube documents the popular understanding that independent nationhood ‘would usher in a general utopian transformation’ (2007, 18). The more precise contours of

what a Timorese nation might look like hence only began to be sketched out after independence.

Initially, the idea of a new utopian order was supported by the ‘spectacle of intervention’ (Nygaard-Christensen 2010) that occurred with the arrival of the UN and the accompanying intervention industry. ‘We thought, with all of that equipment, they can really help us here; things will get better’, a friend and research participant recalled of the 1999 arrival of peacekeeping troops and the UN mission. During the transition years, today recollected as a time of excitement, optimism, and high expectations, international aid organisations and the Timorese elite collaborated in the making of what they hoped would be a miracle nation or success story in terms of internationally steered nation- and state-building processes (see Leach 2017, for a history of nation-building). The onset of a domestic political crisis in 2006 effectively crushed such expectations. Critically, the crisis led to widespread disillusionment coined by a deep mistrust of the political leadership. Several political leaders were accused of instigating or being unable to contain civilian violence during the crisis. Against this background of collapsed utopias, state building only truly began in the post-2006 years, when political leaders could no longer exclusively rely on the heritage of the resistance as a source of legitimacy and state authority.

The expectations about future oil-generated wealth do not only have concrete effects on current resource management but play on familiar hopes about rapid societal transformations once associated with independence. The spectacular images of a future Timor-Leste circulated by CNRT and the current government’s plans for the development of the Tasi Mane project respond to these visions of sovereignty and give concrete form to how they might be achieved. A recurring theme in East Timorese political imagery, illustrated particularly by the CNRT election campaign posters, is the association between freedom and nationalism with a particular, arguably Indonesian-inspired vision of modernity (Nygaard-Christensen 2013). The project of nation building has become firmly identified with a particular vision of modernity, with new consumer practices at its centre. A similar logic is at the heart of the Tasi Mane project (and the Oecusse special economic zone), which conjures up a vision of the future that is not only modernist, but where freedom is equated with the ability to buy and consume products associated with modernity. Issues of equality and sustainability, however, seem to be less significant in the vision of the future that oil wealth is hoped to bring.

The Timor-Leste government gains some of its legitimacy by promoting the idea of the state as guarding the nation’s natural resources against foreign powers, as well as by fulfilling the ‘utopian promise’ of independent nationhood (see Gupta 2007, 271). This is reminiscent of Coronil’s (1997, 4) observation that in its making as an oil nation, Venezuela

was seen as having two bodies, a political body made up of its citizens and a natural body made up of its rich subsoil. By condensing within itself the multiple powers dispersed throughout the nation’s two bodies, the state appeared as a single agent endowed with the magical power to remake the nation.

Similarly, through the Tasi Mane project, East Timorese political leaders advocate an idea of the state capable of transforming the nation via the management of natural resources.

The aesthetic framing of the project has been rife with high-modernist images and computer-generated videos that circulated around the country and on social media (see, for example, [Figure 4](#)), and through political speeches given at community consultations, during which promises of employment, raised living standards and resource independence are made. For example, residents in Betano, where the oil refinery is to be built, were told during a meeting with government and oil industry representatives that once the Tasi Mane project is completed, they would no longer need to buy any petrol for their cars and motorbikes, since the refinery would cater to their needs. Once Timor-Leste had its own oil refinery, the argument continued, petrol would no longer need to be bought from other countries—Timor-Leste would be truly resource independent.

The imagery produced of the planned project sites (see [Figure 4](#))—alongside CNRT’s political imagery and the explosion of street advertisements of foreign and new domestic products following Dili’s recent building boom—give visual shape to this remaking by casting the nation as a ‘market’ (see also Foster 1999, 274) about



Figure 4 Suai Airport Construction Plans.

to open up to its citizens. By modelling this projected market along the lines of new Asian market economies—both in its visual form and through concrete business alliances and relations—the project at once asserts sovereignty in relation to Australia and promises to open the nation up to another region associated with modernity, growth and consumerism. The anticipatory effects promoted by this aesthetic framing of the Tasi Mane project have contributed to the production of a vision of a modern, urbanised landscape and radically improved livelihoods, even before any state-led construction occurred. As we will see in the remainder of the article, the way in which this imaginary has been seized and appropriated by local citizens who have taken steps to prepare for petroleum's arrival, has had its own tangible social and material effects on the Timorese south coast.

Social and Material Effects of Petroleum Planning

Suai is the only site where the Tasi Mane project has thus far seen any concrete building work in the form of the airport expansion and highway construction (see [Figure 3](#)). However, negotiations with Australia, failure to attract significant foreign investment, the rejection of the Hyundai Suai Supply Base contract by the Timorese Audit Chamber (La'o Hamutuk 2013b), and political stalemate following the 2017 national elections, meant that the implementation of the Tasi Mane project has made slow progress. Neither supply base, oil refinery, nor LNG plant have been constructed to date. Even though the project envisioned by the government remains 'suspended' or 'paused' (Weszkalnys 2015, 615), its anticipation has had transformative effects on the south coast, where it has offset a range of activities among citizens in preparation for petroleum's expected arrival.

In both Suai (in 2015 and in 2017) and Betano (in 2016), a number of subsistence farmers had ceased working on their fields, because their land has been identified as a target for the Tasi Mane project (supply base and oil refinery). In Betano, some of the houses along the beach where the oil refinery is to be built have been abandoned and residents have moved to more remote areas. The identification of land to be 'liberated' for the Tasi Mane project and the compensation payments have produced several intra- and inter-communal conflicts in both Betano and Suai. A stated aim of the Ministry for Petroleum and Natural Resources is to invest in human development, along with the goals of 'maximum participation', 'maximum benefits', and 'diversification'. To achieve these aims, fifty students have been sent abroad to obtain university degrees in oil- and gas-related subjects. Farmers living in the Suai area, where the supply base will be built, received English, computer and driving classes so that in the future, they will be able to take on jobs working for employees of the petroleum industry. The spectacle of petroleum-fuelled development plans has thereby caused local communities to ready themselves for the anticipated economic spillover benefits of the project. This seems reminiscent of how people in Dili actively pursued 'skills' such as English and computer literacy that would match those sought after by international organisations in the years following separation from Indonesia.

In Suai, where land compensation had largely been paid by 2017, gambling parlours opened and motor-cross racing was put up. The area has also witnessed a spike in individuals—some residing as far away as Dili—purchasing land or property with the aim of renting out houses to expected incoming petroleum investors and employees. The project has thus sparked hopes for a rental market mirroring that of Dili in the post-intervention years, where many families supported their incomes by renting out rooms or houses to foreign officials and NGO workers. In 2013, a group of highly motivated East Timorese graduates founded an organisation called EIPA (Extractive Industries Professional Association), aimed at supporting East Timorese men and women to get employment in the natural resource sector. In 2016, the large majority of the 320 members (mostly engineers, and men) had not yet found work—even though their families had gone to great expense to support their studies, mostly in Indonesia. The anticipation of the expansion of the energy sector in Timor-Leste has clearly shaped the life choices of these graduates.

Given the immense power of the visions mobilised and Tasi Mane project's framing as a struggle to secure state sovereignty, local residents have offered comparatively little protest and even their enthusiasm thus far is unsurprising.² Ordinary citizens have initiated a range of small-scale entrepreneurial efforts ordered around the expected petroleum infrastructure and its imagined benefits, thus aligning themselves with the development vision promoted by the government. This resonates with Morten Nielsen's (2011, 332) concept of 'inverse governmentality', which he coined to describe how governance is not just exerted top-down from state to people, but how citizens themselves actively create the governmental techniques by which they are governed (2011, 347). Analysing illegal house-building projects in the outskirts of Maputo, he shows how residents mimic state-defined 'urban standards that the state could have applied (but which it did not)'. By doing so, they 'create the ordering gaze of power by which they ought to be illuminated. The gaze radiates, as it were, back from its object towards its source which is thus supplied both with properties and form' (Nielsen 2011, 332). Similarly, Timorese citizens who are preparing themselves through concrete steps for the Tasi Mane project can be seen to have played a crucial part in the co-production of the government's development vision, and thus, in the projection of the idea of a strong state capable of bringing it to completion, even as the project itself remains unfinished.

* * *

By projecting a vision of a future where government-led development schemes bring prosperity to everyone, political actors have succeeded in producing an image of the sovereign East Timorese state that administers the nation's oil wealth. By sharing in—and often co-producing—these visions, citizens implicitly recognise the legitimacy of the state and thus contribute to generating political authority (cf. Harvey and Knox 2015). The Tasi Mane project hence embodies the ideal and material processes through which the state is made. However, tied to the modernist vision of state building, the infrastructure project is not only socially and politically productive, but is also subject to the vulnerabilities and contradictions that sovereignty implies. It

must be understood in the context of the country's contemporary political landscape, its specific historical experience and the paradox of dependency on recognition by a foreign gaze that both authorises and potentially threatens state sovereignty.

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Notes

- [1] Both authors are social anthropologists who have carried out fieldwork in Timor-Leste since 2005. This paper is informed by their past and current research and builds on interviews with state officials and civil society representatives, participant observation, and media analysis, among other sources.
- [2] There have been some protests against the power plant in Betano (see Naidu this special issue) and against the lack of employment of local workers at the Suai airport.

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