Can Oil Speak? On the Production of Ontological Difference and Ambivalence in Extractive Encounters

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ABSTRACT

Two disparate views emerge as rural people living along Timor-Leste's south coast are confronted by extractive industries charged with implementing a large oil infrastructure project: emphasis is put either on the productive potential of the non-human environment or on the spiritual connections with particular sites. While political ontology approaches posit that resource conflicts reveal underlying ontological differences between animism and naturalism, this article shows how differences are in fact produced by extractive encounters. Resource extraction promotes the articulation of clear-cut positions, thereby displacing more ambivalent relations with the inhabited environment. The ontological multiplicity of East Timorese origin accounts challenges the analytical prioritization of difference in political ontology and provides a model for attending to multivocality, ambiguity, and political context. [Keywords: Oil infrastructure development, difference, animism and naturalism, resource extraction and conflict, political ontology, multivocality, ambiguity]

In Timor-Leste, crocodiles are often described as the ancestors of humans. In August 2016, a ritual speaker in Betano, Timor-Leste, told me the following story about a recent crocodile attack.

"Early in the morning, a boy and his family entered the sea in order to catch fish when the ancestor (*avo*) caught the boy and pulled him into the sea. It was about eight in the morning. The family tried to pull him back, but without success. Everyone ran out onto the beach […] and gathered by the seaside. […] The ancestor was scared to enter the deep sea and kept on moving back and forth in the shallow water, holding the boy in his mouth. They called me so that I would *hamula* [utter words of ritual speech], […] in Portuguese, you might say *reza* [to pray]. I asked the ancestor for forgiveness. I said, 'I am so sorry we have made mistakes. […] I am sorry we no longer follow your ways, no longer carry our culture close to us. I beg for your forgiveness.' […] At three in the afternoon, the ancestor returned the boy to us. He was in one piece—no body part was missing."[1]
"But he was dead?" I interjected.
"Yes, he was dead; he no longer breathed," responded the ritual speaker. "But the body was complete. The Ancestor Crocodile [*Avo Lafaek*] had given the boy back to us."

The crocodile attack took place in 2014, just after a power plant had been inaugurated in Betano—a village along Timor-Leste's south coast, which is currently subject to large oil infrastructure development. Such attacks are said to have increased in recent years. Because of the frequent association of crocodiles with human ancestors, it is prohibited to harm them. After the attack, the ritual speaker initiated a large ceremony during which local residents pledged an oath promising to protect crocodiles.
  A former village chief also told me about the crocodile attack, interpreting the event in a different way: "Some people think that crocodiles are our ancestors. But in truth, humans are humans and animals are animals. Crocodiles are not human." He was worried about the increase of crocodile attacks but said that it had to do with the increasing presence of Australian crocodiles on Timorese shores. Timorese crocodiles do not hurt anyone, he insisted, but a large group of Australian crocodiles had escaped from a crocodile farm in northern Australia and had swum across to Timorese shores. "Only Australians bite," he said. "The Timorese crocodiles have

never bitten anyone." "How do you know they are Australian?" I asked. He responded, "They all look the same, but when they bite, you know they are Australian."

This tongue-in-cheek omission of the word "crocodile" when talking about "Australians biting" was also an underhand critique of Australian foreign politics, which we had previously been discussing—most notably the recent revelations that, in 2004, the Australian government had been spying on Timor-Leste in order to obtain an economic advantage in negotiations over oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea.

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At first sight, these two accounts seem to express radically different modes of relating to the environment. First, there is the assumption that crocodiles are human ancestors, which is characteristic of a more generalized identification of human subjectivity, spiritual potency, and agency in non-human sites or beings, commonly found in Southeast Asian animism (Århem 2015:3). The second account by contrast draws a sharp distinction between nature and culture, between the world of animals and world of humans, an assumption said to characterize the naturalism of modernist thought (e.g., Århem 2015:3; see also Descola 2013:75, Viveiros de Castro 2004:481).

These accounts emerged at a time when the independent East Timorese government started to actively pursue the development of extractive industries in the country. In 2011, it initiated the Tasi Mane project, a large-scale development program to establish petroleum infrastructure across key sites along the south coast. In order to develop offshore (and potentially onshore) oil and gas resources, the Tasi Mane project includes plans for a supply base in Suai (in the southwest of the country), an oil refinery in Betano (in the southern center), an LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas) plant in Beaço (in the southeast),[2] and several new administrative cities.[3] Concessions for onshore exploration were authorized in 2017, and the construction of a 160-km-long highway began in 2017.

How have encounters with extractive industries and government agents affected local residents' assumptions about the spiritual potency of the non-human world? Have these encounters led to an expulsion of the spiritual powers the environment is invested with, or have such encounters increased the potency of certain sites?[4] The title of this article, "Can Oil

Speak?"—which is another way of asking whether resource-rich sites are considered to be spiritually potent—already alludes to the fact that this is not an "either/or" question. With this question, which derives from a concrete ethnographic encounter (that I will discuss later), I want to highlight the uncertain epistemological status of both oil and spiritual potency, and stress that how people identify spiritual potency in the landscape is not fixed but continuously changing and processual.

This processual approach stands somewhat in contrast to prominent arguments that emphasize how resource extraction reveals a clash or conflict between the modernism of the oil industry (and its advocates) and the animism—or "relational ontologies"—of indigenous populations residing in affected areas. Meabh Cryan (2015:149), for example, has identified a "clash of worldviews and understandings of land," with ordinary East Timorese ascribing a "social function" to the land while the government's top-down neoliberal development paradigm "prioritises infrastructure and petroleum development with little reference to local values and rights" (see also Palmer 2015:5–6; Hohe 2002 on the "clash of paradigms" in Timorese state-building). These approaches from within the field of Timor-Leste studies strongly resonate with the emerging body of literature on "political ontology," whose proponents have examined the political opposition and emancipatory projects of various Latin American resistance movements (e.g., Escobar 2008, de la Cadena 2010), and who highlight the ontological differences that come to the fore when indigenous populations are confronted with powerful extractive industries and government officials who are often acting on the industry's behalf. Arturo Escobar, a main proponent of this approach, has argued that "[m]any contemporary struggles for the defense of territories and difference are best understood as ontological struggles and as struggles over a world where many worlds fit" (2016:13). According to the political ontology approach, struggles over natural resources cannot be reduced to economic considerations, as these struggles reveal incompatible ontological positions between "modern" and "indigenous" or "naturalist" and "relational" ontologies (Blaser and Escobar 2016:169; see also Escobar 2011, 2008).

But what if conflicting ontological assumptions are not so much revealed by resource extraction, but produced by it? In the recent extractive encounters along Timor-Leste's south coast, local residents have forcefully articulated the meaningful relations they have with spiritual beings, or "metapersons" (Sahlins 2017:100) that inhabit the non-human

environment, such as ancestors, crocodiles, or spiritually potent (*lulik*) places. At the same time, we find among affected populations an acceptance of extractive logics that devalue the animate qualities of place and little organized resistance against ongoing oil development.[5] Examining the entanglements between the "affected community" (*kommunidade affeitadu*) and those implementing the project suggests that the articulation of naturalism and animism as an incommensurable and mutually exclusive opposition results directly from the extractive encounter.

Engaging with arguments about ontological difference as developed in the works of Escobar and several of his co-thinkers, I tease out how different relations with the spiritual landscape come to be articulated and reified in moments of extractive development. An examination of the changing relations with the non-human environment that have emerged during the implementation of the Tasi Mane project shifts analytical emphasis toward the process, via which positions become polarized and differences come to be seen as incommensurable. By doing so, I draw attention to some of the contradictory epistemological processes that resource extraction sets in motion and to the ways in which such projects affect people's engagement with the "spiritual landscape" (Allerton 2009).

As the introductory vignettes illustrate, East Timorese relations with the environment reveal the co-existence of vastly disparate assumptions about the relations between the world of the living and various "meta-persons." These different assumptions came to the fore precisely at the moment when the oil company intensified its activities. However, rather than seeking to identify the different "worldings" (Blaser 2013:553) that are revealed by resource conflict, this article seeks to shift the focus to how specific assumptions become salient and reified in encounters with extractive industries. I propose that the differences that political ontology would regard to be *underlying* resource conflict should be seen, at least in part, as a *result* of resource development. Therefore, this article seeks to place emphasis on the processes of differentiation and incommensuration that come to the fore in the extractive encounters. While these processes hinge on the elimination of ambivalence, I also show that new ambiguities and uncertainties emerge when modes of identification are temporarily fixed. The analysis of the multivocality of the environment leads to a critical re-thinking of the concept of difference underlying political ontology approaches to extractive encounters.

Before I provide the historical context and discuss ethnographic accounts of extractive encounters, let me outline the broad contours of political ontology and some of its criticisms.

Difference and Entanglement: Political Ontology and its Criticisms

In an article published in 2016, Blaser and Escobar trace the origins of the field of "political ontology"—associated, among others, with Blaser, Escobar, and de la Cadena—outlining how this field was developed from earlier generations of political ecology. Political ecology tried to rethink the relation between nature and culture, by showing that nature is always already cultural, and material entities are "envelopes of meaning" (Blaser and Escobar 2016:167). Political ontology, by contrast, "challenge[s] the taken-for-granted ontological character of the divide; that is, they challenge the assumption that the divide is universally applicable as if it represented the ultimate reality" (2016:168). Proponents of political ontology thus propose an active reconfiguring of the analytical distinctions between nature and culture and the ontological assumptions that such a divide brings.

Inspired by phenomenology, actor network theory, and Deleuzian philosophy, and echoing anthropological approaches developed by Descola (2013), Viveiros de Castro (2012), and others, political ontology is critical of Durkheimian approaches that interpret human-environment relations as symbolic representations of human sociality and thereby represent difference as a cultural "perspective" on a shared reality (Blaser 2013:548). These kinds of interpretations are evidence of modernist assumptions that presuppose a shared human nature and multiple cultures. Modernist ontologies separate nature from culture, and therefore lend themselves to legitimizing the human domination of nature, while relational ontologies are not seen to be based on a nature–culture divide (Blaser 2016:169; see also de la Cadena 2010:346, Escobar 2016). It is for that reason that political ontology's goal is to analytically foreground "relational ontologies" (Blaser and Escobar 2016:169) that do not posit an inseparable barrier between people and their environment. While modernist ontologies ("naturalism") rest on an understanding that there are multiple cultures and one shared nature, indigenous or relational ontologies are represented as enacting the possibility of multiple natures and thus multiple worlds (Blaser 2013).

Taking a clue from the perspectivist analytical reversal that posits one culture and multiple natures (Viveiros de Castro 2004:474) and the Zapatista notion of the "pluriverse" (Escobar 2016:13), relational ontologies are described as enacting a "pluriverse" "made up of a multiplicity of mutually entangled and co-constituting but distinct worlds" (Escobar 2016:22).[6] As such, the conceptual emphasis is put on difference and opposition, highlighting the "ontological conflicts" (Blaser 2013:548) at stake in resource conflicts. As Escobar puts it, "cultural conflicts are often the reflection of *underlying ontological differences*, that is, different ways of understanding the world and, in the last instance, different worlds" (2008:14, emphasis added). Even though difference becomes the analytical starting point, Blaser (2013:548) acknowledges that differences become visible at certain historical conjunctures, and calls "to remain agnostic as to the kinds of differences at stake in a given disagreement" (2016:556).

In several respects, the self-defined field of political ontology thus overlaps with the theoretical concerns of the turn to ontology in anthropology more generally, since both direct their critique at the naturalization of "modernist" ontologies that reinforce the detachment of people from the world that surrounds them (Blaser 2009:879, de la Cadena 2010:350, Escobar 2008:15) and thus legitimize extractivist activity. This "ontological turn" has of course been criticized from many different angles. One of these criticisms holds that ontological approaches prioritize academic critiques of knowledge (especially the nature-culture divide) over an analysis of the social *consequences* of such knowledge (Bessire and Bond 2014:448). In my view, this criticism does not apply in the same way to political ontology. Unlike the more "metaphysically oriented ontological anthropologists" (Kohn 2015:313), political ontology, with its roots in post-development theory and political ecology (Blaser and Escobar 2016:164), tends to be better attuned to the political and economic conditions that shape articulations of difference.

Nevertheless, some of the other criticisms directed at proponents of the ontological turn do seem to apply to political ontology as well. Echoing critiques of ontological approaches in anthropology more generally (e.g., Bessire and Bond 2014, Cepek 2016, Graeber 2015), one could argue that the emphasis on ontological difference in resource conflicts homogenizes and standardizes indigenous experiences. The emphasis on ontological struggles seems to map the opposition between "modern" and

"relational" ontologies onto a respective opposition between indigenous populations and state actors or companies.[7]

Another critique of political ontology is that the analytical emphasis on ontological struggles is unable to account for situations when local populations, instead of mobilizing resistance, welcome extractive industries and even become fully engaged in them (Killick 2016:6, 24). This is because ontological approaches locate the possibility of rupture and resistance to hegemonic forces firmly in the "sacred" realm "beyond modernity" (Bessire and Bond 2014:450). Moreover, ontologically oriented approaches are unable to capture people's multiple epistemological positions and their uncertain political representations (Cepek 2016:631–633). As political ontology counters that relational ontologies do not persist "unchanged" (Blaser and Escobar 2016:169), their critics might insist that an analytical consequence of casting resource conflicts as ontological struggles is precisely the reification of difference as incommensurable and mutually exclusive (see also Bessire and Bond 2014:442).

For Escobar (2008:3), the question of ontological difference initially emerged out of a concern over the ways in which the politics of difference and sameness is saturated by a colonial fantasy of cultural superiority and universality. Conflicts emerge not out of difference per se, but out of struggles over who controls the production of knowledge (Escobar 2006:125). However, despite its origins in an anti-essentialist agenda (Escobar 1999) and emphasis on emergent qualities of difference—the "processes through which a world is being brought into existence" (Blaser 2016:552)—the shift away from an examination of the control of knowledge and toward a focus on how "different worlds or ontologies strive to sustain their own existence" (Blaser and Escobar 2016:169) leads to the inadvertent reification of difference (see also Bessire and Bond 2014:442). The initial emphasis on the *processes* of articulating difference is progressively lost as "ontological conflicts" are described as "conflicts involving different assumptions about 'what exists'" (Blaser 2013:547). As Green states, "the very word 'ontology' has difficulty holding the emphasis on emergence, precisely because it proposes to make of these worldings, […] things" (2013:562).[8] In other words, political ontology analytically prioritizes difference, while the critics put the emphasis on entanglement and thus analytically assume a degree of unity that characterises the monist assumptions of "a common world" (Blaser 2016:547).

Yet, why would we assume the many or the one, either difference and opposition or unity and entanglement, as analytical starting points in the analysis of resource conflict? If we truly want to retain the emphasis on process, surely, we need to focus on how difference or entanglement come into being. As I stated earlier, rather than focusing on ontological differences as *underlying* resource conflict, my emphasis is on the articulation and reification of such differences, which, should be seen, at least in part, as a *result* of resource development. I say *in part* because how such differences are articulated is also embedded in already-existing power asymmetries and historical interactions with colonial outsiders. This approach shifts the analytical attention back to the conditions in which difference is articulated, identifying how resource extraction itself is a key moment that can lead to the reification of difference.

Political ontology is critical of analyses in terms of representations since these locate difference merely at the level of perspectives on a shared reality (Blaser 2013:548). However, in my view, the issue of representation cannot be entirely dismissed from extractive encounters. As we know from research on ritual practice in Southeast Asia, as groups confront each other, exchanging words and things, they also "stage authoritative performances about who they are" (Keane 1997:7). Such "scenes of encounter" (1997:25)—which should not be unduly restricted to the ritual sphere—involve representational practices, as actors "*interactively* define themselves and each other" (1997:7, emphasis in original). They momentarily fix people's assumptions about "what is," which subsequently informs how actors want to be seen by others—even if such representations are not necessarily stable. If we apply this to extractive encounters, it becomes clear that such encounters can bring the very actors into being that are seen to be in conflict with one another (Golub 2014:12).

Critics furthermore argue that the emphasis on ontology leads analysts not to pay sufficient attention to the ambivalences and uncertainties indigenous people might express in relation to the spiritual or sacred status of natural resources (e.g., Cepek 2016:631–633). Yet, as ethnographic evidence from Timor-Leste will show, resource extraction tends to efface ambivalent and multi-vocal relations with the landscape. But, as with other scenes of encounter, such processes of incommensuration (or, one might say "purification")[9] tend to be temporary, since the vicissitudes of representational practice (Keane 1997:9) produce new instabilities and ambiguities. On the one hand, the speed and scope of resource development

creates a need for conditions that are free from ambivalence and multivocality. When a site undergoes construction work, affected communities have to decide whether a place is sacred or not; they need to congeal its cultural meaning and resolve any conflicting ownership claims. On the other hand, confrontation with extractive industries intensifies the ambivalence of the spiritual landscape and provokes new uncertainties. This has a contradictory effect, as resource development seeks to purge multivocality while simultaneously producing new ambiguities.

Both contrast/differentiation and entanglement/identification are moments that characterize East Timorese relations with the environment. But when does difference become salient, and when does interaction? Landowners in Timor-Leste are most under pressure when natural resources are developed, land is expropriated, and representatives of extractive industries are encountered. Resource conflicts hence accentuate difference and opposition. The incommensurable opposition between modernist and relational ontologies is thus not *revealed* but *produced* by resource conflicts. One implication of this is, for example, that the spiritual potency of place is accentuated. This kind of "defensive animism" (Shepherd 2019:261) is not new in Timor-Leste, where encounters with foreigners have historically led to an intensification of the animacy of the environment. Let's consider this historical background before moving to an analysis of the multivocality of the landscape and contemporary extractive encounters.

Extractive Encounters

The Portuguese visited the island of Timor in the early 16th century, trying to extend their influence in the enclave of Oecussi and establishing Dili in the eastern part of the island as the capital in 1769. The Portuguese colonial influence remained distinctly weak until the late 19th century, with little control beyond the coastal areas. Portuguese colonialism was motivated by an extractive logic and a quest for profitable resources—including gold, copper, and sandalwood (Boxer 1969:164–167, Wallace 1869:141)—yet the colony continuously suffered from lack of economic profitability. Hope to find oil played a role from the late 19th and early 20th centuries onward (Pélissier 1996:241), leading to first explorations along the south coast of Portuguese Timor and in the highland region of Pualaca. Explorations intensified in the latter part of the 20th century.

The first well was drilled at Aliambata (near Beaço) in 1910 based on surface seeps (Charlton 2002:351). In 1957, the Australian-Portuguese company Timor Oil initiated another phase of exploration, which included drillings near Beaço, Suai, and Betano—the three areas of the Tasi Mane project today. Although oil and gas deposits were identified, which raised significant expectations and hope for resource wealth, none of them was deemed economically viable (Charlton 2002:351–352, Grainger 2018).

From the 1860s onwards, the Portuguese colonial government started to roll out agricultural development, modeled on the Dutch experience in Java. The "culture system" in Java begun in 1830 and was abandoned in 1870. The Portuguese emulated this to varying degrees of success, also implementing large scale state acquisition of land and communal plantations (Meitzner Yoder 2005:288–289). The main crops that were propagated were coffee and coconut. Even though plantations probably never covered more than 3 percent of the half-island, the increase of indigenous rebellions in the late 19th century were, among other factors, related to colonial attempts to control the trade of contraband coffee by local rulers, who used profits to purchase weapons (Shepherd and McWilliam 2014:140, 143). Plantations were extended throughout Portuguese Timor via a combination of methods, including the co-option of indigenous rulers, coercive control, forced labor, and taxation. As plantations extended, indigenous cultivation practices, especially swidden agriculture and the collection of forest timbers, were de-valued and even prohibited (Shepherd and McWilliam 2014:164, 152).

Unhampered access to the southern areas was only secured after the repression of the Manufahi rebellion of 1911–1912 (Shepherd and McWilliam 2014:142). The rebellion was often thought to have resulted from a marked increase in the head tax, but might be better understood in terms of growing Timorese resentment over colonial intervention into indigenous power structures, land, and autonomy, as well as the threat that the overthrow of the Portuguese monarchy and the establishment of the republic posed to loyal indigenous rulers (*regulo*) (Kammen 2012). Colonial agents were hopeful that the suppression of the rebellion would open the south coast up to exploitation (Shepherd and McWilliam 2014:146). Indeed, many of the Bunaq and Mambai speakers living in areas of south coast development around Betano today are descendants of captive laborers moved down from the highlands to work on colonial plantations or other agricultural projects.

During the Indonesian occupation (1975–1999), so-called "transmigration" (*transmigrasi*) programs were initiated, which involved settling farmers from other parts of Indonesia to develop the agricultural sector in places that were deemed particularly suitable, especially along the south coast plains. In addition, the Indonesian military, seeking to control the mountainous regions and quash the resistance against the occupation, forcibly relocated highland communities to lowland areas (1978–1981). These successive waves of forced resettlement and state acquisition of land left a marked imprint on the ways in which claims to land are made and contested in Timor-Leste today, shaping the context for many of the conflicts that emerged during the early stages of the Tasi Mane project.

After 24 years of occupation by the Indonesian military from 1975 to 1999, Timor-Leste has become one of the most petroleum-dependent countries in the world. The Tasi Mane project was part of the government's Strategic Development Plan.[10] The national oil company Timor Gap (Timor Gas and Petroleum E.P.), founded in 2011, was charged with the implementation of the multibillion-dollar project. The government is a 100-percent shareholder in the company. There was a struggle to find external investors and concerns among civil society that money for the project would be taken from the country's Petroleum Fund.

By August 2017, construction work had mainly taken place in Suai, with an airport expansion and highway construction. The supply base has not yet been built because Timor-Leste's audit chamber rejected the contract with the Korean company Hyundai charged with its construction. Despite slow progress on the implementation of the project, 1,113 hectares of land have been expropriated for it in Suai. Some residents living in the area where the airport was expanded have been relocated to newly built houses nearby. In Betano, a power plant has been built, and land for the oil refinery and highway has been identified, though no building work on the oil refinery has begun to date. In Beaço, where an LNG plant is to be erected, community consultations have been held.[11]

Timor Gap has collaborated closely with various government ministries in organizing both community consultations (*sosialisasaun*) and land acquisitions. The identification and mapping of land claims, carried out by an inter-ministerial task force, and the subsequent payment of large sums of financial compensation for several hundred households whose land is affected, have been controversial. This process has brought conflicting and overlapping claims to landownership to the fore and has created some

severe inter-communal disagreement, especially among original landowners and populations who were moved to affected areas due to recent historical circumstances (Crespi and Guillaud 2018).

Many of the original land-owning populations along the south coast are Tetum-speakers, yet other ethno-linguistic groups (such as Bunaq, Kemak, and Mambai-speakers) moved into the lowlands throughout the twentieth century for various reasons. As mentioned earlier, in Betano, these new settlers included descendants of captives from the repressed Manufahi rebellion who were forced to work as laborers for the colonial regime. But there were also later waves of forced resettlement during the Indonesian occupation, when the Indonesian military sought to control the resistance in the highlands and forcibly relocated highlanders in the lowlands. When the land-claims were registered as part of the Tasi Mane project, conflicting claims emerged. Identity markers such as language and geographic location have been attached to cultural and political stereotypes. In the municipality of Covalima (especially the sub-district of Suai), for example, lowlanders are frequently represented as having collaborated with the Indonesian occupiers, whereas highlanders pride themselves on having supported the resistance. Other current conflicts derive from the fact that the oil company Timor Gap decided to recognize certain local leaders as legitimate, echoing the practice of Portuguese authorities who installed traditional rulers (*liurai*) most loyal to them (Crespi and Guillaid 2018:441). As in the colonial past (Shepherd and McWilliam 2014:148), state-led changes to current land management regimes thus tend to exacerbate tensions among local authorities, and between local leaders and regular citizens.

Transformations of Alterity-Oriented Animism

In the early stages of its implementation, one of the major preoccupations of people affected by the Tasi Mane project was the financial compensation they received for land. Residents wanted to know how much compensation they would get, and those who had already received compensation would often provide precise detail about what they had received. Land was compensated at $3 USD per square meter, and individual plants or modes of subsistence also received set sums (e.g., $60 USD for a coconut tree, 15 cents per plant of maize, and $50 USD each for a stake in a fishing boat). When walking with people through the landscape during my

fieldwork, my companions would sometimes list the amount of cash each plant was worth as we passed by. Seeing the environment now involved seeing price tags.

Contrary to what one might expect, this radical hyper-commoditization of nature did not lead to the vacating of its spiritual value; quite the opposite, in fact. Although there was a lot of dismissive talk about the profligate spending of compensation money, research participants emphasized that a significant proportion of funds received was invested in ceremonies aimed at reinvigorating ancestral and spiritual connections. Some people in Suai even commented that the immense financial investment in ritual activities since the payment of compensation had led to a strengthening of spirit powers. Several of the oil company employees charged with implementing the project worried that the abundance of ritual activities was wasteful and that the money should instead be invested in education. However, elders of the affected communities stressed that sudden misfortune might strike if they received large sums of cash and did not invest at least some of it in maintaining their connections with emplaced ancestors. Without the necessary ritual precautions, the money would become "hot" (*manas*) and could harm generations to come.

In different regions of Timor-Leste, residents have historically responded to external threats by paying increased attention to spiritual matters and reinvigorating relations with spirit beings, as could be seen in the revival of ritual practices after the end of the Indonesian occupation (Bovensiepen 2015). Shepherd calls this "hyper-animism," "an intense Timorese reactivity to the colonial threat to the animistic ontology" (2019:261). This could take on a defensive form aiming to protect "animistic integrity" (2019:263), or an assisted form, where outsiders' interest in ritual matters was interpreted to validate indigenous powers. Whether defensive or not, historically, relations with the spiritual landscape clearly changed in interaction with colonial powers and Catholic missionaries, which is why Shepherd (2019:13) characterizes Timorese relations with the environment as "transformative animism."

In Timor-Leste, sites in the landscape not inhabited by humans are often associated with spirit beings or spirit "owners" (*nain*), a term that might also be translated as "master" or "custodian" (Palmer 2015:49). Nain tend to reside in places that are lulik, meaning sacred, spiritually potent, or taboo. They are largely invisible, but they can also take on the shape of different animals (e.g., eels or snakes), can appear in human form (e.g., as

a particularly beautiful woman or as a soldier), and are sometimes likened to the devil. In uninhabited places, one is likely to encounter nain trying to harm or trick human beings who can get lost or go mad as a consequence of such encounters. Lulik sites and their non-human custodians are dangerous and need to be avoided unless special ritual precautions are taken (Bovensiepen 2015; McWilliam, Palmer, and Shepherd 2014). By contrast, lulik sites in inhabited areas tend to be associated with ancestral potency, which can be mobilized by ritual experts to secure communal benefits.

Despite the strong influence of spirit powers in the lives of many East Timorese, I have also frequently witnessed expressions of doubt or jokes about spirit owners and other invisible entities inhabiting the landscape.[12] One of my closest acquaintances, for example, bemoaned the wastefulness of the ritual practice of pouring palm liquor onto the land instead of giving it to him to drink, expressing uncertainty as to whether the ancestors really were located in the land. On the contrary, friends who were otherwise highly skeptical of what they identified as the "superstitions" of rural and "uneducated" people would swiftly make an offering of money and cigarettes to lulik land and its spirit owners when our car had trouble driving up a particularly steep slope. Friends would stress the significance of their spiritual connections with the land in one context, but might express doubt and skepticism in another.

Research participants often told me that the spirit world is not fully known to them; they can only speculate about it by interpreting signs in the landscape and by examining the consequences of spiritual agency in the form of human illness or misfortune. Rather than describing animism as a "cosmology" or "worldview" (Århem 2015:3), I would side with those scholars who have described it as a mode of inquiry into the boundaries between persons and things (Hornborg 2006:21), or as a "relational epistemology" (Bird-David 1999). The related assumption that non-human animals, plants, or things may appear as intentional and agentive subjects (Århem 2015:3) is an emergent not a constant quality (Sprenger 2015).[13]

Yet, East Timorese animism is also characterized by multiple overlapping and at times juxtaposing conceptions of place and related modes of identification that can be found among and within the same communities (Palmer 2015, 2018).[14] There are different political and moral consequences to the way people relate to the non-human world around them. These relations are expressed in origin narratives, which recount the founding of named ancestral houses—a central feature of non-state political and

social organization in Timor-Leste. In Betano and Suai, as elsewhere in Timor-Leste, there are two types of origin accounts. First, there are accounts which might be called (following Scott 2007:10) "mono-ontological" or "monist." They posit a single human origin from a specific site in the landscape. Those who recount such narratives tend to emphasise that humanity originated from a single place (often described as a "navel"), and they might integrate their origin narratives with Catholic accounts of creation, for example by likening their ancestors to Adam and Eve. A second kind of account, which might be referred to as "poly-ontological" (Scott 2007:10) or "totemic," and which often co-exists alongside monist ones, posits multiple independent origins of house groups from distinct sites in the landscape (rivers, rocks, hills, the sun), or totemic animals (crocodiles, eels, snakes).

Accounts about crocodile ancestors are particularly widespread in the areas affected by the Tasi Mane project, where origin accounts of several groups focus on how crocodiles moved from the sea onto the land and founded named houses. These narratives are accompanied by a more generalized taboo on killing, harming, or consuming crocodile, an issue that has become pertinent during recent petroleum development. There is also a well-known national narrative that describes how the entire island of Timor emerged from a gigantic crocodile, complementing local narratives of crocodile-ancestors.

So what are the political potentials and consequences of these different accounts? Totemic accounts tend to be mobilized when making claims to particular sites in the landscape and when stressing equality between different groups, underlining relationships and mutual entanglement. Monist varieties are actualized in situations when relations with high-status outsiders are deemed to be beneficial and hierarchical or asymmetrical relations (contrast and opposition) need to be mobilized (Bovensiepen 2014).

Both types of origin narratives acknowledge the significance of an array of "external" powers, contrasted with indigenous custodians of the land (human and non-human). This has given rise to forms of diarchic social organization well-known across Southeast Asia, which are, at times, legitimized by variants of stranger-king accounts (see Traube 1986, Fox 2008, Bovensiepen 2014). The openness towards the outside, and the significance of appropriating its power—as a key dynamic of East Timorese animism—has provided an epistemological foundation amenable to the accommodation of various outsiders throughout Timor-Leste's

history—including trade partners, colonial officials, or representatives of world religions.[15] The category of outsiders might also include Timorese politicians or oil company employees. This means that "welcoming" responses to extractive industries might at some level present re-enactments of pre-existing preoccupations with the incorporation of external powers (cf. Rose 2018), while also indicating a desire for "development" and new opportunities.[16]

However, the salience of the alterity-orientation of East Timorese animism might also be a key factor in its transformation as argued by Shepherd (2019:13). Changes in colonial governance in the post-pacification era shifted the balance of power from spirits to outsiders (2019:287). This shift was enabled by the homology between spirits and outsiders, growing colonial dominance and associated feelings of indigenous vulnerability, and recognition awarded by outsiders. This realignment, which also extended to Catholicism, empowered indigenous ritual chiefs (who are often described as "foreigners" and thus inhabit a structural position of "internal others"). The historical proclivity towards outside powers in East Timorese animism thus enabled not just the incorporation of foreigners into indigenous relations, it also facilitated the transformation of the very terms on which it was based (2019:287, 299).

In sum, I would describe East Timorese animism as a relational epistemology, a way of knowing and thus of engaging with the outside world (including potent or uninhabited places, totemic animals, spirits, ancestors, politicians, or foreigners). As a mode of inquiry, it also entails doubt and uncertainty, and diverse and conflicting assumptions about the basic building blocks of identification. It is when the pressures from the outside increase that such differences come to be articulated and reified.

Incommensurable Differences

When I carried out fieldwork in Betano in the summer of 2016, government officials were collaborating with the national oil company Timor Gap to identify land and houses that local inhabitants would need to give up for the development project. Despite repeated delays to the implementation of the Tasi Mane project in Betano, a number of peasants whose land would be affected had already abandoned their fields and houses. The crocodile attack described in the introduction had occurred in 2014, just after the power plant had been inaugurated.

Relations with crocodile-ancestors were at the forefront of people's concerns in other regions as well, since there are specific house groups who trace their origins directly to crocodiles in both Suai-Covalima and Zumalai. In May 2015, I participated in an event in which government and oil industry officials met with members of the affected community in the municipality of Covalima to share information about the planned construction of a multi-lane highway. After a number of presentations, these community members were able to ask questions. Most of the questions concerned the land that would be affected, how this land and its owners would be compensated, and what would happen to land with a "cultural" significance (*rai kultura*). However, one group of young men voiced particular concern about an affected area where many crocodiles reside and are part of local residents' ceremonial complex.

This group of young men came to stand at the front of the podium, facing the government officials and members of Timor Gap who were leading the "socialization." The youngest-looking of them, a man probably not even 20 years old who was wearing a hoodie and baggy pants, started speaking:

I am a custodian of words [*lia-nain*], and I am speaking on behalf of the community. I am here to tell you that crocodiles are our ancestors. You cannot move them. It is not a question of compensation. If you move them, disaster will fall upon us. We will have no future. Crocodiles are our grandfathers and our grandmothers. As a representative of Timorese culture, I tell you that you cannot move the crocodiles. You cannot build in this area where crocodiles arrive every year for our ceremony [*lia*].

The young man was clearly less deferential than the others who had commented or asked questions before him. He was calm and resolute—and showed that his position was not one he was willing to negotiate. As a response, one of the representatives from the oil industry detailed the plans to create a conservation area, explaining that this would benefit the community as well as the crocodiles.

In a surprising breach of etiquette, the group of men stood up again and the young man repeated his point. Taking a microphone, he said, "With all due respect, perhaps you don't understand. The crocodiles are our ancestors. You cannot move them." This young man's words are reminiscent of

Martinez-Alier's argument that sacred values ascribed to the environment imply "a denial of nature as capital, that is, the impossibility of compensation for externalities in monetary terms" (2003:23).

Political ontology approaches would interpret this as revealing underlying ontological differences: on the one hand, a modern or naturalist ontology, which holds that animals (and by implication other non-human beings, such as rivers, mountains, forests, or rocks) do not have human qualities; on the other hand, an animist or relational ontology, which ascribes spiritual and/or human qualities to non-human beings; humans are part of the inhabited environment, not separated from it in spheres that juxtapose nature and culture.

Although the statements expressed clearly represent very different ways of relating to the spiritual landscape, I want to draw attention to the fact that these animist assumptions only came to be seen as incompatible with naturalist ones at the moment when decisions had to be made regarding whether crocodiles could be moved for the implementation of the Tasi Mane project. Logically incompatible ideas can co-exist in East Timorese relations with the environment, but prior to negotiations with the oil company, differences could remain implicit and did not need to be articulated. It is in moments of massive infrastructure development, forced resettlement, and the destruction of the environment that residents come to see these actions as either incompatible with government projects or aligned with them.

In 2017, a large ceremony was organized in Suai to facilitate the cutting of trees around a lulik site so that airplanes for the newly developed airport would be able to land. Some residents argued that this lulik site was one of the most culturally significant places in the entire country and that representatives from each region would have to be invited for the ceremony because of its connection with the traditional ruler (*liurai*) of Suai-Camnassa. Representatives from three other house groups challenged this view (and thereby implicitly the authority of the liurai), giving a slightly altered version of the site's cultural significance and connection with their own ancestors. One respondent also claimed that the place was not lulik at all, and that people were inventing lulik sites in order to receive compensation from the government for land or ceremonies. There was disagreement about whether the land was owned by an individual or collectively by a house-group, and whether it was owned by the autochthonous people of

the region or by the descendants of a settler who arrived in the early 20th century.

Nevertheless, in order to be able to inaugurate the airport, the trees by the site had to be cut and a ceremony had to be held. It was decided by representatives of Timor Gap that the site was indeed lulik, and despite contestation about this issue, a decision was made as to which person had the authority to lead the ceremony—and thereby whose account of ancestral connections was considered legitimate. The multivocality of this place was thus purged through the ritual, since the need to proceed rapidly meant that there was no time for lengthy negotiations to accommodate everyone's claims. Unable to contain ambivalence or indeterminacy, resource development requires a singular unambiguous meaning of place and thus leads to the incommensuration of difference.

There were a number of conflicts about land in Suai and Betano that came to the surface in the moment that land claims had to be documented and registered for the payment of compensation. A reoccurring issue of contention was the basis of the land claims. There were those residents who claimed ownership of land based on the fact that they were the first people to reside in the area (precedence). Many claimed autochthonous origins based on a primordial unity between ancestors and sites in the landscape; sometimes these narratives co-existed alongside accounts of an outside origin, but these aspects of the accounts were de-emphasized. Then there were claims by more recent settlers, who claimed land ownership based on the fact that they made the land productive by virtue of having worked on it through agricultural labor. However, the ecology of such modernist settlers was not devoid of animism, since accounts about the productivity of the land were also accompanied by narratives of their own sacred sites of significance and origins in the land.

The difference between "settler" and "autochthonous" logics came to be expressed as a conflict between "law" and "culture," with rights to land based on precedence as a question of "culture" and rights to the land based on living and working on it being represented as a matter of "law." As part of the Tasi Mane projects, mediations were organized to resolve these conflicts, led by local leaders, police, and national members of government. During these events, the multiplicity of people's own accounts moved into the background and "law" and "culture" were increasingly seen as incommensurable.

The Resurgence of Ambivalence

"At the bottom [of the oil well], there was a monkey," recalled a former employee of the Portuguese-Australian company Timor Oil with an uneasy laugh. It was the summer of 2016; I was in Betano to do research on the government's plan to build an oil refinery, and I had been told about this man, who had knowledge of previous extractive projects. The former Timor Oil employee lived far from the main road, so several local men accompanied us to find his house; out of curiosity, they stayed for the interview. The man had worked for Timor Oil in the early 1970s, when they were drilling boreholes for testing in different areas along the south coast of what was then Portuguese Timor. He explained that it took more than ten men to hold the drill in place as they dug deep into the ground in search of oil and gas; they worked in shifts, day and night. The moment the men spotted a monkey at the bottom of the well, they had "entered" the world beneath the earth, which is lulik (sacred/potent). Jokingly yet nervously, the former employee suggested that the monkey might have been the devil. Some of the men sitting around added that the monkey was the "owner" or "custodian" of the land (*rai-nain*).

However, my interlocutor added, the dangers of lulik places were not a problem for the Timor Oil company, because one of the "foreigners" (*malae*) overseeing the work had been muttering words of ritual speech while they were drilling. This malae was described as a very large man, probably Australian, who was always smoking a pipe. My respondent's tone betrayed a mix of suspicion and admiration as he described how the Australian had employed ritual technologies to deal with the dangers of the land. After the interview, when we were no longer in earshot of this interlocutor, one of the East Timorese men who had accompanied me cast doubt on the account of the monkey at the bottom of the oil well, dismissing it as a "superstition" or *mitos* (myth).

Ambivalence about agency and potency of natural resources also emerged on other occasions, for example when visiting a site where the Portuguese company Timor Oil had its base camp in the early 1970s. The site was located deep in the forest, which is why a group of adult men and teenage boys accompanied me, some of whom had never been there themselves. When we arrived, we found nothing much apart from overgrown skeletons of old cars and large barrels that were broken and rusting. Walking past one of the broken oil barrels, the open metal sheet started to move eerily in the wind. One of my companions murmured,

"A landowner [*rai-nain*]?" The barrel was moving forcefully at that point. There were some giggles, but several of the boys also looked nervous. As we were leaving, we heard a loud birdlike sound. The young men stopped and slowly turned around. With a tense look on his face, one of them said, "Can you hear the oil speak?" There was silence. Then another youth repeated, "The oil is speaking." Scared, as one would be of spirit owners that typically reside at lulik sites, we moved away swiftly and continued our journey home.

Inspired by the suggestion that the oil might have "spoken" earlier, I asked the group while walking back whether or not oil had an "owner" (*nain*). In response, one of the young men answered, "How would I know? I have never been here before." The others looked similarly puzzled and proceeded to discuss the question among themselves. Some suggested that oil undoubtedly had an "owner," while others strongly refuted this suggestion; quite a few were simply uncertain.

In her examination of the ubiquity of petrol in the everyday lives of Sanema in Venezuela, Amy Penfield argues that petrol would act "*as though* it had a spirit master" (2015:22, emphasis added). This is because petrol is seen as having a vitality that resembles the animacy of the environment, specifically with regard to the way it emerges as a point of moral reference in a relational field. What I find noticeable about both Penfield's case and the discussion following our experience at Timor Oil's base camp is not so much the structural similarities between oil (petroleum) and spiritual agents, but the ambivalence that this substance generates. While some people see similar qualities in oil as in other animate elements of the environment, in Timor-Leste, like in Penfield's case, oil is not seamlessly integrated into existing animist relations. There are a variety of opinions, and a degree of uncertainty and ambivalence, as to whether oil does indeed have a spirit owner.

Spirit owners tend to appear at lulik sites, and lulik powers are associated with the underground, just like oil (cf. Cepek 2016:631). Both oil and lulik sites are seen as a source of immense wealth and potential catastrophe, which renders one vulnerable to exploitation by foreigners. It is hence not surprising that some people, like the man who spotted the monkey in the oil well, argued that oil-rich places were lulik. However, this was not a view shared by everyone, and several respondents denied that there was any connection between oil and lulik sites. Another man, who had worked as an overseer for Timor Oil in the 1960s and early 1970s,

argued that none of the places where the company drilled for oil and gas were lulik. He would know, he said, since he had often slept in camps in the forest where the work took place. While those with higher education levels were perhaps less likely to attribute animacy to oil, this was not a position exclusively associated with older generations. Indeed, the young men who accompanied me to the base camp expressed a pronounced uncertainty about the spiritual propensity of oil. Similarly, the men who defended their ancestor-crocodiles during the socialization were clearly of a younger generation.

In Cepek's (2016) critique of ontological approaches to resource extraction in Ecuador, he points to the fact that statements about the relationship between oil and *coancoan* (mythical underground beings) are often accompanied by humor and uncertainty. Instead of "mining our subjects' discourse for bits of alterity-affirming content," he argues, it is more productive to pay analytical attention to "complex figuration in the skeptical, humorous, contradictory, inventive, and quotation-riddled statements of actual individuals" (2016:633). The connection between blood and coancoan made by journalists might be stabilized in the future if such a link allows further political mobilization. Similarly, connecting oil and lulik is a possibility that corresponds to other things East Timorese know about the spiritual propensities of particular places, and this association might become more stable (or be weakened) in conducive political conditions. But we must be weary of overdrawing this connection merely because it affirms our desire for alterity.

Towards a Nested Understanding of Difference

Despite the diversity of relations with—and assumptions about—the non-human environment that exists in the area of Timor-Leste currently subject to massive oil development, such projects confront people with the need to "take sides." Although affected communities have clearly encountered extractive logics before, the speed and enormous scale of the current development polarizes and reifies difference. The external threat to people's livelihoods and way of life paradoxically encourages the articulation of difference while tending to silence multivocality.

While the production of difference takes place within a field of already existent power relations (Peluso and Alexiades 2005:9), extractive encounters also instigate antithetical processes. The trend of mapping and

codifying local knowledge as a way of managing residents' relations with their land has the effect of eliminating contradictory or ambiguous relations with affected sites. However, this is bound to be an ever-incomplete process, since exposure to new extractive endeavors prompts novel uncertainties about the spiritual power of place and those able to mobilize it. Ironically, the modernist compulsion to efface the spiritual value of land by turning it into a productive commodity accentuates the animist relations people have with it.

While political ontologists are arguably better attuned to the importance of politics, history, and emergence than their more metaphysical ontological cousins, highlighting how difference comes to be seen as incommensurable in resource conflict allows me to critically engage with the assumption of difference in political ontology approaches. Interpreting the emergent differences from a political ontology perspective forecloses the possibility that those who value the "social function" of the environment (as Cryan [2015:149] put it) might also simultaneously desire its commodity value. The assumption of difference as a priori and incommensurable is one that is based on opposition and mutual exclusion, with modernity negating indigeneity; these are seen as fundamentally incommensurable categories to the extent that the contemporary condition is described as "an ontological war on relational worlds" (Escobar 2013:562). Ironically, by positing an incommensurable opposition between relational and extractivist logics, ontological approaches display a fundamental—indeed, "modernist"—bias in their understanding of difference.

The limitations of this approach for capturing people's diverse and ambivalent relations with place are particularly evident in Timor-Leste, where attitudes toward the massive Tasi Mane oil development project have generally been characterized by acquiescence and where large-scale organized resistance has been conspicuously absent. This does not mean that local peasants have entirely bought into modernist ideologies; nor does it imply that they no longer value the spiritual connection with the land they are in the process of losing. It might indeed be the case that people accept development fueled by oil extraction in their midst as it promises to alleviate social and economic problems, while *simultaneously* experiencing the environmental damage and dislocation that such extraction produces as a deep and painful cultural loss (Dayot 2015). That is also why monetary compensation for loss of land can never be fully adequate (Dayot 2015:1, Martinez-Alier 2003:150). In other words, people do not tend to value the

environment *either* economically *or* spiritually—however, such relations tend to become polarized when faced with extractive industries. As Dayot (2015:7) has argued, there does not have to be a hierarchy of values and needs; indigenous people might not privilege their "difference" over other values or desires.

There are various ways in which scholars working within a political ontology paradigm have stressed the mixing and mingling of worlds (Blaser 2013:553, 557), the partial connections established between them via equivocation (Blaser 2013:553, de la Cadena 2010:350), and even the posterior character of ontological difference (Blaser 2016:557). Despite highlighting the importance of relational, non-dualist ideas (Escobar 2016:22), the emphasis on "multiple reals" (Escobar 2016:22) and "multiple worlds," or "worldings" seeking to "sustain themselves" (Blaser 2013:553), nevertheless leads to an analytical over-prioritization of difference. Why should we take either incommensurable difference or a "common world" (Blaser 2016:546) as analytical starting points, instead of examining the burdens of practice that assumptions of either monism, dualism or pluralism impose on people's ritual and political lives (Scott 2007:18)?

Contrastive approaches, such as political ontology, seem to assume that difference precedes identity, while they criticize those who assume a subordinate holistic unity (a "common world") that encompasses difference (Viveiros de Castro 2001:27). These two types of assumption can also be found in East Timorese origin narratives, which variously attribute salience either to independent origins ("pluriverse"), or a primordial totality ("common world") that subsequently fractures into parts. These disparate assumptions can be instantiated depending on political and historical conditions, which includes relations with outsiders (politicians or oil industry representatives) as well as relations with neighbors, who might be making competing or opposing claims. Despite (and perhaps because of) the argument that differences are not necessarily "closed" (Blaser 2016:547), political ontology equates a "common world" with hierarchy (of perspectives) and thereby indirectly identifies incommensurable differences with equality.

Yet, incommensurability does not necessarily lead to an equality of worldings. For example, origin accounts emphasizing primordial unity were potentially accentuated due to the growing influence of the Catholic Church, which promoted the idea of a single human origin. A similar impetus might have been given in the post-pacification era, when connections

with outsiders became politically productive for certain groups or individuals and in some cases Portuguese colonizers came to be seen as returning younger brothers (Traube 1986). The understanding of difference underlying this "transformative animism" (Shepherd 2019:13) is a nested one that views its "other" as opposed, on one level, and as part of the self, on another. Holding unity and difference in a tense equilibrium, the notion of nested difference allows people to instantiate different sides of their being in given historical moments. In contrast to the influence of the Catholic Church, contemporary oil development and land expropriation has accentuated vital connections with specific places, which means totemic connections with lulik places and animals gain traction. Relations with outsiders come into play when local leaders appeal to the historical influence of traditional authorities (liurai).

It could be argued that political ontology's analytical prioritization of difference is due to the fact that scholars developing the paradigm are working in Amazonian and Andean contexts, where, according to Viveiros de Castro, "there is no higher order between difference and identity, just difference" (2001:27). Yet, Viveiros de Castro's conceptualization of the opposition between humanity and animality could equally be interpreted as taking on a form of nested difference, whereby humanity is both a totality that precedes division (shared by humans and animals), and a separate embodied mode of being (e.g., Viveiros de Castro 2004:465). To what extent Southeast Asian notions of encompassment correspond to Amerindian notions of alterity is material for another article. For the time being, suffice to say that by assuming neither difference nor unity as preceding subject formation, we are better able to address the uncertainties, ambivalences, and contradictory desires that arise as communities confronted by resource extraction try to make sense of the boundaries between people and the spiritual landscape, and between themselves and others. ∎

Endnotes:

[1]Words in italics are in Tetum-Praça, Timor-Leste's national language and the language in which fieldwork was conducted. Tetum-Praça is slightly different from Tetum-Therik, which is the first language of several groups living along the south coast of Timor-Leste.

[2]This article is based on eight months of fieldwork in Dili, Betano, and Suai in 2015, 2016, and 2017, and is informed by over two years of fieldwork carried out in Timor-Leste between 2005 and 2012.

[3]Initially, the entire infrastructure was supposed to be completed by 2020, but progress has been held up for various reasons, including disagreements among main political parties. There has also been uncertainty about the location of the LNG plant, which might instead be constructed in Natarbora. In Suai, there were disagreements over the potential location for the administrative city. As time went on, the cities received increasingly less attention in public statements by the government and were hardly discussed by 2018. This could be an indication that this aspect of the plan might be dropped.

[4]It is of course likely that relations with the spiritual landscape are not just affected by extractive industries, but also by other factors, such as education, generational change, or exposure to social media. However, this article will largely focus on interactions with extractive industries, which has initiated some of the most radical changes along the south coast in recent years.

[5]There have been few organized protests against the Tasi Mane project thus far, with the exception of a protest against the power plant in Betano and more recent protests in Suai because of the lack of employment opportunities at the newly opened airport. These protests remained relatively small and did not oppose the project itself.

[6]De la Cadena (2010:345) traces the notion of the "pluriverse" back to Carl Schmitt.

[7]Anticipating this critique, Blaser (2013:553) counters that political ontology does not attribute a given ontology to a specific group. Yet, critics might call into question whether political ontology sufficiently theorizes how conflicting ontological assumptions co-exist within the same context, group, moment, or individual.

[8]Contemporary debate about ontological difference undoubtedly echoes earlier anthropological debates about cultural difference (Carrithers et al. 2010) and about how identities become essentialized (e.g., Barth 1998, Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, Gupta and Ferguson 1992). Discussions about the contrast between naturalism and animism also share commonalities with earlier debates about gift and commodity societies and their subsequent entanglement, as well as with related debates in the anthropology of development. Christopher Shepherd (2013:21–29) has argued that the anthropology of development has gone through several generations of scholars who stressed contrasts and differences, approaches which were subsequently criticized for essentializing tendencies by scholars who set the emphasis on mutual entanglements and appropriations. The contrastive arguments hinge on a series of oppositions between inversely related ideal types, while the critics emphasize the contradictory, disjunctive, messy, contested, and multi-vocal contingencies at the interface of development agents and recipients of development, outsiders and insiders.

[9]For Latour (1993:11), purification is the modernist tendency to seek to draw a clear distinction between humans and non-humans, divorcing knowledge claims from social and political contexts and thereby creating objective scientific knowledge.

[10]Tasi Mane, meaning "male sea," is the name given to the sea on Timor-Leste's south coast.

[11]Described here is the situation as it was during my last visit in August 2017, but to my knowledge there have been no significant changes by the time this article went into print (April 2021).

[12]On doubt, see Bubandt (2014), Cepek (2016), Graeber (2015), and Pelkmans (2013).

[13]While New Animism studies have located "animist ontologies" largely in the Americas and Northern Eurasia, Århem (2015:3, 19) has argued convincingly that in Southeast Asia, spirits take on the role that animals take on in Amerindian animism. Accordingly, relations are not structured by predation, but by sacrifice, as humans offer livestock (not prey) to spirit beings. This asymmetric relationship between humans and spirits distinguishes the more hierarchical nature of Southeast Asian animism, in which differentiation can occur according to different degrees of spirit potency, from more egalitarian Amerindian forms (Århem 2015:19, 24).

[14]Those charged with implementing oil development in Timor-Leste also hold multiple disparate ontological assumptions, but a detailed analysis of this is beyond the scope of this article.

[15]Sprenger (2015) has argued that alterity-orientation is a fundamental aspect of Southeast Asia animism, reminiscent of how alterity has been described as a constitutive role in Amazonian contexts (e.g., Gordon 2010, Santos-Granero 2009).

[16]In many Southeast Asian contexts, relations between humans and spirits are analogous to relations between insiders and outsiders; see Bovensiepen and Rosa (2016), McKinley (2015), Shepherd (2019), and Sprenger (2015).

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Foreign Language Translations:

Can Oil Speak? On the Production of Ontological Difference and Ambivalence in Extractive Encounters
[**Keywords**: Oil infrastructure development, difference, animism and naturalism, resource extraction and conflict, political ontology, multivocality, ambiguity]

Abstract: A população rural que habita a costa sul de Timor-Leste é confrontada com indústrias extrativas que pretendem instalar aí um imenso projeto de infraestrutura petrolífera. Nesse processo, surgem entre a população dois pontos de vista distintos, que ora enfatizam o potencial produtivo do ambiente não-humano, ora acentuam as conexões espirituais com lugares específicos. As abordagens feitas a partir da ideia de ontologia política sugerem que os conflitos em torno de recursos revelam diferenças ontológicas fundamentais entre animismo e naturalismo. Este artigo, contudo, mostra como essas diferenças são de facto produzidas por encontros extrativos. A extração de recursos promove a articulação entre posições bem definidas, desse modo modificando relações mais ambivalentes com o ambiente natural habitado. A multiplicidade ontológica das narrativas leste-timorenses de origem põe em causa a prioridade analítica que se concede à diferença na ontologia política e fornece um modelo que atende à multivocalidade, à ambiguidade e ao contexto político. Pode falar o petróleo? Sobre produção de diferença ontológica e ambivalência em encontros extrativos

[**Palavras-chave**: infraestrutura petrolífera, diferença, animismo e naturalismo, extração e conflito de recursos, ontologia política, multivocalidade, ambiguidade]

Pode o Petróleo Falar? Sobre a Produção da Diferença Ontológica e Ambivalência nos Encontros Extrativos
[**Palavras-chave**: Desenvolvimento de infraestrutura petrolífera, diferença, animismo e naturalismo, extração de recursos e conflito, ontologia política, multi-vocalidade, ambiguidade]

油能说话吗？论产油经历中本体差异性与歧义之生成
[**关键词**: 石油基础设施发展, 差异, 泛灵论与自然主义, 资源采集与冲突, 政治本体论, 多义性, 模棱两可]

Говорит ли нефть? О продукции онтологического различия и двусмысленности в добычных встречах.
[**Ключевые слова**: различие, анимализм и натурализм, добыча полезных ископаемых и конфликт, политическая онтология, мультивокальность, двусмысленность

هل يمكن للزيت التحدّث؟ حول إنتاج الاختلاف الوجودي والتضارب في المواجهات الاستخراجية
كلمات البحث: تطوير البنية التحتية للنفط، الاختلاف، الأرواحية والطبيعية، استخراج الموارد والصراع، الأنطولوجيا السياسية، التعددية، الغموض.