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Reproducing Life After Conflict

Population, Prosperity and Potent Landscapes in Timor-Leste



Laura Burke

Reproducing Life After Conflict

Population, Prosperity, and Potent Landscapes in Timor-Leste

Laura F. Burke

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in Social Anthropology

July 2022

96,520 words

School of Anthropology and Conservation

Division of Human and Social Sciences

University of Kent

Canterbury, UK

Abstract

This thesis explores how life is reproduced after conflict. It examines debates and contrasting approaches to reproduction, and how they interact. Based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the central mountain town of Maubisse, I explore how the state, health workers, Catholic Church, NGOs and local communities approach reproduction in the aftermath of the Indonesian occupation. In Timor-Leste reproduction is seen by the state and international organisations as a tool for national development. At the same time, reproduction is understood locally in Maubisse as a process which is distributed through social networks and across the spiritual landscape. Using a reproductive justice framework, I conceptualised these two differing but interlinked approaches as 'reproductive developmentality', and 'distributed reproduction'. Through reproductive developmentality, reproduction is conceptualised as a biological life process that can be managed for development. Whereas 'distributed reproduction' acknowledges the ways reproduction is shaped by wider structural forces, such as conflict and colonialism, and acknowledges the desire to replenish the population and rejuvenate communities. These two approaches to reproduction after conflict collide causing frictions. However, they also merge in new and interesting ways as both approaches pursue different paths to prosperity. Engaging with feminist debates about reproduction, population, and environment I argue that the abundance of life, human and nonhuman are significant to communities in the post-conflict context.

Acknowledgements

I hope that the thesis reveals and pays tribute to all those who helped produce it throughout, namely those in Timor-Leste and the UK that contributed their time, knowledge, and friendship. Writing anthropology is an ethical commitment. Here I want to name and pay tribute to those who participated, helped, and challenged me. For privacy reasons I don't name my participants, although it pains me not to do so as they are the core of this project. Instead, I just say *rihun obrigada* (a thousand thanks) to everyone in Maubisse, Same, Dili and the places in between. Particularly to my family Maubisse who watched out for me as if I was a daughter, who pushed me to find out more, who cooked me corn stew when I was feeling sick, who welcomed me for coffee and sweet potatoes who invited me to family events and celebrations, for their patience and knowledge. To the leaders of Maubisse, the Clinics, Hospital, the Radio station, the Village Office, the schools and the people on the teams who worked there. To the Hospitals and clinics adopted me, showing me the ropes and the roads. To, The Village Office which was always friendly, and Radio Maubisse-Mauloko, a great source of knowledge. 'A thousand thanks' to the men and women who invited me to chew betel nut and the young people who invited me to join their adventures. This is yours.

To those who assisted me in other ways with translation, transcription, and interpretation; Bertanizo Guro, my first research assistant provided me with some excellent translations and analytical comments. Janico Gusmao Alves, shared with me his thoughts on the young generation. Natalia Figueirado approached me in Maubisse with a great smile and became a close friend.

Positivist science often asks of ethnography, ‘where is the evidence?’, for me tell it is in the blood, sweat and tears of friendships and fieldnotes. I thank other friendships in the field, particularly Liz McGee for never failing to make me laugh, helping me take a break, and propping each other up during long cold evenings on the job. I also thank Lourenco Hornay and his family for their friendship, hospitality, and their stories. I hope to write more about them some day.

To my fellow researchers and friends Carolina Boldoni , Pelgaio Duterres, Joao da Cruz Cardoso, Sapna Raheem, Sara ten Brinke, Emily Toome, and Teresa Hall, for conversations, debriefs, support and thought sharing particularly during and after fieldwork. Without you all fieldwork and writing would have been all the less pleasurable, and your own work and our conversations greatly inspired me. Carolina deserves special mention for being a lifelong Anthro sister. Thanks to Regina and Stephanie for giving me a second home and helping me find peace with me in child’s pose and to Matt Lee for braving it with me.

To my supervisors for their unwavering support through fieldwork, pandemics, and life in general. Judith Bovensiepen gave me the best introduction anyone could have had to Timor-Leste, shared her wealth of knowledge and analytical skills, and gave me unwavering and committed support. Jonathon Mair always had a way out of any problems I went to him with and a keen ear for my fieldwork stories. Matthew Hodges pushed me to my best, gave much reassurance and fantastic edits.

This is a thesis about family and friends. Many thanks to my supportive sister and brother, for being siblings, making me one in three, and the shared adventures big and small. To my parents, who never doubted I was capable of anything, sharing their feminist values, love of interesting things, their health expertise, their own fieldwork stories, and their passion for a challenge. To the Beans, Quaranteam clan and Flat 27 for brave *brave* friendships and bottles of wine. Special thanks to Ian Murphy for his sharp eye and his comma fetish. To Claudia, my endometriosis demon personified, despite always getting in the way, but constantly reminds me how important it is to talk about reproductive health and bringing lesser-known feminist issues to the fore. Lastly, thank you to for Sandy planning adventures, being an anchor, and all the cats.

Here's to more mountains and more dancing. *Viva Timor-Leste.*

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List of Abbreviations

AMP	<i>Aliansa Mudansa ba Progresu</i>	Alliance for Change and Progress
CCT	<i>Café Cooperativa Timor (P)</i>	Timor Coffee Cooperative
INS	<i>Instituto Nacional da Saùde (P)</i>	National Institute of Health
KB	Keluarga Berencana (I)	Family planning
KOICA	The Korea International Cooperation Agency	
MdS	<i>Ministério da Saúde (P)</i>	Ministry of Health
MSI	Marie Stopes International	
PLP	<i>Partidu Libertasaun Popular</i>	Popular Liberation Party
RDTL	<i>República Democrática Timór-Leste, or República Democrática De Timor-Leste (P)</i>	Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste
UN	United Nations	
UNDP	United Nations Development Program	
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund	
WHO	World Health Organisation	

A Note on Language

Where possible I use English terms for fluency and clarity. Words in italics are Tetum, the national language of Timor-Leste, unless otherwise stated. I make reference to specific words or phrases in Mambai, Tetun, Indonesian, and Portuguese when it might be useful for Timorese readers and Scholars working on Timor-Leste. These are denoted in brackets as follows:

(M), Mambai words, the language group of the central highlands

(I), refers to Indonesian

(P), refers to Portuguese words. Portuguese is also considered a national language but spoken by approximately 5% of the population

Glossary of Non-English Terms

<i>Avo sira</i>	Ancestors or elders
<i>Barlake</i>	the customary marriage exchange practices where gives are exchanged between the wife's family and the husband's family
<i>Bei'oan/ Bei'ala</i>	Descendants/Ancestors
<i>Feto</i>	Woman
<i>Feto isin rua</i>	A pregnant woman, lit. ' a woman with two bodies'
<i>Feto saan</i>	Wife takers, the ancestral house group which a woman marries into
<i>Fetosaan-umane</i>	The wife givers and wife takers
<i>Foho</i>	Mountains or rural areas
<i>Kaben nain sira</i>	Traditionally or catholicly married couples
<i>KB/Keluarga Berencana</i>	Family planning (I)
<i>Kultura</i>	Culture
<i>Lia</i>	Words, can also refer to customary payments
<i>Lia nain</i>	Guardians of the words, the customary speakers of ancestral house groups
<i>Lisan</i>	tradition
<i>Lulik</i>	A potent force that is both scared and taboo
<i>Malirin</i>	Cold

<i>Mana/Maun</i>	Sister/Brother (polite terms of address for your age mates)
<i>Matak Malirin</i>	The green and the cool/ green coolness
<i>Natureza</i>	Nature, the force of nature
<i>Oan</i>	Child
<i>Rai</i>	Land and/or country
<i>Rai Mamuk</i>	Empty land, land that has plenty of space
<i>Soe bebe</i>	Baby dumping, child abandonment, lit. to discard an infant
<i>Tais</i>	Traditional woven cotton fabric made into cloths and scarfs
<i>Uma Lisan/Uma Lulik</i>	Ancestral house
<i>Umane</i>	Wife givers, the ancestral house group which a woman leaves

1. Life After Conflict: Introducing Reproduction, Population, and Environment in Timor-Leste

This thesis explores reproductive politics in Timor-Leste in the aftermath of the Indonesian occupation. Specifically, it examines how contrasting approaches to reproduction interact and intersect. Based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the central mountain town of Maubisse, I explore how reproduction is politicised by the Church, the State, NGOs and the local community in the aftermath of the Indonesian occupation. In post-independence Timor-Leste reproduction is viewed by the state and international organisations as a behaviour that can be harnessed for national development. At the same time, reproduction is understood locally in Maubisse as a process which is distributed through social networks and across the spiritual landscape.

These two approaches to reproduction – developmental and distributed – emerged during my fieldwork with health workers and the community in Maubisse. I conceptualise these two differing but interlinked approaches as ‘reproductive developmentality’, and ‘distributed reproduction’ (Murphy, 2017). Reproductive developmentality describes the rationale that individual reproduction can be managed and shaped for national development, whereas ‘distributed reproduction’ describes reproduction as a process that

is shaped by uneven relations and structural forces across time and space (ibid., p. 141). In Timor-Leste, both approaches to reproduction are influential, but they also collide and cause frictions. Moreover, they merge in new and interesting ways as both approaches embody different ideas about how to generate prosperity. The chapters in this thesis explore how these two different approaches to reproduction clash and converge resulting in heated debates, reproduction of violence and inequalities as well as offering new ways for conceptualising reproduction and its often-problematic association with population and environment. I start with two ethnographic vignettes showing how these approaches emerged during my fieldwork. This is followed by a deeper theoretical discussion and development of the concepts of reproductive developmentality and distributed reproduction in section 1.1.

1.1 Reproductive Developmentality: Reaping the ‘demographic dividend’

In 2018, I attended a public lecture at the National University of Timor-Leste in Dili, the country’s coastal capital. The presentation by the United National Population Fund (UNFPA) addressed the concept of a ‘demographic dividend’. Rows of students listened as a Timorese doctor explained the benefits of family planning. She stated that in Timor-Leste, family planning was concerned with ‘the *quality* of Timorese, not the

quantity'. A European demographer went on to explain that in 2002 when Timor-Leste regained independence, the country experienced rapid population growth. Women were having on average 7.2 children, one of the highest rates in the world. Despite the fertility rate falling to 4.2 in 2016 (GDS, 2017), Timor-Leste had one of the fastest growing populations in the world. 'Congratulations Timor-Leste!' someone in the audience shouted.

In front of the large audience the demographer displayed slides featuring population pyramids and explained how a lower fertility rate could have a positive effect on the country's economy. Reducing the 'dependency ratio', he argued, the percentage of working adults in relation to dependents (such as children and the elderly) would open a window of opportunity called the 'demographic dividend'. If this demographic phenomenon was capitalised on, he concluded, it could improve the countries overall economy and wellbeing.

During his presentation, one graph showed Timor-Leste reaching an average fertility rate of 2.3 by 2030. A midwifery student doubled-over in laughter and spoke up.

'I agree we need more information about family planning, but what about what happened in Portugal and Japan? Their fertility rates declined very quickly, and their governments are panicking. What will the government do if our fertility rate keeps falling here?'

‘There is something called “replacement rate”. The Timorese doctor clarified. ‘This is the rate at which the population reproduces itself but does not grow and is sustainable.’

Another student pointed out that government even had trouble providing water to rural communities, never mind Family Planning. The students were not against education or access to family planning, but they were concerned about what sort of problems reduced fertility might bring in the future. They were also critical of the government’s ability to deliver such services.

The idea that managing fertility rates to improve the nations prosperity is part of what in this thesis, I call ‘reproductive developmentality’. This term draws on theoretical concepts from reproductive studies to specify a discourse which casts reproduction as something that can be shaped for national development. I describe how and why I develop this term in Section 1.1. First, however, I describe the second approach to reproduction that emerged during my fieldwork.

1.2 Distributed Reproduction: Making Life in The Empty Land

The developmentality approach in which fertility rates are managed for national prosperity sat in stark contrast to another approach to reproduction that was prominent in my fieldwork in the central mountain town of Maubisse. To describe this approach, I borrow and build on Murphy’s term of ‘distributed reproduction’ (Murphy, 2011, pp. 21–27) to

describe an understanding of reproduction as a distributed process that stretches beyond individual bodies and is transformed by a range of unequal relations.

Maubisse and the central mountain area in Timor-Leste is home to the Mambai¹ ethnolinguistic group, the second largest of 32 language groups in the country. In cosmological origin accounts, the highlands of the Mambai speaking areas of Ainaro, Maubisse, Aileu and Emera are considered the central origin point of Timorese people – the ‘navel of the land’ (*rai hussar*; M, *rai fusan*,)² (Traube, 1986). In my central fieldsite of Maubisse, rather than hearing about rapid population growth, people told me ‘the land is empty’ (*rai mamuk*), and ‘Timor needs more people’.

Cristiano was a 30-year-old male who worked on his family’s land on the coffee slopes outside of Maubisse town. Throughout my time in Maubisse I got to know his family very well, often visiting their house to help pick the coffee harvest and help drink it.

‘People in the UK only have one or two children. The UK must be lacking in space!’, Cristiano teased. We sat drinking black, earthy coffee in his family’s garden under a cold blue sky, surrounded by Maubisse’s verdant mountains. A light breeze rustled the iron wood trees next to us. Cristiano

¹ Mambai/Mambae, this language group also has four dialects spoken in different areas (Ainaro, Maubisse, Aileu, and Emera)

² M refers to Mambai, T refers to Tetun. See note on languages.

and his father quizzed me about the differences between families in Timor-Leste compared to the UK.

‘There is a limit on the number of children people can have in the UK, right?’ Cristiano inquired more seriously.

‘Like in China, they can only have one child’, Cristiano’s father added. ‘Here the land is empty, and we living here now are few, because many died in the war.’ Then he reasoned, ‘Maybe in the future, when we are many more, we will change to a system like the UK.’

In conversations like these people sometimes commented that in the future Timor-Leste might be like ‘developed’ countries like the UK, China, Singapore and America which already have large populations and where people have fewer children. More often they talked curtly and solemnly about the loss of lives that had taken place in the Indonesian occupation, describing the land as ‘empty’ (*mamuk*), or spacious (*luan*). They also described themselves as being ‘few’ or ‘reduced’ (*menus*) in number due the deaths and suffering endured through multiple experiences of conflict.

In 1974, after centuries of Portuguese colonialism a brief civil war broke out between two Timorese political groups. Independence was declared but within 10 days, Indonesia violently invaded and occupied the territory. The violent occupation lasted for 24 years. Between 1975-1999 approximately 200,000 people, up to a third of the total population, died due to violence, displacement, and starvation. Throughout the early years of the occupation (1975-1980) Maubisse’s population shrunk dramatically by almost 50%

(CAVR, 2005, p. 493). The Indonesian Family Planning program also became implicated in these claims amidst reports of coercion, covert administration of contraceptives, and forced sterilisations (Sissons, 1997). The extent of this violence directed towards Timorese people by the Indonesian military is referred to by some activists and academics as a genocide (Kohen and Taylor, 1979; Saul, 2001; Kiernan, 2007; Pilger, 2010), although this label has never been legally applied through the UN Convention or by the national government.

Timor-Leste's population has grown from 555,350 in 1980, to 1,167,242 in 2015. (General Directorate of Statistics, Government of Timor-Leste 2015). This means the population more than doubled in 35 years. The country was 'the fastest growing in Asia and amongst the fastest growing in the world' according to the 2018 Human Development Report (UNDP, 2018). These demographic figures might sound impressive, but how do these understandings of population figure into the everyday lives of people in Timor-Leste?

Timor-Leste has a population of 1.3 million people, however the number you are more likely to hear quoted in the media, literature and development reports about the country is not its present population count, but the number of people killed during the Indonesian occupation (1975-1999). The most quoted figure for the numbers of lives lost is 200,000 - sometimes cited as one quarter, or one third of the pre-invasion population (see Dunn, 2012, Kiernan, 2008, CAVR, 2006). The number itself is debated,

but regardless, the extent of the violence directed towards Timorese people is often referred to as a genocide (Kohen and Taylor, 1979; Saul, 2001; Kiernan, 2007; Pilger, 2010).

Reproduction in Timor-Leste has already been transformed through infrastructures and political economies: nation-states, militarisation, violence, displacement, technologies, biomedicine, and birth control. Murphy's concept of 'distributed reproduction' charts temporal existence that stretches beyond bodies and includes the uneven relations and infrastructures that shape which lives are enabled, and which are constrained or destroyed (Murphy 2017, p. 141-142). This thesis will build on Murphy's work and show that distributed reproduction isn't limited of political economies or infrastructures but extends to the customary practices and spiritual ecologies that are key to the reproduction of life in Maubisse that *make* reproduction distributed in the first place.

The approaches to reproduction which I described in two vignettes in section 1.1 and 1.2 appear to be in opposition. However, distributed reproduction is not in exact opposition to reproductive development. Rather, it recognises and names the collection of processes, including reproductive developmentalities.

In the next section (1.3.), I draw out their conflicting elements and common themes which inform the direction of inquiry of this thesis. I then introduce the theoretical concepts of reproductive development (1.4) and

distributed reproduction (1.5) and their application to my analysis of life after conflict in Timor-Leste.

1.3. Conflicting Approaches and Common Themes: reproduction and population and environment:

As made visible through the ethnographic vignettes above, developmentalist approaches to fertility reduction and local approaches about replenishing life sit in opposition to one another on one key point. The developmentalist approach favours fewer lives to be born for economic prosperity. The local desire for replenishment however favours a larger population to replace lives lost in conflict.

Interlocutors in Maubisse described the land as 'empty' (*rai mamuk*) and Maubisse experienced depopulation during the Indonesian occupation, as did the rest of the country. Yet, when Timor-Leste regained independence in 2002, the nation had the world's highest total fertility rate (TFR 7.8) and was experiencing rapid population growth (Saikia, Dasvarma and Wells-Brown, 2009). Development practitioners warned about the negative consequences of rapid population growth, such as malnutrition, environmental degradation, and a return to violence conflict (Bulatao, 2008; Saikia, Dasvarma and Wells-Brown, 2009; Saikia, 2018). Fertility rates were declining again by 2016, though Maubisse still had the highest fertility rate in the country (TFR 6.0), with women having on average 6 children (Hakkert, 2018). If the land is still experienced as empty, despite

rapid population growth, several questions are immediately apparent. What counts as the reproduction of life in Maubisse? How is life reproduced and replenished in the post-independence period? How are attempts to reproduce life embedded in perceptions of the environment? How do such narratives clash and converge with development discourses about reducing fertility rates and creating a sustainable population? These questions will be examined through engagement with three key categories and will draw on upon recent debates in scholarly work on reproduction.

As the ethnographic vignettes show, the development approach of the demographic dividend, and local approaches about replenishing the empty land, contain assumptions about population, reproduction, and the environment. *Population* pertains to growth, decline, density, demographic dividend. *Reproduction* often refers to fertility rates, children, family planning, death and *environment* is associated with *nature*, degradation, land, and space. These categories however, will be critically evaluated in this thesis. I interrogate assumptions relating to these categories, examining their significance in Timor-Leste. I consider how these categories are understood locally in Maubisse and how they interact with nationalist and development discourses and practices.

These three key categories are influential well beyond Timor-Leste. In fact they form the backbone of the population 'problem' (Dow and Lamoreaux, 2020) and populationist thinking (Sasser 2019) in which social and environmental issues are attributed to population growth or decline.

Reproduction, population, environment are categories that carry significant problematic baggage. They are embedded in western modes of analysis and embedded with contradictory and complex meanings. However, whilst they might 'signal trouble', they are also key words that situate important roots of discussion (Clarke, 2018, p. 3). In particular, I have chosen to engage in recent discussions that have arisen in feminist debates about population growth environmental degradation and reproductive justice, (Murphy, 2017; Clarke and Haraway, 2018; Sasser, 2018; Dow and Lamoreaux, 2020).

Reproductive justice is a theoretical paradigm and activist model that brings theories of human rights and inequality with intersectional examinations of women's embodied experiences and locates these in local social contexts (Gurr, 2014, p. 32). The reproductive justice movement emerged to highlight reproductive oppressions that challenged marginalised communities. The mainstream reproductive rights movements in the United States in the 1970s was dominated by white women of good economic standing. However, community-based women's health organisations³ felt the reproductive rights movement did not reflect the realities of low-income women or women of colour they worked with. SisterSong defines 'reproductive justice' as 'the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, social, environmental, and economic well-being of

³ Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse, The National Black Women's Health Project, Sistersong and Asian Communities for Reproductive justice (Ross, 2006)

women and girls' (Ross, 2006, p. 5). Through a holistic approach, reproductive justice examines the intersectional inequalities that impact reproduction within marginalised communities considering the wider social, economic, and environmental contexts reproduction happens within.

The concept of reproductive justice emerges from and supports the reproductive rights movement, and remains connected to it, but reproductive justice rejects narrow concepts of reproductive health as an individual experience. It's important to note that the movement emerged in a North American context, it is rapidly becoming a way to describe and implement reproductive interventions on a global scale through health and social interventions. Its usefulness in other contexts, such as South and Latin America, have been questioned (Morgan, 2015).

However, the reproductive justice movement recognises how reproduction is environmental, as well as 'relentlessly individual *and* social *and* cultural *and* political in complexly tangled ways' (Clarke, 2019, p. 22). Hence, it provides a holistic framework that allows a broad and non-prescriptive examination of what reproduction is and what it means to people in Maubisse. As I discuss below, the social and spiritual connections between people and land documented in anthropological literature in Timor-Leste makes it a pivotal place to explore how reproductive justice might be constructive. Furthermore, examining reproductive justice in the wake of conflict draws out the tensions between what kind of reproduction is deemed as safe and sustainable.

Exploring problematic categories of reproduction, population and environment which are at the root of debates about reproductive justice enables me to engage in conversations about population change which are as significant to present-day Timor-Leste, as they are to the wider world. To do this I bring reproductive studies into conversation with anthropological literature in Timor-Leste on ‘spiritual ecologies’ (Palmer and McWilliam, 2019). I also draw on anthropological studies on reproduction, land, and animism from the wider regions of Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Alongside my ethnographic material, my engagement in this literature enables me to explore how the categories of reproduction, population and environment, and the dominant discourses around them, can be rethought.

Engaging with a reproductive justice framework, I coin the term ‘reproductive developmentality’ to describe an approach that assumes reproduction can be governed for the sake of future national prosperity. I combine a reproductive justice framework with anthropological scholarship on Timor-Leste, as well as wider studies of Southeast Asia and Oceania. This allows me to consider how ‘reproductive developmentality’ (as a specific approach to reproduction) clashes and converges with the approach commonly found in Maubisse: that reproduction is ‘distributed’ (Murphy 2017) between social relations, the landscape and the human and non-human actors within it. Below I discuss these two theoretical concepts that frame this thesis in more detail.

1.4 Reproductive Developmentality: reproduction, development, and governmentality

What counts as reproduction of life in Maubisse? This section critically evaluates the category of reproduction in the context of Timor-Leste's post-conflict development landscape. Through this I show how reproduction has become entangled with development discourses and subjected to governmental practices. Through my engagement with literature on Timor-Leste, development and 'reproductive governance', which I discuss below, I develop the term 'reproductive developmentality' to describe the approach to reproduction outlined in the first vignette, in which reproduction is seen as something that can be shaped for national prosperity. First, however, let's take a closer look at the meaning of reproduction both anthropologically and in the local context.

The rapid population changes Timor-Leste has experienced due to the Indonesian occupation and post-conflict recovery make it a significant place to explore how reproduction is understood anthropologically. However, reproduction is a broad concept. It's usage often encapsulates a wide variety of activities. It is biological, individual, social, cultural and political in 'complexly entangled ways' (Clarke, 2018, p. 22). Reproduction has been described as a 'slippery' concept by anthropologists (Ginsburg and Rapp, 1991, p. 311). The concept has come to refer to either biological events of the female body, or Marxist concepts of the continuation of social

structures (Almeling, 2015). Its meaning has not only changed over time, though in different historical and political moments, but its meaning has also been transformed in different localities and transmitted through multiple language contexts (ibid.).

If reproduction is a broad, complex, and diverse concept, how was I to investigate it in Timor-Leste? In my fieldsite the word 'reproduction', in either English, Portuguese or Tetun, was predominantly used in the reproductive health sphere where it was connected to sexual and maternal health in a biomedical sense e.g., reproductive health, (*saude reprodutiva*) or reproductive rights (*diretu reprodutiva*). The word '*reprodusaun*' (T), taken from the Portuguese translation of 'reproduction', was rarely heard, but the activities of the Catholic Church, such as in liturgy, homilies, and public messages, the word 'recreation' (*recreasaun*) was used regularly. However, people in Maubisse used other terms to talk about reproduction: 'hold/cradle a child against one's breast or belly' (*kous oan*); 'have the next generation' (*iha jersaun*); descendants (*bei'oan*), or start a family (*forma familia*). The importance of having children was usually cited as 'continuation', so that life and tradition would continue. Terms like 'continue' (*kontinua*), 'move forward' (*ba oin*), 'grow' (*buras*) and 'make the new generation' (*halo jersaun foun*) were used in everyday conversation amongst my participants to talk about family and kin. This implied a sense of movement, of growth, abundance, and continuity. In my fieldsite then, reproduction was encapsulated in a variety of phrases. A broad array of

activities were conjunctive to anthropological understandings of reproduction as a complex assemblage of relations. However, through ethnographic observations and participation over the course of my fieldwork, distinct approaches to reproduction emerged, both of which related to the future prosperity of the country's population. As the chapters of this thesis will show, the ways reproduction was conceptualised in Maubisse provide some opportunities for anthropologists and scholars of reproduction to expand on and rethink categories of reproduction, population and environment, and how they relate to one another.

Academic research on Timor-Leste has paid much attention to Timor-Leste's 'birth' as a new nation in the 21st century. The themes of this research have largely concerned the death, destruction and the rebuilding of people's lives in this context. Thus, investigating reproduction in Timor-Leste builds on past research to offer a new orientation for research about life after independence. After the 1999 referendum on independence, the violent retreat of the Indonesian military left 70% of Timor-Leste's infrastructure destroyed or damaged, 2000 people dead and tens of thousands displaced. The rebuilding of public infrastructure and state institutions received much attention international observers and foreign development professionals. Timor-Leste was considered a state that would be built 'from scratch' (Nygaard-Christensen and Bexley 2017: 11). However, many academic researchers have criticised this characterisation of Timor-Leste as a 'blank slate' for glossing over local participation, and

local social and political conditions in the creation of Timorese identity and state (ibid., p. 21).

Given Timor-Leste's tumultuous colonial history, much scholarly literature on Timor-Leste has centralised the themes of death, the dead, and the importance of funerary rituals. A recent edited volume, *The Dead as Ancestors, Martyrs and Heroes in Timor-Leste* (Feijó and Kent 2020), is a case in point. The chapters investigate the ways the dead matter to the living. In particular, the theme of how people have cultivated meaningful relationships with the dead as part of a process of post-conflict recovery (Bovensiepen 2015) has been a significant point of focus. This thesis focuses on the other half of this equation, life, and those yet to be born. Arguably, customary renewal and rebuilding communities through engagement with the dead are also at their core about renewing life, rebirth, and reproduction. However, building on the extensive foundation of studies of the dead, this thesis reorientates focus to the making of life, reproduction, and continuation.

In summary, anthropologists have established that reproduction has a multitude of meanings, and Timor-Leste offers a unique context in which to consider and reconsider them. However, reproduction is inherently political as it takes place at a global and local level and incorporates a multitude of actors (Ginsberg and Rapp 1991). Part of the challenge of studying reproduction is that it entails working from the individual to the global and back again (Schneider and Schneider 1996:3). Foucault's concept

of biopower (1978) has become a useful tool to span this chasm. Below I outline how scholars of reproduction have drawn on biopolitics and governance to develop the concept of 'reproductive governance' (Morgan and Roberts, 2012), how I build on it to develop my concept of reproductive developmentality and its application my fieldsite.

1.4.1 From Reproductive Governance to *Reproductive Developmentality*

Timor-Leste's post-conflict population boom is sometimes referred to as a 'peace dividend' (McWilliam, 2008, p. 222) or attributed to the 'enormous loss of family and friends due to the conflict' (Belton, Whittaker and Barclay, 2009, p. 20). However, demographers are sceptical and suggest that people's desire to replace loved ones is overestimated (Hull, 2003; Saikia, 2018). According to demographers, the real danger lies in over-population, not under population, which will cause an imminent demographic danger (Saikia, 2018; UNDP, 2018).

Yuval-Davis (1996, p. 18) identified three discourses that have dominated nationalist policies of population control: 'People as power', eugenics, and the Malthusian discourse. These discourses can be found in the narratives about population in Timor-Leste that have been described so far. The discourse of people as power centres the need for a larger and continuously growing population which is seen to be key to the nation's success. This pronatalist discourse encourages and incites or sometimes forces people to

have children. Eugenics focusing on the quality of a population rather than size, this encourages certain people to reproduce and others not to. The Malthusian discourse works in both opposition to 'people power' and is adjacent with the eugenics discourse. It is what is usually assumed in Western discourse as the population problem, that is an unchecked population growth will lead to disaster (ibid., p. 20)

These discourses feed into 'the population problem' or what Angus and Butler call 'populationism'; - the idea that (over)population causes social and ecological ills that can be mitigated through the management of reproduction (Angus and Butler, 2011, p. 4).

Foucault describes biopower as 'an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations' (1978, p. 140). Biopolitics has become a much discussed and widely used analytical tool through which to investigate the state, global institutions, power, knowledge, and reproductive bodies (Maternowska, 2006; Greenhalgh, 2008; Wilson, 2012; Andaya, 2014; Mishtal, 2015)(e.g., Maternowska 2006, Greenhalgh 2008, Andaya 2014, Misbach 2015). Even if some argue that the term has been used somewhat hazily and ethnographic accounts expose many contradictions, it allows us to recognise that across history, time and space, the impulse to manage bodies and populations, persists (Krause and Zordo, 2012).

For Foucault, 'government' is the 'conduct of conduct' (Burchell *et al.*, 1991). Government is concerned with the welfare of the larger population

and it seeks to ensure the 'welfare of the population, the improvement of its conditions, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health ect. cetera describes an attempt 'to shape human conduct by calculated means' (Li, 2007a, p. 275). Drawing on biopolitics and feminist reproductive studies, Morgan and Roberts' concept of 'reproductive governance' traces the changing political rationalities of reproduction and population (Morgan and Roberts, 2012). It describes the ways different actors (state, religious institutions, and non-governmental organisations) use '...legislative controls, economic inducements, moral injunctions, direct coercion, and ethical incitements to produce, monitor and control reproductive behaviours and practices' (Morgan and Roberts, 2012, p. 243).

Reproductive governance is a helpful concept to understand how a broad range of actors and actives connect reproduction to political and economic process. This thesis shows how reproductive governance in Timor-Leste includes the Catholic moral guidance on sexuality and a strict ban on abortion. It also includes the state through the Ministry of Health programs that promote certain methods of family planning, biomedical and non-biomedical, yet at the same time struggles to deliver these services. It includes international organisations that partner with the state to deliver hormonal and non-hormonal methods of contraception and support maternal and infant care. It also includes the promotion of family planning for economic prosperity, as the first vignette on the demographic dividend shows.

As a broad reproductive governance is useful to encapsulate the many interventions in reproduction by multiple actors with different agendas. However there are some specificities in Timor-Leste that led me to further develop the term to encapsulate a specific way reproduction is governed in Timor-Leste through a discourse of national development.

Medical anthropologists explored both the advances in reproductive technologies and their socio-political implications. Reproductive studies undoubtedly harbour a strong interest in new reproductive technologies (NRTs) or assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) such as in vitro fertilization (IVF), pre-natal testing, surrogacy, and gamete donation, and artificial wombs, to name just a few (Strathern, 1992; Edwards *et al.*, 1999; Inhorn, 2007; Ross and Moll, 2020). However, in Timor-Leste, as in other places such biomedical technologies are not readily available or used. For example, despite widespread knowledge about biomedical contraceptives in Timor-Leste, just 24% of women use them (PDHJ 2017). The inequalities in access to reproductive technologies thus means anthropologists should pay attention to reproduction that is 'assisted' by other means, either in absence of these technologies, or alongside side them.

The stratified ways that some groups and populations are discouraged from reproducing, and/or left out of technological assistance to reproduce can be thought of as 'reproductive abandonment' (Munro and Widmer, forthcoming). This includes the situations in which people have been left to their own devices and/or subjected to reductionist or unwanted assistance

(*ibid.*). This often takes place through development interventions into reproduction, and biopolitical interventions in Oceania have often been about preventing life than enabling it, in a bid to improve the quality of populations (*ibid.*). This is evident in Timor-Leste in the discourse on the demographic dividend outlined in the first vignette above. Here, family planning used to reduced fertility is seen not only as a health intervention, but one that can shape the economic outcome of the country. To describe these interventions as a form of reproductive governance in the development context I draw on Foucault's concept of governmentality.

By governmentality, Foucault describes 'the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy and as its essential means apparatuses of security' (Foucault 1991: 102).

Governmentality also refers to the pre-eminences of government over all other forms of power and the result of process through which the state becomes administrative or 'governmentalized' (Foucault 1991, pp. 102-3). In other words, governmentality or 'the art of government' as a term enables us to question the political rationality behind the technologies of power (Lemke 2001). Governmentality as an analytic enables us to understand how power works and what it does (Li, 2007b, p. 19).

Building on governmentality, Ilcan and Philips (2010) describe the government discourses which shape the field of development, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The governmentality that these goals produce recast development problems and offer formulated solutions – they call these discourses ‘developmentalities’ (Ilcan and Phillips, 2010, p. 845). ‘Developmentality’ is also described as the various governance instruments and techniques in the aid and development sector, that through liberal ideas promise to allow the recipient to develop itself as long as it is within accordance with the donor’s established development discourse (Lie 2015:4). This is similar to what Li describes in her work in Indonesia as the ‘will to improve’ (Li, 2007b, pp. 4–5). This ‘will to improve’ includes attempts to improve people’s lives that are never quite met, namely because projects which often seek technical solutions to structural issues ((Li, 2007b, p. 8). For this reason Ferguson described development as the ‘anti-politics machine’, as development often depoliticises social issues by looking for technical solutions (Ferguson, 1994, p. xv).

Bringing together governmentality, developmentality and reproduction, I have developed the concept of ‘reproductive developmentality’ to describe those modes of reproductive governance that aim to shape reproduction for the sake of national development. Reproductive developmentality is the discourse and practices that intervenes in people’s reproductive lives with the aim of improvement. It is more specific than reproductive governance in that it describes modes of

governmentality that are specifically focused on national development. e.g., the concept of the demographic dividend. This is part of what Michelle Murphy has also identified as a process of ‘economization of life’ (Murphy, 2017, p. 5), the way that population has become tied to economy through processes valuing and governing life in terms of those lives ability to contribute to the economy of the nation state (ibid., p. 6).

As Murphy conceptualizes it, the ‘economization of life’ is a ‘historically specific regime created through quantification and social science methods to calculate the value of human life’ (ibid., pp.5-6). Reproductive developmentality is a smaller part of this wider economization and valuing of life. At the same time, it is more specific in that it names what happens in the development and aid sector which has aims of both economic and social improvement. Reproductive developmentality is driven both by the ‘economization of life’, and the ‘will improve’. Reproductive developmentality names the rationale of development interventions which shape reproduction for national prosperity, both economic and social.

In development contexts, societal constraints, local attitudes, logistical issues and religious pressures are listed as ‘barriers’ to healthier reproductive behaviour. Reproductive behaviour and poor reproductive health are then portrayed as a barrier to economic prosperity, overlooking wider structural forces or influenced by state policy or global development partnerships. These portrayals can at times be moralising, as they produce

‘normalised’ sexual identities through constructions of science, medicine and development, leading to many ambiguities (Pigg and Adams, 2005).

In Timor-Leste studies which have placed reproduction front and centre have largely come from a reproductive health and policy perspective within the global health and development domain (Wayte *et al.*, 2008; Belton, Whittaker and Barclay, 2009)(Whittaker 2008; Wayte et al 2008). Several important studies have investigated reproductive issues such as the criminalization of abortion (Belton et al 2009) and access to maternal health services alongside maternity and domestic violence (Wild *et al.*, 2010, 2018). Wallace's work in partnership with Marie Stopes International, explores family and contraceptive choices from a sexual and reproductive health perspective, finding that reproductive decisions-making is often not in the hands of an individual woman (Wallace, 2014; Wallace *et al.*, 2019). From a demographic perspective, Saikia argues that high fertility preferences are not only due to lack of access to contraceptives but a ‘culturally rooted practice’ (2018, p.376). Plan International’s report on teenage marriage and young pregnancy in Timor-Leste found that girls had little agency in sexual decisions making (Cummins 2017).

These studies on reproduction emphasize the importance of individual decision-making, choice, gender dynamics, cultural factors, and education. They also show however, that individual decision-making in reproduction (whilst desirable) is actually far from reality, as I shall also show in the Section I of this thesis (chapter 3 and 4).

It is often the narrow conceptualisation of reproduction that enables development discourse to approach reproduction as something that can be intervened in for other purposes, such as improving health and development metrics and national economy. The concept of reproductive developmentality thus helps to describe and analyse the various actors and processes at work which intervene (or abandon) reproduction in Timor-Leste for the aim of development, improvement, and prosperity. Utilising a reproductive justice approach this thesis takes a wholistic approach to examining reproduction in the local context including the structural and intersecting challenges communities in Maubisse experience.

Building on the literature from the health and development sector, this thesis offers a long-term ethnographic perspective which considers the everyday subjective experiences of reproduction, its local significance, and meanings which challenges understandings of reproduction and narratives about it that appear in the wider socio-political context. This anthropological perspective s and illuminates the nuanced dilemmas, constraints, and contradictions that people encounter, and how people negotiate and rationalise the different ideals of reproductive behaviour they are presented with from a multitude of actors often unaccounted for in development and health research. For example, in her in-depth interviews with members of Timor-Leste Catholic church leaders, Richards (2015) found that rather than a cohesive rejection of contraceptives, views were in fact very mixed. Thus, it is also important to consider how reproduction is

viewed locally, sometimes, but not always, in opposition to national or global development narratives. In the next section I outline the second theoretical concept that is central to this thesis, distributed reproduction. I start with an overview of the approach anthropologists have taken to studying life after conflict in Timor-Leste before examining Murphy's concept of distributed reproduction in more detail.

1.5 Distributed Reproduction: making life in the empty land

The anthropological literature on Timor-Leste offers a foundation on which to build an examination of reproduction in conversation with discussions on reproductive justice and the developmental approach to reproduction in Timor-Leste. Here I outline the anthropological literature and explain how it relates to the concept of distributed reproduction.

The development literature on Timor-Leste has often characterised post-independence Timor-Leste as a 'blank slate' (Nygaard-Christensen & Bexley 2017, p. 23). However, in critique of this is what Nygaard-Christensen and Bexley describe as the 'resilience' literature (ibid., p. 14). This body of literature is largely anthropological in approach and focuses on the role of kinship and customary practices as ways of surviving the brutality of the Indonesian occupation. A central theme of customary renewal prioritises the reconstruction of scared houses and the return to ancestral lands. This illustrates the way people cultivate relationships with

the dead as a way of building communities and the state in the post-conflict era (Feijó and Kent, 2020). Whilst arguably this focus on customary renewal is closely tied to social reproduction, few studies have focused specifically on the significance and wider meanings of reproduction in a broader perspective. In addition, studies have looked at how fertility is portrayed symbolically in ritual (Hicks 2007; Trindade 2013), marriage exchange (Niner 2012, da Silva 2018, 2019; Simião and da Silva 2016) as well as social recovery, customary renewal and animism (Bovensiepen, 2015; McWilliam 2008; McWilliam and Traube 2011; Palmer and McWilliam 2019). However, these themes of resilience, customary practice and fertility, have yet to be brought together in a broader extensive examination that places reproduction, in all its social, political, and biomedical significance, at the centre.

The study which comes closest to a broader approach to reproduction, and closest to my fieldsite geographically, is Elizabeth Traube's *Cosmology and Social Life* (1986), because of its examination of the connections between cosmology and symbolism, social reproduction and birth and death. In her seminal ethnography on 'The Mambai' of Aileu, Traube wrote that she hoped her ethnography on the cosmology of social life, published after the onslaught of the Indonesian invasion - would 'testify to the capacity' of Mambai people 'to think imaginatively and profoundly about the meaning of collective life' (1986, p. xxi). The Mambai play into the stereotypes of mountain people being stupid and uneducated. By agreeing

that they themselves are the 'stupid ones' Mambai lever their ritual and mountain knowledge against their critics, the educated lowlanders from the coast, who do not give importance to such things. Traube writes 'stupid has its own meaning in the mountains, where social existence is oriented around *the quest for life*' (1986, p. 50, my emphasis). Here she implies that customary ritual and knowledge pursues life, something that the 'educated' don't understand and reap from.

Customary practices and identity have been shaped by oppression under racist colonial practices, as well as negotiations and new constraints in the independence era (Bovensiepen and Delgado Rosa, 2016; Leach, 2016; Viegas and Feijó, 2017; Kammen, 2019). Land and thus environment has been an important topic in this literature. Studies on nationalism and identity have therefore perforated in recent studies on Timor-Leste. The theme of gender and sexuality has also moved to the fore (see Boarccaech 2018), particularly in recent years amongst a new wave of global feminism and as the global development agenda has championed gender programs (Niner, 2016). Nationalism and gender are themes which run throughout the thesis, and they are incorporated into the broader themes of reproduction, population, and environment, with which they are deeply entwined, and cannot be set apart. The importance of customary practices in Timor-Leste and the way they interact with new discussions and developmentalities suggest it is necessary to rethink what we mean by reproduction. A concept that enables a broader understanding of the

category of reproduction is ‘distributed reproduction’ (Murphy, 2011, pp. 21–38).

Engaging with a reproductive justice framework, Murphy argues that we might think of reproduction as ‘a politics of redistributing relations, possibilities, and futures’ (Murphy 2017, p. 11). This enables us to move away from thinking about reproduction as a series of individual biological events (conception, pregnancy, labour) (Almeling, 2015), or even a life process associated with the individuals. Instead, it allows us to consider what relationships and which infrastructures shape what forms of life are supported to persist, thrive and what forms of life are destroyed, injured, and constrained (Murphy 2017, p. 141–142). I consider what reproductive justice look like in Timor-Leste to understand what governs reproduction in the post-conflict context where the land is perceived as empty. I expand on Murphy’s concept of ‘distributed reproduction’ (2011; 2013; 2017) to encompass human-environment relations in Maubisse where customary renewal and spirit ecologies are central to reproduction. Using ethnographic material from my fieldwork in Timor-Leste I draw on a reproductive justice framework to highlight reproductive inequalities and question how such a concept might be applied (or not) in animistic relations with the land in Timor-Leste.

Dow and Lamoreaux (2020) summarise the recent literature on reproduction and population which addresses the idea of overpopulation, often expanding population’ to environmental degradation. As they show,

this recent literature shows the problem the language and discourse around population causes for understanding reproduction and freedom.

Making Kin not Population addresses what Donna Haraway calls a 'booming silence', of feminist engagement with issues of population (Clarke, 2018, p. 4). It aims to provoke discussion in feminist scholarship about the intersecting issues of population, reproduction, and the environment, particularly ill-fated but never disappeared 'population problem'. But how to investigate the population ethnographically? This research investigates the narratives around population, moving outside of reproduction as an individual endeavour, and asking how groups count themselves, as well as looking at how modes of governance count and measure. A large part of this meant following narratives and 'logics' about population, how was life in Timor-Leste thought of as whole? In Maubisse this was expressed in terms about population loss and growing the next generation.

In her book *The Economisation of Life* (2017) Murphy traces how the concept of 'population' emerged in the 20th century. Population was made 'problematic' as it was turned into an object of experimentation. This occurred in the encounter between Cold War politics and postcolonial sciences, at a turning point between imperialism and decolonisation, where experiment and governance made reproduction central to the governing of the economy (ibid., p. 9). Murphy thus argues that the very term 'population' carries the weight of a racial colonial politics. She suggests that

the term 'population' might better be left behind in order to think of other ways to think about aggregate life, one that does not come with so much experimental baggage.

But if we were to leave behind 'population' as Murphy suggests, so many of the systems built around it would crumble. This is certainly the point, but for Timor-Leste, independence rested on a mechanism of self-determination that enabled the claim of sovereignty of a population or collective people over a territory. This mechanism might be flawed in many ways (firstly the current sovereigns must agree to a referendum on independence), but in the correct circumstances, it enabled Timor-Leste to form a nation based on a significant Timorese population coming together under one national identity.

Murphy's chapter in *Making Kin* (Murphy, 2018) explicitly calls for the term population (and all the violence it has caused) to be left behind. Haraway, whose own chapter confronts population numbers and figures head on, would rather stay with 'the trouble' including the problematic concept of population (2016, p. 1; 2018). Here too, her maxim 'make kin not babies' favours a solution where population pressures on earth are eased by people having fewer biogenetic children (2018., p. 99). She adopts the term 'multi-species reproductive justice' to pursue a world where all species can thrive together (2018, p.67).

Jade Sasser warns however that such a call risks reigniting old Malthusian tropes and with it regimes of population control (2019). She argues against

thinking which problematizes population whilst ignoring wider structures of inequality and identifies what she sees as ‘a gendered politics of population’ (2017).

These recent scholarly debates around population show how the term population itself is embroiled with violent pasts of racism, colonialism and is caught in present debates about reproductive and environmental justice. It is these debates this thesis engages with theoretically, bringing to the table the ethnographic examples from Timor-Leste to tease out these arguments further and drawing on examples of reproduction after conflict, of animism and potent environments, and the population of a young country. The concept of ‘distributed reproduction’ (2017, p. 141) eliminates the colonial and racist baggage of counting and calculating lives in terms of their economic worth and instead recasts collective life as a set of relationships stretching beyond individual bodies and includes the unequal relationships that shape which lives are supported and which are not. It also points to the contradictions and contested relations inherent in the process, not only focusing on the good or a romantic idea of ‘flourishing togetherness’ (ibid.,p. 142).

The ‘population problem’ or ‘problem of human density’ as Murphy (2017, p. 141) refers to it, needs to be turned on its head, it is not how many or who gets to reproduce as if often discussed, but how are life chances unequally distributed. In other words, who is supported to survive? Distributed reproduction is about ‘naming the spatially and temporally

uneven arrangements' of 'being and becoming' (ibid., pp.141-142). Being and becoming, in words used by my participants, refer to continuing (*kontinua, ba oin*) and surviving (*la para, la mate, la rohan*) and being prosperous and growing (*buras*). What are the environmental and socio-political and economic arrangements that help or hinder this? ‘

Within such infrastructures, some aspects of life are supported while others are abandoned. Infrastructures promote some forms of life and avert others.’ (Murphy 2013, para. 8). Whilst Murphy examines the infrastructures of polluting industrial chemicals on intergenerational reproduction in Sarnia, Canada, I develop Murphy’s concept of distributed reproduction in relation to animist practices and spiritual landscapes of Timor-Leste, in relation to the ‘flow of life’ (Fox, 1980) of Eastern Indonesian archipelago. In this way I engage with recent debates of feminist scholars of reproduction concerning reproductive justice, environment and population, examining where Timor-Leste contributes to and complicates the discussion. Expanding the concept of distributed reproduction allows me to further explore what reproduction is, and how it relates to concepts of population and environment both in local terms in Maubisse as well as the multitude of actors, state, church and international, that are part of shaping new life in Timor-Leste.

Primarily I question what reproduction means in Timor-Leste’s post-colonial, post-conflict development world. What sorts of life ‘counts’ in this context both in terms of how and what lives are counted and what are they

deemed to be worth (Nelson, 2018). Through an 'economization of life' how have reproduction and economy become entwined through capitalist projects of development (Murphy, 2016). ; and how are the environments, landscapes and spaces that reproduction and population take in and *with*, and how are they 'bound' to local ecologies, human and non-human, that are part of sustaining generations for the future? (Dow, 2018). Rather than looking to the veneration of the dead (William and Traube 2011) how does the renewal of social processes through customary and ancestral relationships with the land (Bovensiepen, 2015) influence reproduction of life not only in social terms but through the other processes involved in reproduction which is all at once biological, social, political and cultural? Ultimately how are reproductive relationships distributed as futures and possibilities?

1.6 Reproducing Life After Conflict: Structure of the Thesis

The thesis consists of an introduction and methodology (Chapter 1 and 2) followed two empirical sections (Section I and Section II), and a conclusion. Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 introduce the thesis, theoretically and ethnographically. The theoretical framework I have outlined in this introductory chapter will be developed in detail throughout my ethnographic chapters. Chapter 2 provides an ethnographic description of my fieldsite in Maubisse and explore the virtues and challenges of

conducting ethnographic research in Timor-Leste's aid and development landscape amongst sensitive post-conflict politics. It addresses how I ethnographically investigate a topic of study usually dominated by quantitative research methods, as well as my positionality and ethics as an unmarried white European woman without children.

Section 1. Reproductive Developmentality describes several ethnographic case studies which illustrate developmental and nationalist discourses on reproduction choice, sex, development, and environment and how they shape present-day reproductive politics. Chapter 3 presents an ethnographic analysis of the family planning landscape in Maubisse through a case study focusing on a training course. This brings together health workers and partners working in the domain of reproductive health. In this training health workers challenge the development language of 'choice' used around family planning and contraceptives by highlighting the structural inequalities present in their area. This chapter shows how the language of 'choice' in reproductive rights and family planning discourse is challenged by doctors and midwives who show that the reality of reproduction is more socially collective, politically sensitive, and environmentally challenging than the reproductive rights discourse would let you believe. Chapter 4 provides an insight into the local and national politics around unplanned pregnancies and ideas of development. It looks at the moral panic around child abandonment or 'baby dumping' that became the topic of a national youth debate. This chapter illuminates the heavily

gendered debates about reproduction in Timor-Leste and the moralising language that casts women as responsible for the future prosperity of the nation.

Section 2: Distributed Reproduction, presents an ethnographic analysis of the natural and spiritual landscape and its relationship and local and customary understandings of reproduction in Maubisse. Chapter 5 documents and explores? the meaning of the description of land in Maubisse as 'empty'. It shows the importance of counting kin, as well as population, in customary storytelling through ancestral houses to show how paying attention to local ways of counting kin matters in a post-conflict content. It proposes that despite the governmental practices of counting and measuring population being problematic, part of 'reproductive justice' must include considering how people 'count' themselves. Chapter 6 investigates another description of the landscape. It starts by examining a local joke that relates cold weather to sexual behaviour. It interrogates the meaning of this joke to reveal the different ways that the environment and sex are connected in Maubisse through customary practices that link human life and the natural and spiritual world. It shows how reproduction in Maubisse is and has always been, distributed throughout the landscape. In Chapter 7, the threads of reproductive developmentality and distributed reproduction meet at an environmental youth camp centered in Maubisse. This chapter focuses on ethnographic depiction of sex, education, environment and resources from

related notions of reproductive developmentality, and where they collide with distributed reproduction. It deals with a sexual health workshop delivered and highlights the disjunction between development rhetoric and the reality of rural youth and education. It also investigates the problematic categorisation of human and natural resources which have come to dominate the language of development with reference to the young population and behaviour in relation to the future of the nation and national prosperity.

Lastly, Chapter 8, the conclusion, examines the meaning of the 'demographic dividend' for reproduction, population, and environment, and how this tripartite relationship might be rethought using different conceptualisations of reproduction, such as one that is distributed through people, land and spirits, based on the ethnographic examples from Maubisse. It argues that by further expanding the category and possibilities of reproduction we can reconcile the elements of different approaches to reproduction which recognise reproductive justice and unsettle the composition of the population problem.

2. Resisting Numbers: Ethnographic approaches to reproduction

‘Do you want children?’ I asked timidly.

‘Like it or not, you must have children,’ Jerika replied plainly.

I watched as she sprinkled cold soapy water over the dirty plates, using the limited resources she had. Behind me, the toilets reeked. There was no water to flush them. Jerika was the first person I had posed this question of ‘wanting’ to have children too. She was a young student who lived in Dili. She had come to do community service in Maubisse with her classmates and they were camping behind the village office where we sat. Her friends had gone off to fetch supplies for the water storage tank they were building. They financed it themselves through collecting donations and selling snacks at their university campus.

Jerika’s puzzling response of ‘like it or not’ reflected how in Timor-Leste having children was not a possibility but rather an expectation and even an obligation. My own question, by contrast, reveals my position as a foreign white European female researcher, unmarried and without children. I understood parenthood as a potentiality, rather than a certainty. Growing up, I had been asked the same question I asked Jerika: ‘do you *want* children?’. This conversation with Jerika exposed so much; in a place where

resources such as water are so limited, where university students are using their own funds to build basic infrastructure, reproduction was not simply an option, but an expectation. This caused me to think about how and when reproduction, in this case having children, became a potential option, and how and when it became an expectation.

In this chapter I introduce my ethnographic approach to exploring reproduction in Timor-Leste. I address some of the challenges I faced as well as and assumptions that were made about my methodology. These challenges also reveal the different assumptions and perspectives I encountered about reproduction. Through these examples I reveal how reproduction becomes tied to the idea of national population in a post conflict development context. My reflections on my positionality helped me to refine and, in some cases, resist the expectations of the kind of data that my research project on reproduction would collect.

Jerika's assured response stuck with me throughout my fieldwork. It led me to question how reproduction, in particular, having children is shaped by individual, social, political, economic and environmental conditions (Clarke, 2018). Yet it is also 'stratified' (Colen, 1995) in that the intersections of race, class, gender and other inequalities lead to conditions in which some women are encouraged to reproduce and others are not. What were the complex ways that reproduction was shaped in Maubisse, and Timor-Leste as a whole?

The calculations around the demographic dividend assume that given access to contraception and education people will choose to have children at an older age, and that they will choose to have fewer of them. Yet Jerika, didn't view having children as a choice at all. In development programs sexuality and decisions around fertility contexts gets related to barriers such as education, or access to contraception (Pigg and Adams, 2005). Development discourse thus carries the assumption that given the opportunity, women will choose to have fewer children and choose to follow a western biomedical approach to reproductive health. Such developmentalities embrace calculative practices (Ilan and Phillips, 2010). Census data, surveys and counting are part of state government through which life is made visible and 'legible' (Scott, 1998).

However, my ethnographic approach to this project included participant observation, everyday conversations, and unstructured interviews. Development professionals and state officials often asked me to qualify my research. I was asked 'how many, 'what percentage', and 'is this rate high or low?'. Interlocutors in Maubisse also expected that I would be conducting some sort of census or demographic survey and often directed me to administrative offices to look at population records. The expectation was that reproduction and population were things to be counted and measured. This metrics inform reproductive health and rights discourse which has historically overlooked local contexts and unequal environments. Yet scholars of reproductive justice rally against metrics that cast

reproduction as an individual experience whilst at the same time representing a utopian vision of different populations living with equal means.

As outlined in Chapter 1, Murphy has (2017, p. 6). shown how life has become economized through an assemblage of practices, including coloniality, social science practices and racialisation This has led reproduction to be counted and measured in relation to national economies. Practices of quantification alongside intervention into reproductive behaviours included a range of infrastructural projects such as family planning, development projects, global health NGOs and imperialism. A reproductive justice approach moves away from such quantitative practices and looks towards other modes of documenting reproduction (Strathern *et al.*, 2019)¹. It is this line of investigation I explore in this methodological chapter.

As Haraway argues that when it comes to human population, numbers cannot be ignored due to the determinantal effects on the planet (Haraway, 2016). In conversation about their scholarly opposition on this point, Murphy argues that we need different way of counting (Strathern *et al.*, 2019). She argues we need modes that are not entrenched in racist, colonial and capitalist infrastructures, such as demographic calculations of the state

¹ See Sasser's response in the Forum on Making Kin (Strathern *et al.* 2019)

and other actors, which have historically led to coercion and violence (Murphy, 2017).

Engaging with this discussion, I investigate *how can we research reproduction and population ethnographically? How can we resist traditional methods of measuring reproduction and their associated calculations? And how can the positionality of the ethnographer be an asset in questioning assumptions?* Exploring these questions, I introduce how I came to find my fieldsite by listening to narratives about reproduction (2.1). Here, the ‘sensitive’ topics; sex, violence, and death, which are implicit in my research, were not the biggest challenge (2.2). Whilst there were ethical dilemmas, the largest issue was how my research topics were associated with biomedical and quantitative methods, which required resisting the pressures and urges to count, collect demographic data, and quantify my work (2.3).

In trying to find ways to resist this and find ethnographic ways to research reproduction and population in a development context I utilized ‘assemblage ethnography’ (Walberg, 2018) to trace the relations and actors that problematised reproduction in Timor-Leste, from my fieldsite of Maubisse. I do this by discussing how assemblage ethnography enables the anthropologist to understand complex social organisation across scales, site and practices (2.4). Whilst my research included long-term field work I also reflect on the merits of a ‘patchwork’ approach (Günel, Varma and Watanabe, 2020), a feminist approach which questions how innovative

ethnographical methods are shaped by working with constraints to the usual expectations of fieldwork. I explore this in regard to various ethical dilemmas and my positionality as a white European female, unmarried, without children, and with a chronic illness (2.5). First however, I introduce my fieldsite, how I got there, and the narratives I encountered that shaped my methodology.

2.1 Finding the Field



Figure 4. Photo taken from the road leading to Maubisse from Aileu. Credit: Author 2019

2.1.1 'Go To The Mountains': Following narratives of reproduction

In this section I describe how I found my fieldsite in Maubisse, and importantly the conversations that lead me there. As it turned out the topics of these conversations would feature as a larger theme of my research which I discuss in a subsequent chapter. This section also provides an example of how I went about exploring reproduction and population ethnographically.

I first visited Timor-Leste in 2016, spending the majority of my time in Same, Manufahi, on the south coast about 5-7 hours from Dili. I was assisting my main supervisor in her research in Betano, an hours drive from Same. The main town of Same Villa was lush, shaded by the cool figure of Kalblaki mountain, with plenty of water flowing through irrigation channels to vegetable gardens. In 2017 I returned there for my MA fieldwork to conduct ethnographic research. During this period, I spent a month or doing participant observation at the local youth centre and collecting family histories. One family always welcomed me onto their veranda anytime I walked past their house. Their daughter Vera was about my age and our informal interviews were often accompanied by strong black coffee and gooey banana fritters. It was in Vera's Garden that I first heard a humorous story that piqued my curiosity and would become a reoccurring narrative in my research.

‘If you want to know about families and children... you should go to the mountains (*foho*) they have lots of children there.’ Vera’s older sister suggested. *Foho* is synonymous with both the countryside and mountains in Tetun. ‘Where in the mountains?’ I asked, ‘why do they have more children there?’ ‘They have more children there because it’s cold,’ Vera’s sister said with a broad smirk. Then rattled off in rapid Tetun ‘ In the mountains, it's cold, people stay in bed, wrap themselves in blankets and have lots of children’, she giggled to her sister. I also laughed, and then Vera and her daughters laughed even louder when they realised, I understood the joke. The joke implies that people in the mountains have more sex because it’s cold and they stay in bed, leading to more children. I investigate this joke or trope in detail in Chapter 6. I recount it here to show what led me to Maubisse, a cold place in the mountains. In addition, it counters the impression that people gave me that sex was a taboo or sensitive topic that would be difficult to talk about. As it happened, in my first visits to Same, sex came up a lot in informal conversations with friends, and everyday conversations were peppered with sexual innuendos. This was the same in Maubisse where I learnt a lot from the way people joked about sex, as well as the more serious conversations about it.

Writing how I came to find a fieldsite in the mountains through this joke about the cold land, would embarrass some of my participants in Maubisse, and make others laugh. In reality, choosing to make Maubisse my fieldsite was, of course, complex and carefully deliberated. It involved welcoming,

patient participants and friends, a beautiful landscape and proximity to several hubs of interest such the large referral hospital, a sexual health clinic run by a coffee company, as well as a government-church clinic run by Carmelite nuns. Contacts and friends had told me other things about Maubisse; the area was known for its adherence to *Mambai culture*, as well as its strong relationship with the Catholic church. The cold mountain climate was agricultural and produced coffee, and fresh fruit and vegetables, including several large strawberry farms. Alongside this, the gossip about people having more children in the mountains sparked my interest towards views about reproduction the joke about cold land and more children would resurface consistently throughout my fieldwork.

2.1.2 Maubisse: The Navel of the Land

During my first visits to Maubisse in 2016 and 2017, road was in a poor state, in some places pot-holed, or dirt and mud, in other places totally collapsed. At that time it took approximately 5 hours for the bus to leave the coastal capital of Dili, climb the snaking road over the Laulara mountains and wind down to the plateau of rice fields in Aileu. The bus then embarked on a further trek up and over the lip of the next large valley to Maubisse, which is at an altitude of around 1500m. During my stay in 2018-2019 the roads were slowly being repaired, sealed and, finally, tarmacked. Importantly, these jobs provided work for local younger men often seen

working on the roads, filling wire cages with rocks and stones to hold back the hillsides which were prone to landslides in rainy season.

Maubisse is a large ‘village’ (*suco*) and wider administrative post (*posto administrativo*)² in the municipality of Ainaro, in the central mountains. The administrative post comprises 9 villages in total: Maubisse, Fatubessi, Horiqic, Liurai, Aituto, Edi, Maulau, Manelobas, and Manetu. The post as a whole has 23,750 inhabitants. Maubisse itself has a population of 6,229 living in 951 private households. The village and is divided in to 13 hamlets (*aldeia*) (Table 1) (RDTL, 2015a). I was based and around the centre of Maubisse known as ‘Maubisse Villa’ and its surrounding hamlets, although my interlocutors were distributed throughout the other villages in the wider administrative post.

Figure 5. Figure 5. Table 1 : Population of Maubisse village (*suco*) and its hamlets (*aldeia*)(RDTL, 2015a)

Population of Suco Maubisse 2015				
Population of Suco and Aldeia	Total	Male	Female	Private Households
Maubisse	6,229	3,173	3,056	951
Cano-Rema	1,500	761	739	218
Goulala	326	164	162	47
Hato-Fae	353	184	169	49
Hato-Luli	404	227	177	58
Hautado	462	241	221	53
Lequi-Tei	561	280	281	95
Ria-Leco	382	177	205	61
Ria-Mori	634	325	309	100

² Timor-Leste is divided into municipalities, which comprise of administrative posts made up of villages (*sucos*)

Sarlala	157	83	74	22
Teli-Tuco	162	81	81	22
Ura-Hou	689	349	340	112
Vila	599	301	298	114



Figure 6. Map of the Municipality of Ainaro showing administrative regions and villages. Credit: J. Patrick Fischer (Fischer, 2008)



Figure 7. View of Maubisse Villa from the Pousada, including market and church. Credit: Author 2019

Like other Mambai speaking areas, Maubisse was sometimes referred to as the ‘navel of the land’ (M, *rai fusan*, T, *rai husar*) the central origin point of Timorese people³ (Traube, 1986). When telling creation stories and talking about ancestral origin stories, local cultural leaders refer to Maubisse as the site of the original indigenous Timorese people and consider other language groups to be descents or to have arrived from other neighbouring islands.⁴

³ M refers to Mambai, T refers to Tetun. See note on languages.

⁴ For a discussion on the similarities and differences of origin narratives of language groups in Timor-Leste see (Traube, 2007; Viegas and Feijó, 2017; Viegas, 2019)

The town sits on the slopes of a wide caldera above the river below surrounded by a circle of green mountains. It's large church, The Immaculate Heart of Mary, is painted bright yellow. The church is easily the tallest building in the town and stands overlooking the hospital, school, and valley below. The large referral hospital and two health clinics are within walking distance of the town's market with its stalls and shops, which are run by Chinese families⁵ and filled with colourful plastic items. The large three-story guesthouse and restaurant owned by the Village Head's (*Xefe Suco*) family. This served as a popular stop-off for government workers and NGOs travelling through to other towns, and often their marked white Toyota Hiluxs' could be seen parked outside on the small roundabout. At the round about the road forked in three, the north road led to Aileu, and then Dili. Another fork led up to the Pousada, a hilltop residence built by the former Portuguese Administration which is now run as a hotel. The final fork led to the market and then south up the other side of the valley and on to Same, Ainaro, and the south coast.

I first visited Maubisse briefly in 2017 on my way to and from fieldwork in Same. In 2018 I visited again to monitor the general elections and was introduced to a family who lived in the centre of the town. Maria and João, who I would come to know well, rented rooms in their home to nurses and doctors who worked at the hospital and in local clinics, often friends and

⁵ For a history of Chinese Timorese see Kammen and Chen (2020)

colleagues of their daughters who were nurses. They also hosted peace corps volunteers and any NGO workers needing a place to stay. Renting out rooms in this way was a valuable source of income for families with larger concrete houses.

Unfortunately, the day I arrived to stay with João and Maria's family in June 2018, funeral preparations were taking place for Maria's mother. As it turned out, Maria's daughter would go into labour during the speeches of my leaving dinner, delivering her fourth granddaughter in July 2019. I arrived on the day of a death and left on the day of a birth – this seemed very fitting for someone investigating reproduction. The funerary rites for Maria's mother continued throughout the year I stayed with the family, and the newly arrived granddaughter was named after me.

It was thanks to Maria's family's kindness, hospitality, and sense of humour that I chose to stay in Maubisse after my time staying with her family during observing the 2019 elections. Several months into my stay the latest Demographic and Health Survey data was released. Just like Rita's sister and others joked, people really did *seem* to have more children in the mountains. The administrative area of Maubisse in fact had the *highest* birth rate in the whole country. An average of 6 children per woman compared to the national average of 4.2. In demography, qualitative data is often used to 'plug the gaps' of quantification. But the humorous story of cold weather, blankets and people having more sex in the mountains reminded me how ethnography can reveal nuanced information in the absence of quantified

data, and as well as alongside of it (Adams, 2016). Particularly, in the indexical world of global health and development data, ethnography can unseat numbers' hold on truth (ibid., p. 11). Ethnographic research enables us to think about how something such as reproduction is known and defined in complex and diverse ways: epistemologically, numerically, individually, institutionally, and importantly, culturally.

With Maria's family I encountered many deaths, as well as slowly being drawn into conversations around marriage, children, education, sex and wider political debates about young people and the future. The politics around customary practices often took place at home, discussed in the kitchen, and materialising in the form of food, animals, and money. I was positioned 'in the field' of relations that I was attempting to gather knowledge about (Bernard, 2006, p. 344) Issues, around sex and death for example, were never far from conversation. Talking about certain issues related to them was taboo, but these topics were firmly part of everyday life and conversation.

Janet Carsten's vivid account of everyday life and kinship in Langkawi, Malaysia, provides a unique insight into non-formal familial relations in the household of a fishing village (1997) of relevance to ethnographic fieldwork in Maubisse. Her detailed account of lives within the household, show how the household, previously associated with female lives and assumed to be devoid of politics by earlier anthropologists, is central to the kinship process and the political world. The home then, as a

domestic setting, is an important place in which relations are formed as part of the politics of the everyday. Following Carsten's approach, in Maria's kitchen, around the fire with her family, and in the rented quarters with the nurses and other lodgers, I learnt a great deal about Maria's familial relations, her daughters' friendships and relationships, health workers' frustrations with their work and income, everyone's concerned but dutiful attitude to customary practices. Essentially everyday plans for families and the opportunities, dilemma's obligations, and pressures around relationships, marriage, house building, and children. In contrast with Carsten's early ethnography, however, I was aware that investigating reproduction in Maubisse also required breaking away from the house setting (previously considered the 'domestic' sphere) to consider the wider politics of reproduction – that beyond the family dynamics to explore how reproduction was entangled with life beyond (Ginsburg & Rapp 1991, 1995). Migration, biotechnologies the state and global flows are as much part of reproduction as family life and community settings (Browner and Sargent, 2011). Timor-Leste's political history and geography has led to some particularly unique global connections and assemblages of actors entangled in reproduction, Cuban doctors, Indonesian abortifacients, Australian pro-lifers, and reproductive healthcare from an American coffee company. The ways that globalised practices interact with local practices and knowledge requires a wider frame than the home, or a single family or village, to consider the ways reproduction is both now 'assisted' (Ross and Moll, 2020)

or ‘abandoned’ (Munro and Widmer, forthcoming). As I will discuss below, the methodological approaches were shaped by following ‘reproduction’ wherever it might lead, that however, lead to some conundrums and challenges about language, and choosing which language(s) to learn.



Figure 8: A view of from the main road in Maubisse Villa, looking out towards the jagged face of mount Rabilau and the hamlets of Cano-Rema and Goulala in the distance. Credit: Author 2018

2.1.3 Language Dilemmas: Fieldwork and Language Politics

In global terms, Timor-Leste has an extraordinary variety of languages for its comparatively small population. The 2015 National Census counted 32 ‘mother tongue’⁶ languages in Timor-Leste (RDTL 2015). With a land area

⁶ The language that people consider their ‘first’ or main language

14,919km², Timor-Leste's size is most comparable to Northern Ireland (14,130km²). In this area, with a population of 1.3 million it is linguistically highly diverse. During the struggle for independence Tetun Prasa, often referred to as Tetun Dili, or simply Tetun⁷, was promoted as a *lingua franca* along with Portuguese. After independence, both became official national languages. The politics of language in Timor-Leste and which languages should be used in formal education is a contested topic, a common feature in emergent nationalism. Only around 10% of the population speaks Portuguese and outside of the capital, Tetun is most people's second language (Boldoni, 2021). Indonesian and English are considered working languages of the state, with English largely used in the international development sector. Speaking in Portuguese, Tetun Prasa, Bahasa Indonesia or English are far from neutral ways of communicating, with each having particular political values attached to them (see Boldoni 2021). After Tetun Prasa, the second largest language spoken in Timor-Leste is Mambai⁸. This is spoken in the western and central highlands and it the dominant language in the district of Ainaro, where Maubisse is located (RDTL, 2015b).

⁷ Tetun is also spelt 'Tetun', there is also some debate about the standardisation in spelling.

⁸ Also spelt Mambae

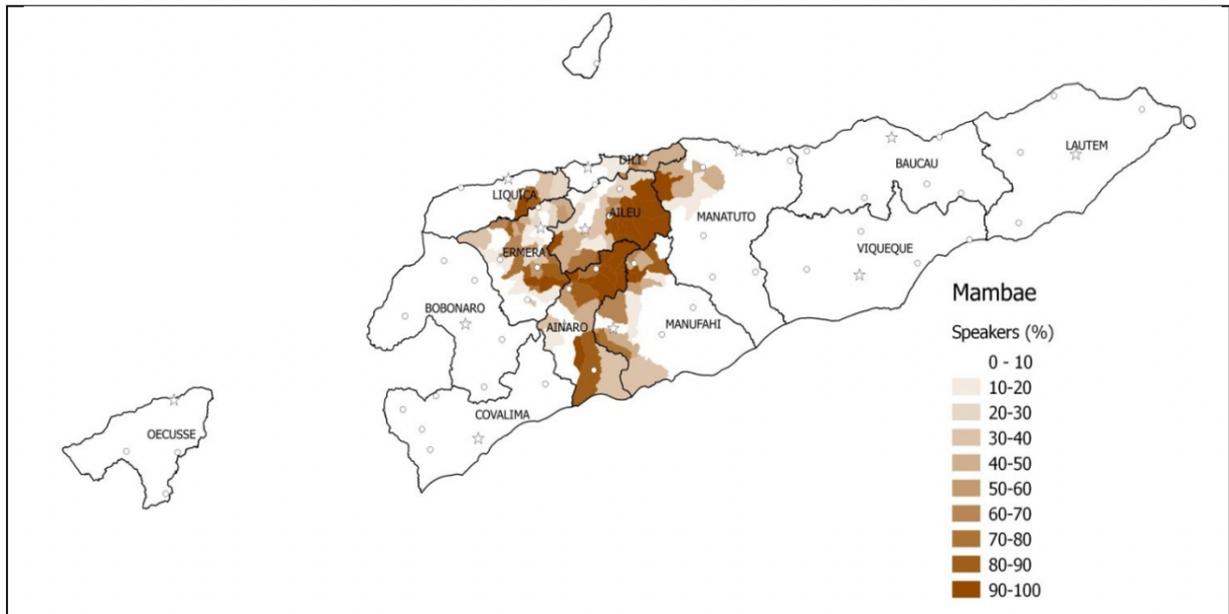
Mambae

Figure 9. Map showing the percentage of Mambai (Mambae) speakers in the central mountain area including the municipalities of Ainaro, Emera, Aileu, Dili, Liquica and Manufahi. Credit Williams- van Klinken and Williams: (2015, p. 10)

When I arrived in Timor-Leste in 2017, I spoke basic Tetun and Indonesian. When I decided on the central highlands as the location of my research, learning Mambai was an initial goal. However, as I found out, many of the young people in Maubisse did not speak Mambai fluently and some not at all. Some had grown up displaced in other parts of the country, many had learnt Indonesian at school or for the younger post-independence generation, Tetun with a little Portuguese. Furthermore, women who married into Mambai families from other language groups either didn't speak Mambai or were learning. In addition, there were at least four dialects of Mambai (Aileu, Maubisse, Ainaro and Emera). These dialects are mutually intelligible, but still some informants told me they struggled to understand

particular words and phrases. In addition, health workers who trained in Cuba, Indonesia and Dili were not always Mambai speakers either. As a result, I finally opted to focus more on Tetun rather than Mambai. However, with time, I learnt enough Mambai vocabulary to follow conversations and glowed with joy when people politely and over-generously declared me 'fluent'.

Still, learning Tetun, and its colloquialisms in Maubisse, was a significant hurdle in my fieldwork. I owe a lot to my language tutor at Timor Aid, Brigildo (Maun Gil) Fras Xavier Martins. During my lessons he pushed me towards many useful topics, taught me a lot about local politics, and corrected my mistakes. After I moved to Maubisse, Maun Gil often stopped to visit me on his way to see family and congratulated me on my Maubisse accent. I therefore achieved a very good command of Tetun within my first 6 months, but it was still a challenge to learn the way different groups of people switched between Mambai, Portuguese and Indonesian within a few sentences. In time I learned to recognise the different contexts each language was used in and the politics of using them at the correct times. Portuguese was more formal, usually within state institutions or healthcare. Indonesian slang was used by young people, but also when speaking of technologies and commercial products sold in the Chinese shops in the market. Mambai was widespread in the market, at family gatherings and at customary events. Numbers and prices were often recited in two or more languages for confirmation. This 'patchwork' of languages presented a huge

challenge at first, but I gradually realised others also that struggled with the switching between languages and colloquialisms. It was comforting to team up with such 'outsiders' and share confusion.

I recruited several assistants to help language and research, although they were based in Dili, and were unable to accompany me in Maubisse.

When it came to recording and revisiting interviews, I found working from transcriptions or interviews, rather than translations, more helpful. The context of some interviews were difficult to understand for those who weren't familiar with local names, geography and cultural context.

However, Bertanizo Guro and Janico Gusmao Alves helped with some transcriptions from Dili. Natalia Figueirado was another transcriber who on several occasions accompanied me in Maubisse and Dili for Maubisse for interviews and presentations. In Maubisse I was supported by different interlocutors, often young people, who would help translate Mambai to Tetum or spend time with me to explain things in more detail. Most of the time in Maubisse I was supported by local friends in who accompanied me on many expeditions, long walks, motorbike rides and to family events.

Cristiano, Tina and Delia, and their families (who we meet in later chapters), plus the teams at the local radio station (*Radiu Maubisse Mauloko*), Coffee Cooperative clinic (*Klinika Café Cooperativa Timor*, CCT) and the joint Church and Government Health Centre (*San Joaquin Clinic - Centro Saude Maubisse*.) Anyone who showed me around I counted as a de facto research assistant because there was not only one researcher, but a

host of people who directed me to various points of interest. Friends, many of them researchers themselves, directed me to helpful places.

For a while, I struggled with the issue of continuity with one transcriber or research assistant. This was particularly because I was often questioned by development professionals if I had one, and I felt pressure to be considered a 'professional' researcher. But in the end, I understood the approach I had, working with multiple transcribers, as well as interlocutors gave me a different sense of the language, from those who were fluent Tetun speakers, those who were Mambai speakers, and those who were not. Understanding other confusions or difficulties with languages deepened my understanding of communication between people from different parts of the country, but also and across generations. Given the historical context, there was a generational divide in language and communication, and I wasn't always the only one that needed translating for. For example, if an older person was speaking Mambai at a customary event with a lot of younger people present, it couldn't be assumed that everyone understood perfectly. In the end the Mambai I learnt from those around me was valuable not only as a tool for communication but as evidence of my effort to understand, respect and 'raise up' local culture (*hasa'e kultura*).

2.2 The Ethical Dilemmas of Researching Sensitive Topics

Researching sex, death, violence, reproduction, and medicine raises many of ethical questions. Most obviously, which questions can be asked, to

whom, and by who? The evidence gathered through the Commissions for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR) in Timor-Leste is joined by many other well researched accounts of the violence and suffering that people experienced during the Indonesian occupation (CAVR, 2005, p. 1268). When researchers investigate conflict and violence it's important to ask ourselves *why* we need to ask people about painful experiences (Oluj 1995) and weigh up potential unintended harms with the purpose and impact of our research. An ethical approach to protecting interlocutors (ASA 2011) and a sense of responsibility to them meant I was keenly aware of when people became uncomfortable when talking about certain topics as well as recognising my own discomfort and reflected on them. Given my focus on reproduction, it was not necessary or ethical to ask interlocutors to recount their experiences of violence and conflict, but rather to pay attention to how their current lives and perceptions are shaped by past experiences, those which are spoken about, and those which go unspoken. I took an approach of listening and following the lead of interlocutors on the subjects they were comfortable talking about with me. The language of 'huge suffering' (*terus boot*) appeared more often in speeches than in peoples personal accounts, and in Maubisse people were discouraged from talking about themselves in terms of suffering and victimhood by others around them. I learnt that laughter was also a way of coping 'better to laugh than to cry', was a maxim people repeated if I looked shocked at their laughter about a trying or violent time. Very I soon found that where people were comfortable, such

sex and violence were not off-limits in everyday casual conversation, as shown by the joke of the cold land. Another example comes from one of my first days in Maubisse which I describe below.

2.2.1 Sex, Death and Coffee

Outside of the family and rented accommodation I looked for places to have conversations about reproduction. On one of my first days in Maubisse, I walked towards a sexual health clinic run by the Timor Coffee Cooperative (*Cooperativa Cafe Timor*, CCT). The cooperative was funded by USAID in 1994 to launch a commercial coffee industry with the US National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA)⁹. It has Fairtrade certification and designated money for healthcare in the coffee growing regions. I was intrigued by the connection between the coffee business and sexual reproductive health. From my western perspective, and my experience so far in Timor-Leste I was also aware that trying to talk about reproduction and population would be likely to invoke the sensitive topics of sex and death, and I would need to find the spaces where I could engage with these issues. Starting at a sexual health clinic for coffee growing communities turned out to be a surprisingly good place to start.

The Timor Coffee Cooperative provides health care in coffee-growing areas in the central mountains. Maubisse, sitting at an altitude of 1500-

⁹ Whilst using the name 'cooperative' coffee farmers partner with CCT, which is reliant on NCBA, a company which brokers access the international market and large corporations such as Starbucks. For a historical and structural overview see Grenfell (2005) and (Graciana *et al.*, 2019)

2000 metres above sea level, offers good conditions for Robusta and Arabica coffee trees to grow on steep wooded slopes. CCT has operated a reproductive and sexual health clinic in Maubisse for over 10 years, and from this base, a 'mobile clinic', a small team with basic medical supplies, visits harder to reach coffee growing communities on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. The clinic is housed in a white building known as *Uma Xina*, Chinese House, as the building was previously owned by a Chinese-Timorese family. Above the entrance hung a faded sign reading 'Reproductive Health Clinic' (Klinkia Saude Reproductiva), followed by the logos of CCT, UNFPA and Ministry of Health.

The clinic is located on the road which bridges the area from the market to the mounded hill of the *posada*, the old Portuguese residence. On either side of the road, the slope falls away giving way to small vegetable gardens or coffee slopes below. On my initial visits to Maubisse, I had walked past the clinic with its large faded red iron gates, and it seemed empty, unoccupied. There were some sun-faded anti-smoking posters on the wall by the entrance, alongside a newborn child immunisation timeline and an 'ABC' AIDS awareness poster. The ABC strategy was developed as a response to the growing number of reported cases of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s. ABC originally stood for Abstinence, Be Faithful, Use a Condom. This particular poster, endorsed by the Ministry of Health, omitted the condom as a form of protection from HIV/AIDS. As a result, the C had been repurposed: 'Abstinence, Be faithful, Control yourself.'

On the first day I visited CCT found the gates closed and walked a little further down the road. I hadn't gotten far when an older man shouted after me. He wore a leopard print suit jacket and smiled widely, introducing himself as Kasimiru, the clinic's security guard. A younger man emerged from the clinic gates and explained he was a midwife. He was called Markus, it emerged, and wore a grey sweat top with animal ears sewn on the hood, which was up against the cold. Markus was from Maubisse, but had studied his midwifery in Indonesia and now worked for CCT. I explained my research briefly, and Markus told me how he had studied maternal mortality in Java. 'It's traditional here to have lots of children,' he told me. He pointed to Kasimiru, who confirmed he had 10 children of his own.

Markus connected his work in reproductive health to his country's history. 'The Portuguese and Indonesian occupation didn't do anything for development', he said. 'Did you know Timor was the *last* place in Asia to get independence? We are at the beginning, we are learning' he said. 'Most families don't think about the future, they live for now, and they want to be free, because of what has happened.'

As we chatted, we stood awkwardly outside the clinic, Markus hanging onto the gate, whilst Kasimiru listened and nodded. Did I know that in Indonesian times only the elite families were allowed to wear shoes? Markus asked. People also had to be in their houses by dark. Late at night men or women would be shot or raped. Now people just want to be happy

and enjoy life, he explained. He emphasised this by switching to English, 'they just want to live their lives'.

Whilst I had feared that no one would talk to me about subjects around violence and conflict, here I was on my first day 'in the field' at a clinic where these subjects were directly spoken about. Both violence and reproduction might have been political and or sensitive to people in different ways, and less appropriate at certain times or events, but it didn't mean that the topics were off-limits. Violence is a dimension of people's existence, not merely something external to society and culture that 'happens' to them (Nordstrom and Robben 1995:2). Whilst like Bovensiepen, I found that people rarely talked about the details and personal experience of the Indonesian occupation (2015). The occupation is part of collective memory. It exists in the remembrance of the dead but also in the material remnants of buildings and houses that were destroyed in the violence that followed the 1999 referendum. Several national processes have sought to address the trauma and suffering of the conflict. As part of the community reconciliation process, a Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste (CAVR, 2005) (CAVR)¹⁰ was conducted. It was tasked with establishing the truth regarding human rights violations during the civil war and the Indonesian occupation (1974-1999). The CAVR report was published in 2005 although projects for victim

¹⁰ *Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação de Timor-Leste* (P)

support and searches for those disappeared are on-going through various NGOs. In 2015 the government held a National End of Mourning (*Kore Metan Nasional*) as a way to acknowledge the dead with a view to moving forward. It was a way of ending 'saddness suffering, revolt and loss' and to move to a phase of acceptance and 'progress and development'. Whilst no one in Maubisse referenced these processes directly, there was a hushed atmosphere when people talked about the suffering of the occupation outside of the speeches made by local political and cultural leaders. It was also clear that there were still rifts between communities that had become divided during the conflict as well as personal and familial relationships that had broken down.

On one occasion, amidst relative silence on the occupation, I was taken aback by a historical and comedic re-enactment of the struggle for independence. This took place as part of a youth talent show at a day celebrating the restoration of independence. School children using props in place of guns posed as Indonesian soldiers and 'shot' at a group of their peers posing as Timorese civilian protesters. A crowd laughed at the depiction of the violent Indonesian soldiers. 'Better to laugh than to cry' was a phrase I commonly heard when people laughed, sometimes awkwardly at stories of the Indonesian occupation. This illustrated the multiple ways in which groups remember and reconcile violence and conflict.

Figure 10. Table showing population decline in Maubisse between 1970–1980. From *Chega!* Volume 11 Part 7.3

Table 10: Sub-district population change 1970–1980

District	Sub-district	1970	1980	% Change
DECREASE				
Ainaro	Maubisse	20,119	10,409	-48.3
	Turiscal	5,981	2,890	-51.7

In general, I took my interlocutors lead when the topic of suffering, conflict and violence arose. Violent conflict, whether that be that experienced under Indonesian occupation or other instances of violence that have affected life under independence, is something dynamic and processual, often inconclusive (Nordstrom and Robben 1995) therefore it is important not to have ready-made assumptions of what it is and how people deal with it. Alongside navigating taboo topics of sex and the ethical challenges of conversations about violence, conflict and suffering in everyday interactions, the formal ethics processes I was required to undergo for this research also raised questions about the assumptions associated with my research. As I discuss below, the formal ethics process also revealed the assumptions about research on reproduction that was embedded in health research showing how reproductive developmentalities were present.

2.2.2 Ethics, Assemblages and Reproductive Research

During my fieldwork I found it challenging to navigate the different ethical expectations of my research. Whilst reproduction involves a broad

range of actors it is often associated with health and biomedicine. I often found myself asking, whose ethical principles was I following? This question revealed a lot about not only the politics of reproduction in Timor-Leste but the politics of research itself, which was embedded in reproductive developmentality.

Reproductive health has historically been studied in relation to with women considered of reproductive age. The global health and development sector is an assemblage of practices and values. 'Assemblage is the product of multiple determinations that are not reducible to a single logic', the temporality of assemblage is emergent and shifting (Ong and Collier, 2008, p. 12). However, there are dominant forms of practices and values that lead to assumptions about the best way health should be practiced and researched.

In medicinal practice the Hippocratic Oath of 'first do no harm' and the version of it I observed being practice in Timor-Leste, serves to protect patients. This aligns strongly with anthropological values and with anthropologists' first responsibility being to their research interlocutors (ASA 2011). However medical ethics processes often designed based on the biomedical model of health make specific assumptions about participants and research design. Global health in particular places great emphasis on research that previous versions of health development (Adams, Burke and Whitmarsh, 2014). What is productive research in global health research environments, and what ethics and values are followed in research design

can end up inadvertently comprising and dismissing local perspectives (ibid.,)

Reproductive health has historically been studied in relation to with women considered of reproductive age. To mitigate reproducing assumptions and narratives about reproduction, I saw it as important to avoid doing research *only* on women of reproductive age. Initially, whilst I wanted to engage with clinics and health workers, I also wanted to base myself outside of formal health settings such as clinics and hospitals so as not to disrupt medical consultations and treatments. I had planned to engage with people in more communal settings such as youth clubs, community organisations, the market and other communal settings. Yet the assemblage of interlocutors that I consulted with had expectations that my target group should focus on women of reproductive age, and I should work closely with health facilities. This then raised questions when I sought formal ethical approval for my project in Timor-Leste .

After many conversations with researchers in Dili, it was clear that my topic of ‘reproduction’, like it or not, was viewed by the Timorese government health institute and international partners as a health-related topic, and thus I was required to submit a research proposal to the Ministry of Health. This required a presentation to the ethics committee at the National Institute of Health (*Instituto Nacional de Saúde*, INS) which provides, training and research as part of the Ministry of Health. The ethics approval process was designed with a biomedical perspective informed by

health and development process. The INS ethics committee therefore expected me to have a very narrow window of empirical focus. The committee quickly raised questions such as: What was my sample size going to be? Which village would I be restricted to? Who was my target group? Did I have a control group? I explained the rudiments of my ethnographic methodology, including participant observation, and unstructured and semi-structured interviews techniques. But unsurprisingly, I was challenged on the scientific rigour of my research and the utility of my study. Surely, one INS member enquired, I must have a control group to compare my sample to? Would I be providing any equipment, funding, or training? These questions in themselves reveal the nature and relationships of foreign research in Timor-Leste in an underfunded and under-resourced health system. Often health research conducted by international researchers came with offers of funding, new equipment, and the promise of outside knowledge to develop and improve the Timorese health system. However, as a post-graduate researcher of anthropology, I was not able to offer any material resources or name specific tangible outcomes for 'improvement' to health practices. However, despite the questions and criticisms I faced from the ethics committee, after justifying my reasons for an ethnographic approach I was granted approval¹¹.

¹¹ When I presented my findings to the committee at INS a year later, some of them were impressed with the results, mainly that I showed a good understanding of local 'culture' (*kultura*) and local understandings of health, and that I presented in Tetun. Others were

As this example shows, making the case for the value of ethnographic research to stakeholders who were expectant of quantitative results and provision of medical supplies, training, and technologies, was sometimes a challenge. Those within the ethics committee had a different idea of what was considered 'good' ethical research from the different perspectives of medical professional, anthropologists and local people. For example, the privacy and confidentiality of patients is at the core of biomedical practice, and I observed how the importance of this was emphasised health policies and health training in Timor-Leste. However, in Maubisse as I accompanied health teams, and talked to community members this value wasn't closely observed. In many clinics, particular on rural health outreach teams, privacy was almost impossible when consultations were conducted outside or in a large room in the house of the local leader or the local health volunteers. Community members had little choice but to consult with health workers who might be family members or friends. I constantly questioned- whose ethics am I following? Ethics and participant consent was a constantly evolving and negotiated process (Peluso and Alexiades, 2002) and different people held different views at different times. Ironically my picture and a copy of my research abstract I presented to the medical ethics committee appeared in a local newspaper without my knowledge or consent. Consent

more sceptical because in their eyes local knowledge of health was not new to them, and they were trying to overcome 'dangers' of traditional medicine to treat health issues through biomedical approaches, albeit with very limited funds and resources.

for printing or posting information and photographs online was not commonly sought. Navigating the different ethical assemblages in my fieldsite then required me to continually consider and calibrate my approach within multiple ethical expectations and contradictions. To do this I drew on the values and commitments outlined in a reproductive justice framework.

2.2.3 A Reproductive Justice Approach

My commitment to the reproductive justice approach is to consider the intersectional inequalities in reproduction in Timor-Leste and to interrogate how the categories of reproduction, population and environment are construed and related to one another by different actors, drawing on and recognising the knowledge shared with me through my interlocutors in Timor-Leste. I see this as an ethical commitment as well as an analytical one. Recently more and more researcher state that they had adopted what is described as a 'decolonization'. Such an approach rightly aims to recognise the unequal power relations in the way research is conducted; that is by researchers from institutions in the global north on non-white populations in the global south. However, in the case of Timor-Leste, this dynamic also includes not only researchers from countries recognised as the 'global north' but a host of experts from the global aid and development sector and countries with bilateral relationships with Timor-Leste. I recognise the inequality in the research I was doing as a white

European woman who was conducting research and taking it back to the UK. I am also considerate of the fact that terms like ‘decolonising’ and ‘social justice’ have also been misused and co-opted in work that is not true to the original values of these activist terms (also see Sasser 2019). My first and foremost concern are my interlocutors and for because of this I find a reproductive justice approach more appropriate as it already incorporates the values and aims of decolonial approaches and places reproduction at the centre of its concerns.

When I explained my research to interlocutors, I was aware that I was unable to give them a full understanding of what the research would turn into, what it might achieve??, and who would read it. Partly because the ideas I had of these were not certainties to me myself. People had many different expectations of what my research would achieve, but most interlocutors appreciated and interpreted the goal of my research to be an the exchange of knowledge and sharing of experience. The majority of people I worked with wanted Timor to be ‘known about’ abroad. Many wanted me to tell people in the UK about Timor-Leste, so they would know about it. In return, most asked for information about the UK in case a relative might work or live there one day. In recognition of the importance of reciprocity, I aimed to always be generous with my time and skills for local projects and research students. I gave presentations about my research where possible and always in the local language, Tetun. This I was able to learn due to 6 month language learning grant which helped me building on

my language abilities gained from prior trips to Timor-Leste as a research assistant and post-graduate student. These skills also enabled me to develop materials and summaries in Tetun for local audiences, for broadcast on radio programmes or distribution as printed information booklets. When I was able to I volunteered to give English lessons and many interlocutors appreciated cultural and political comparisons of European countries to their own as part of what they called 'exchanging experience'. I was aware that many development and research projects aimed and often promised to bring about a specific outcome or 'change', however if they didn't deliver, and many that I saw didn't, hopes were dashed and distrust brewed. With this very much in mind I tried as much as possible to make sure my interactions were transparent and undertaken as part of reciprocal exchanges and with the goal of shared experience and learning, always discussing possibilities and offering support where I could.

2.3 Resisting Numbers

As I noted in the ethics process, the key challenge that I faced was that in Timor-Leste's post-conflict landscape research on reproduction involved a biomedical approach that assumed methods of quantification. In-state and nation-building, state agents and international development professionals mapped the population in numeric terms; census data, demographic health surveys (DHS), knowledge and aptitude surveys (KAP), well-being surveys, and other methods that produced statistics based on

population samples. These methods are part of state governance through which life is made visible and 'legible' (Scott 1998). Even qualitative data is often transformed into something quantitative by the time data researchers the end report. Whilst quantitative knowledge can be useful, it cannot always tell the whole story, or stand in for stories and experiences. More so numbers and metrics can conceal and produce facts through their very production and circulation (Adams, 2016).

Take for example the 2019 UNDP Human Development report which measured eight dimensions of 'well-being' across the country's 13 municipalities. The survey attributed percentage points based on scores from a youth survey on indicators like education, health and environment which were rated between 0-8 (UNDP 2018). The survey reported that 74% of young people across Timor were declared to be satisfied with their wellbeing (ibid., : 34-35), a fact many youth advocates contested. The survey reported that Ainaro, the municipality in which Maubisse is based, had the most deprived youth with only 40% of young people achieving satisfactory wellbeing (UNDP 2018:3). Apparently 97.7% of youth in Liquicia were satisfied with their well-being. These figures caused some outcry at the launch of the report as youth advocates challenged the data, and the indicators, and questioned why the statistics were presented as representative of the national population when the sample sizes were too small to be representative.

In a further abstraction, the data from this survey was used to justify interventions into employment, education and family planning, in order to realise the demographic dividend, ((UNDP, 2018). The framework and demographic theory that tied the survey to the social and health interventions lead some youth activists I late interviewed to question why, internationals kept coming in with their 'expert' knowledge and presuming to know what Timor-Leste needed without really listening.

Health and development goals were measured by specific metrics influenced by a global agenda. Metrics, quantitative practices that produce knowledge on a global scale measure health at national and regional levels, such as maternal mortality rates or vaccine uptake (Adams, 2016). Whilst accomplishing some things, these metrics produce specific expectations of health and development that have been shaped by the economy, sovereignty and politics of knowledge, and reproduce colonial approaches to medicine (ibid.). However, they are often held as 'apolitical or politically neutral forms of evidence' (ibid., p.8). What the local response to the UN Human Development report and survey also shows is the way international development depoliticised issues such as employment, education and sexual and reproductive health which were fraught with their own local tensions that went unmentioned.

Numbers in the sense of quantification and metrics, are at the heart of what I term reproductive developmentality. Development work often requires producing reports on 'target groups' with findings that can be

measured via management tools for ‘monitoring and evaluation’ purposes. Ferguson’s seminal work on development apparatus in Lesotho shows how development discourse both expands state power whilst simultaneously de-politicising social problems (Ferguson, 1994). Ferguson’s conceptualization of development as an ‘anti-politics machine’ (ibid.) has been picked up by scholars who furthered critiques of the aid and development industry. However, as Li (2007b) argues, this critique does not necessarily mean that the industry operates with bad intentions. Rather if we talk about development work at face value, we must accept that many people within it have good intentions. It is the process of ‘rendering technical’ social issues, that is, providing technical solutions to social inequalities, which distances development work from the lived realities of people it tries to help. It is the promise of progress, *the will to improve*, that leads to processes that seek to measure life and gauge improvement often by calculative means (ibid.). Both Ferguson and Li draw on Foucault’s concepts of apparatus and governmentality, their concepts concerning how knowledge is made by state (Foucault, 2003) aim not so much to critique development but dissect it and its shortcomings as an agenda for positive social change. In exploring reproduction in Timor-Leste using the frameworks of reproductive developmentality and distributed reproduction I explore how knowledge about reproduction is made, and the challenges and negotiations around it amongst different actors. In the pursuit of prosperity and wellbeing, what sort of reproduction is enabled, and by who?

When it came to my interlocutors in Maubisse, those in the health sector, NGOs and government administration were at ease with such forms of quantitative research and expected me to conduct a survey. Interlocutors were used to structured interviews and answering survey questions and were less comfortable answering open-ended questions. I must also stress that when I refer to development or state workers, I include both Timorese and non-Timorese. Perhaps because of familiarity with such quantitative approaches, it was often assumed my own research would be similar. When people asked about my research they asked for numerical data and comparisons: how many children did people have on average? Where were my enumerators? Were families bigger and poorer in the mountain areas? I was also offered advice along similar lines: if I wanted to know about births or deaths, families, children, and health. I needed the census data. Local people often directed me to the village or municipality administrative offices. I spent a few days pouring through handwritten records of births and deaths in Maubisse's village office wondering what on earth it could tell me beyond birth and date rates in any given month, presuming most had been registered. Most of my participants often told me to seek out quantitative data and find the 'correct' numbers. In some instances, there were also signs of research fatigue and sometimes outright complaints. Hadn't someone else already done this? Wouldn't it be easier to find that data in Dili?

The topic of the study itself pushed me into spaces that were *expected* of research on reproduction – spaces of biomedicine, women’s health classes on birthing, breastfeeding and infant health. And from both state operators, health professionals and locals, there was an expectation that any data would be quantifiable, with measurable outcomes that would lead to solid recommendations for the state or local population. I found myself questioning if I *could* learn anything *ethnographically*, about reproducing life after conflict, that was *useful* in the sea of data that swelled around pursuits of progress and development. In this context did it matter what reproduction was if all people cared about was numbers? In the first year of my fieldwork, questions about numbers weighed on me in moments of uncertainty. However at other times I forced myself to dig in to these concerns. Once in Same, I got talking to a lady who had worked as a census data collector, I asked her what the census was for. ‘It will be made into a book’, she answered shortly. Different perspectives about what quantification did and how it was useful kept me motivated to push for more ethnographic answers.

In her analysis of the use of quantitative metrics in global health Vincanne Adams writes ‘numbers are not intrinsically capable of proving anything’ (2016:9) They can be made to tell a story depending on who produces them, but they don’t tell the *whole* story. I began to question what would it *do* to tell the stories and narratives of reproduction? Who would use it, and who would care? Gradually I came to realise that this showed

something in and of itself, something that eventually became a key to my research. Familiarity with quantification in research about reproduction and population, but also in the post-conflict context in general. It showed not only the landscape of quantification in a state propelled by ideas and promises of development, but how people related to numbers, where they mattered and where they didn't, at local and national levels. As much as I had tried to orientate my research on reproduction *away* from a demographic focus, there was a story in this struggle, in my struggle with ethnography, about the importance of numbers itself. I piloted a survey but found myself not knowing how more demographic data really helped, there was already so much of it around and many other places collecting it, and I paid attention to how quantitative data was displayed in public buildings on large boards which would be filled with the data of state employees, from phone numbers to salaries to level of expertise. Or in hospitals and clinic where the number of patients treated for each illness were pasted on to the outside walls for all to see.

However, despite paying attention to these practices and displays of quantification, I looked beyond clinic registers, census data and health surveys and found a way of broadening the categories of my research, beyond those things associated with reproduction and population: that of sex, or birth, maternal and infant health metrics. Being part of the clinical teams to begin with, getting to know doctors and nurses, ambulance drivers and medics. Illuminated the everyday practice of healthcare and crucially

showed me how lived experiences differed from policy and programme evaluation reports. Sometimes these people were the ones that explained things at cultural ceremonies, funerals, they were people who sought me out to help write community proposals, and the people I visited to drink coffee with on a cold day. In Maubisse, with its referral hospital, the clinic and the hospital are central, and the hospital is by far the biggest employer in the area. Being in amongst all this for a period of time helped familiarise myself with the reproductive health environment.

My push to be outside of the clinic was partly to distance myself from the (bio)medicalisation of reproduction (Boydell and Dow, 2021). This relates to the way that medical specialisms, knowledge and interventions have been created to treat a universalised body (ibid., p. 9). In her research on race and maternal health in the USA, Dana-Ain Davis also chose to focus on experiences rather than data to work against the medicalization of pregnancy (2019:10). In hindsight understanding, a biomedical approach to reproduction in Maubisse, and the places where it came into friction with other possibilities of the term was extremely productive, as was moving in and out of the medical sphere. I followed the work of several clinics and health outreach teams. But a large part of this involved chatting and cooking with health workers in their downtimes. It also extended to watching Indonesian soap operas and telling stories with their families around mealtime fires. Another large portion of my time in Maubisse was spent hanging out with young people who were looking for work, either students

or farmers or farming students from the local agricultural school. Through drinking coffee in kiosks and attending all sorts of local events I found there were narratives of reproduction, population and environment that didn't emerge from numbers, but did show how numbers mattered, and how topics often bound by number, such as population, can be researched ethnographically. A 'regular' day of ethnographic fieldwork in Maubisse at this time involved cooking banana fritters in a family kitchen first thing in the morning, going out with a health team to do some community outreach, returning to eat lunch and take a siesta, followed by a community meeting in the afternoon, and/or a church or funeral ceremony in the evening. Weekends consisted of customary events, wedding celebrations, coffee picking and motorbike trips with friends to nearby beauty spots. I carried my notebook, recorder, phone and camera diligently, and like everyone else during quiet moments or even quiet days I was on social media along with everyone else catching up with local news and community events. Facebook, which was provided free of charge by many mobile networks, was many peoples main source of communication and accessing news and other media in Tetun or Indonesian.

Despite the challenge to resist counting, I continually found myself questioning, *how can we consider narratives about reproduction, population decline/growth, and all these demographic figures, from the perspective of those being counted?* By taking an ethnographic approach to the topics of reproduction and population, this thesis explores what narratives

proliferate around making collective life, and how they relate to different understandings of reproduction and the environment.

As I outlined in the introduction the population debate or ‘problem’ has resurfaced amongst scholars of reproduction. The debate about how to ‘manage’ or not manage global population growth and impact divides people across disciplines, backgrounds, and political lines. It’s a grave and ‘thorny’ debate with a history linked to population control, eugenics and genocide (Clarke, 2018, p. 10). Environmentalists might argue that population can’t be ignored in the earthly debates, but reproductive rights activists might argue that talking about population only helps old Malthusian ideals to resurface in which marginalised peoples are blamed for causing social and environmental problems due to their ‘over’ reproduction. Others argue that Malthusian ideas have never really gone anywhere, they are here, all along (Sasser, 2018). Those who have seen environmental campaigns swell and ebb again might tell you that the population has always followed these trends too, and prenatal or antenatal policies are always at odds with each other under the surface of everything we do. After all, what policy is not linked to population? (Haraway, 2016). Is reproductive rights pronatalist in itself? Is the promotion that reproduction is a natural part of life cycles something that should be questioned? Do cultural and religious arguments for or against ‘more people’ only come from an evolutionary survival technique. And do populations need pushes and nudges just short of violence coercion to keep quality of life in check? Does

quality and quantity have to be in a binary opposition? The more you dig into population ethics the easier it becomes to shy away from debates, thinking them unsolvable or unproductive. From an ethical perspective surely, we should just be working to make all life better. And live by values that do no harm. Unfortunately, population is a topic that researchers in the world of reproduction can't escape any more than climate scientists, governments, local councils, or a village doctors survey. 'How many' will always be a question asked. But ultimately, in the end, investigating reproduction and population ethnographically ultimately meant resisting numbers by following and embracing the stories people told.

At their core, recent debates between feminist scholars on the population 'problem' (Chapter 1) both support and problematise counting. In a forum on the book *Making Kin*, Strathern observes that size is at the core of this enterprise. Despite disagreeing on how we should refer to populations and use population data, both Murphy and Haraway call for better ways of counting, numbering and demography (Strathern et al 2020). Both call for ways of counting that are ethical, non-violent, non-colonial, and non-harmful, to pursue reproductive justice. To date, there are few examples of how to do this. To find a way of doing this I found myself adopting the methodological approaches of assemblage ethnography (Wahlberg, 2022) and reflecting on the merits of patchwork ethnography (Günel, Varma and Watanabe, 2020). The goal was to assemble and patch together a novel approach to reproduction that examines how local people

view reproduction from a cultural perspective; how other actors and stakeholders, such as global and local health professionals, engage with similar topics; and how these diverse perspectives and viewpoints interact.

2.4 Assemblage, Patchwork and Positionality in Ethnography

Following the stories in the case of finding a fieldsite led me to Maubisse, but ethnographic fieldwork has evolved exponentially from single sited “village” ethnography. As I have described, in the domestic setting in which I lived and engaged within Maubisse, as well as interactions with one of the clinical sites I worked at, my research was embedded in a multitude of flows between houses, clinics, hospitals, government offices, NGO’S and groups. My research looks at how reproduction is problematised and approached in certain ways after conflict in Timor-Leste. This study takes an in-depth view of Maubisse but it also traces the different ‘flows’ of national and global information (Wahlberg, 2018) that help us to understand reproduction in Maubisse and in Timor-Leste through national and international development programs . I aimed to explore reproduction in its multiple meanings by different actors.

In his ethnography tracing the routinization of sperm banks in China, Wahlberg (2018) uses what he calls a site specific, in-depth ethnographic study where although located at a specific site he participated in the national and global flows and exchanges of knowledge, people, equipment,

and regulations related to the practice of sperm banking. This was not an ethnography of 'lived experience' in the sense of individual and community experience, nor was it a laboratory ethnography looking at how specific forms of knowledge or practice. Rather Walberg defines it as an 'assemblage ethnography' as that is an ethnography that generate insight into the ways in which certain problems, or better yet, problematizations take form. In many respects, my research was an assemblage of the people, knowledge, technologies, and regulation around practices of reproduction based in Maubisse. I use assemblage here to denote something that is fluid and in motion rather than a static. As Collier and Ong (2008, p. 12) denote, assemblage is the product of multiple determinations that are not reducible to a single logic. They are conglomerations of heterogenous material that have melded together (Marcus and Saka, 2006; Ong and Collier, 2008; Rabinow, 2009) Assemblage most accurately describes the multiple and diverse actors and materials that were forever moving and unpredictable in the reproductive landscape of Maubisse. From a family domestic setting to cultural and ancestral sites, local clinics, hospitals, and government offices and traced linkages to Dili, foreign aid packages and regional and global health and development agenda. Through this, I investigated how reproduction, and its relation to environment and population, was problematized in different ways.

Despite trying to use Dili as a respite from mountain life, Dili became a de facto secondary fieldsite, or a link in the assemblage of reproduction in

Maubisse, as friends and interlocutors moved back and forth between the capitals and the mountains. Dili was the place of many debates around reproductive health as well as the Ministry of Health and the National Institute of Health, who I presented to on several occasions as part of their ethics approval process.

Turning now to ‘patchwork ethnography’, in their recent manifesto, Günel, Varma, and Watanabe (2020) point out the impact Covid19 has had on the traditional long term in-person fieldwork.. They champion a more accessible method, a feminist and decolonial approach to ethnographic fieldwork. One that does not insist the ethnographer is always in the field in person for a lengthy amount of time. By ‘patchwork ethnography’ they mean ‘ethnographic processes and protocols designed around short-term field visits, using fragmentary yet rigorous data, and other innovations that resist the fixity, holism, and certainty demanded in the publication process.’

They recognise that conducting long term single-sited fieldwork has had its difficulties long before the pandemic and call on scholars to embrace and acknowledge this more accessible approach. It doesn’t mean less depth or rigour rather a way to do long term fieldwork that allows for more flexibility.

I support this adaptable and kinder approach. Even though my fieldwork was long-term and intensively immersive, it was still adhered to the patchwork approach in many ways. I worked alongside different groups of people at different points in my fieldwork, starting with medical staff, radio

reporters, and in and out of different ancestral house groups, rather than staying only within one household or organisation. I also spent a good amount of time in the capital Dili, renewing visas, report to certain ministries, attend relevant events and network.

All of this made fieldwork not only more possible but all the more interesting. It was often at times of distance, when themes and connections started to click into place. My peers viewed my fieldwork as ‘traditional’ in the sense that I went to a place far away from home for a lengthy amount of time, at times conflating Timor-Leste with the well-known anthropological fieldsite of Indonesia. But clearly, it was still ‘patchworked’ in ways to accommodate for personal needs. Patchwork ethnography offers a new way to acknowledge and accommodate how researchers’ lives in their full complexity shape knowledge production’ (Günel, Varma and Watanabe, 2020).

A large part of me wonders if all fieldwork wasn’t patchworked all along, but simply written out of anthropological accounts to make it sound more rigorous and compete with regimes of quantification that often claim the monopoly on science and truth. Although my research in some ways followed a traditional long term infield approach, I adopt and advocate for the values of patchwork ethnography – our lives are and never have been apart from the field. Assemblage ethnography, including an acknowledgement of the considerations patchwork ethnography brings

thus best describes my approach to investigating reproductive politics in Timor-Leste.

Assemblage ethnography takes heed of the concept of ‘reproductive governance’ (Morgan and Roberts, 2012) which I outlined in the introduction. It is this concept that I refine to develop ‘reproductive developmentality’, a key concept of this thesis which refers specifically to the discourses and practice that seek to govern reproduction for the sake of national development (see 1.1). I negotiated around my positionality as white female researcher in her late twenties, unmarried, without children and with the UK and Irish heritage and citizenship. Each element lent me a unique insight. This included uncomfortable expectations about race and gender. Why wasn’t I married, when would I have children, was I there to ‘educate’ people away from local culture, or ‘improve’ it? Wasn’t the UK a developed and rich country? Other elements lent me friendship and warmth as well as solidarity in unexpected places. I was a student sought out by other students; as a childless outsider similar to newly married-in or not yet married young women, and as an ally from another previously colonised and conflicted land.



Figure 11. Photo of the view over the market in the centre of Maubisse. Credit: Author 2018

2.5 Sex, Gender and Positionality

Researching reproduction comes with its own assumptions as I outlined above, however, being a woman researching reproduction in the field brings many more. In 2016 when I first arrived in Timor, I described my research in terms of reproductive health. However, this often meant I was automatically assumed to be a midwife, working in a maternity clinic. Or working with an international NGO. Even in 2017 when I was more careful to try and describe my research as family and reproduction, it was assumed I was working in a clinic and doing something related to health. In

2018 when I returned to Timor for my PhD fieldwork, I was determined to explore reproduction away from a clinical setting. But the clinic was something I was always pushed back to, as I struggled and found new ways in both English and Tetun to explore the language around reproduction.

The assumption that I was a health expert of sorts, shows the strong association of matters of reproduction with the health sector. So it was not only my method that people found problematic but also the topic I had chosen to pursue, which had strong ties with biomedical approaches to health and development. I often had to explain to informants that I was not a qualified doctor, nurse, midwife or even studying medicine, as they often presumed, I was. I often reminded people I was ‘not that kind of doctor’ (Nelson, 2019, p. 1), and I couldn’t advise people on the best family planning methods, or more frequently asked for – treatments for infertility. I felt the same discomfort that Erica Nelson (2019) describes in her account of working as an ethnographer on a ‘community embedded’ reproductive health program. These include difficulties of explaining anthropology, the embodied experience of being a young women with a womb and IUD, seeing informed consent, privacy and other aspects of ethical practice overridden by those who should be protecting it, trying to steer clear of giving advice or moral judgement and in doing so feeling removed from the rest of the team providing care and making interventions. Nelson was pregnant at the time of working as an ethnographer on an adolescent sexual and reproductive health intervention in Colombia Nelson asked, ‘how much of the conflict

over what an anthropologist could or should contribute...was tied up in my personal experience of pregnancy and birth and motherhood?’ (Nelson, 2019, 17), and what values did she represent?

For myself in Timor-Leste, as someone, a young female, of childbearing age, without children, studying reproduction, what did I represent? My own mixed feelings and experiences with reproductive health interventions certainly played a role. I grew up in Manchester and went to Catholic schools at a time when Manchester had the highest teenage pregnancy rate in the UK, at that time, the highest in the UK and Europe. Abstinence from sex was promoted by the school, and contraception by everyone else. I thus carried my own experience and assumptions about reproduction. It only felt right when researching to show how I was prepared to share bits of my personal and reproductive story. Paul Stoller talks about how his key interlocutor in *A Sorcerer's Tale* reminded him that he needed to tell the stories of people, whilst telling the story of himself (Stoller 2020). This ‘yours + theirs’ is something I keep in mind in this thesis.

These stories I write cannot certainly not be taken out of the context of my own experience. My identity as a cisgender woman without a child weighed on me: who was I to research reproduction? This self-questioning was particularly relevant as it reminded me of my own expectations around reproductive research: was I unqualified as someone who was not a parent or more specifically a mother?

I questioned my own assumptions, I tried to remember the time when I had learnt women didn't have to have children. I have my mother, a feminist maternal health professional, to thank for only ever asking me if I wanted children not when I wanted them. This sat opposite to my research participants' own determination that everyone should have and should want children. Thus my own assumptions and experiences of reproduction, or perceived lack of them as well expectations about reproductive behaviour weighed 'laboriously' on me during my fieldwork.

When Sophie Lewis (2020) talks about surrogacy and abolition of the family she acknowledges that her position as a non-heterosexual non-mother might be taken as context for the basis of her arguments. But she points out how 'that is true of anyone' (ibid., 2020:1). Learning about reproduction doesn't have to be the study of having children, it can be the study of not having them and everything else in between. We all have reproductive bodies, in different capacities.

My own experience of reproduction obviously informs my positionality, the perspective from which I approach the topic and which drives my passion for better and more equal reproductive care experiences. But, after all, none of us are exempt from the questions, dilemmas, bodily realities, and assumptions about reproduction and approach it bearing our own experiences. Similarly our sex, sexualities and gender cannot be removed from this experience of fieldwork. As a coupled but unmarried female I found myself in positions during and around fieldwork (as I do outside it)

that I know have not been experienced by my male colleagues or friends in the same way. In more than several encounters, some awkward, some physically harmful and dangerous, I found myself wishing I was not female or unmarried in order to make fieldwork easier. From stalking, to sexual harassment and violence I was very aware of my sex, gender and sexuality during fieldwork, no less because I was interested in the sexuality, and what that led to, in my fieldsite. 'Anthropology has always trafficked in the sexuality of the people we study' Kulick writes (1995:2). Assumptions about sexuality and gender are linked to racism and colonialism and multiple types of discriminations due to its threat to western civilizations' moral order.

This is clearing the way sexuality and gender are discussed in chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis on the issue of contraception, child abandonment and teenage pregnancy in Timor-Leste. Clearing the way, I draw attention a questions posed by Calloway: ' what are the implications of the anthropologist as a gendered knower?' and Kulick's extension 'what are the implications of the anthropologists of a sexually cognizant knower'? In all my conversations about reproduction simply asking about sex and reproduction as a unmarried female put me in a strange and awkward positions. Simply being in the field as an unmarried female alone, put me in sometimes dangerous positions that certainly taught me something about my research topic. A question that often comes up in conversations about my work is 'I would love to know what a Timorese woman would have found

in your fieldwork’ or ‘I would have loved to have known what a male researcher would have found in your fieldwork’. It would of course look very different, and it begs the question, would they have even chosen to do it? To mitigate the gendered assumptions about reproduction in my fieldsite I spoke to a variety of people, insiders, outsiders, male, female, married and unmarried. I didn’t want to limit reproduction to any one particular group of people - to explore it meant leaving its definition wide open. ‘Sex is impossible to delimit in a general way’ writes Kulick, and I attempt to take this approach with the themes of reproduction and population whilst acknowledging how my own experience and positionality affected it.

I acknowledge that my positionality provided many advantages, I was in many ways treated as a young unmarried woman and there were certain behaviours expected of me, such as the desire for marriage and children. This gave me an insight in to gendered roles and expectations, however at the same time, as an outsider I was able to challenge assumptions and ask questions without too much repercussion. People also asked questions of me which showed their assumptions and expectations of young unmarried women without children, both in Timor-Leste and as a white European. There were unique advantages to my marital status, gender and of course privilege as a white European.

My positionality also came with unique challenges, ones that a white male researcher, or a Timorese woman, would have faced differently. Investigating the topics around themes reproduction, population and

environment were challenging, not least because of the difficulty of defining a term like 'reproduction' (see 1.2). The associated topics of sex, conflict and death were often considered 'sensitive' or 'taboo' and friends and gatekeepers warned me about the difficulties of conversations around these topics as I started out fieldwork. However, as I mention above, this was not the case as I would come to find out. Secondly, as a white female researcher, local expectations about my behaviour and interests sometimes restricted the freedoms and independence I was used to.

However, despite these issues I have laid out in this section (2.5), ironically it was not my own positionality or local expectations of me or handling 'sensitive topics' that were the most challenging. In fact, these were often revealed much about how reproduction is understood. It was the wider expectations of what counted as research in the domain of reproductive health and population that most challenged my ethnographic research, and simultaneously my position as an anthropologist (2.3). As I have laid out in this chapter, an ethnographic approach to studying, population, and the environments actors assemble in, involves listening to narratives as well as *resisting* the expectation to count and configure life in quantitative terms.

In the first empirically chapters of this thesis, Section I, I show how reproductive developmentality manifests in Timor-Leste through approaches in which actors assume reproduction can be shaped to bring national prosperity. This includes looking at approaches to family planning,

contraception, abortion, child abandonment and sexuality. I show how these approaches are contradicted and challenged as they emerge. I start with an account of a family planning training session which took place in Maubisse.

Section I:
Reproductive Developmentality

3. The Illusion of Choice: Challenging inequalities in reproductive health in Maubisse¹

‘We won’t force you ...’ Rita said with a wide smile, ‘but you can use the methods to space your children and give them more love.’ Rita, a young midwife, was completing her family planning training in Lauhili, a rural area of Maubisse. As part of Rita’s practical assessment, she was conducting a consultation with a family planning client at the local clinic. Before the client and her husband entered the room, Rita’s supervisor reminded her that she hadn’t yet practiced an IUD insertion.

Rita started the consultation by explaining the benefits of family planning in terms of child spacing and ‘love’ (*domin*, T), then she named the different methods by pointing to the pictures on her triangular WHO chart.

‘The man wears this,’ she said pointing at the condom. ‘You count the days,’ she said pointing to the illustration of a calendar for the Billings method. She described the pill, ‘you must take it every day’, and the copper IUD ‘you put it in your womb’. Rita paused on the IUD, adding ‘this one is really good, it doesn’t have side effects, and when you remove it, you can get

¹ A version of this chapter is currently under review at *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* journal, American Anthropology Association. Sections of this Chapter were also published in the special collection ‘The Hospital Multiple’ (Chabrol and Kehr, 2020; Burke, 2021).

pregnant again'. Glossing over the other methods, Rita focused on the IUD and its benefits. 'It has no side effects and no "medicine", no hormones, and you will still have a period every month.'

The couple were asked which method they would like to choose. There was a small pause of breath in the room. Rita sat smiling as her supervisor looked on. The client's husband gestured towards the IUD. The client, cradling her 2-month-old child, looked at her husband, then nodded. Rita, smiling brightly, seized the moment.

'If you want you can take it out at any time...we are not *forcing* you, we are just giving you information.'

Despite using a language of 'choice', Rita exhibited bias toward the IUD. In her position as a medical professional, she had the responsibility to provide a person-centred service provision and give non-biased information, however she emphasised the IUD as the superior method of contraception. The couple were taken to the hospital in the clinic's Hilux for the procedure. Rita and I walked the short distance down the hill to join them. In this case, Rita's bias, and directive counselling encouraged by her supervisor, led to a case of non-consented provision of long-acting contraceptives that comprised her client's reproductive and 'contraceptive autonomy' (Senderowicz, 2019, p. 3).

At the hospital, Rita was congratulated by her colleagues on finding the only client to 'choose' the IUD. Implants were becoming more popular with women in the local area, but IUDs were relatively rare. In the

procedural room there were no curtains around the beds. I hastily helped a nurse adjust the broken window blinds. As far as I had observed no explanation of the procedure had been given to the client up to that point. The client was told to undress, lie down on the bed, and given a small white sheet to cover her pelvic area. She pointed her knees inwards for some privacy from the rest of the room which was busy with implant clients and female nurses. Rita's supervisor told the Rita's client to move down the bed and open her legs. The client kept slipping off the plastic sheets and I rushed over to hold a pillow in place, so she didn't fall off.

'Wide, like you're giving birth!' The facilitator told her loudly to open her legs and her ankles were grabbed and awkwardly stuck in the birthing stirrups. The insertion of the IUD was painful for the postpartum client. Rita and her supervisor sharply instructed her to relax. No reassurances were made as a sonde and speculum were inserted or when things got tense and the client was in pain. Rita needed help from the training facilitator to complete the procedure. Within seconds of the client sitting up, an emergency patient was rushed into the room bleeding heavily. The IUD client was quickly ushered outside.

I was left somewhat stunned by this client's journey. I had accompanied Rita and her colleague on the ten-day family planning training programme. During the training there had been a heavy focus on non-coercion and client 'choice'. Yet Rita had been instructed by her supervisor to find an IUD patient to practice on just before the client entered

the room. Then, not only had the client been gently persuaded to get the IUD, but she then had a painful and uncomfortable experience. Coercion had been denounced from the outset of the training, but the client had not chosen, nor been provided with her preferred method of contraception in an informed way.

Above Rita's story shows how 'choice', whilst presented as paramount throughout the training, was ultimately overridden to meet the training's objectives. But how did this come to be?

In this chapter I argue that in this biomedical landscape, the discourse of choice in family planning was an illusion. Despite the best of intentions, this discourse was fraught with contradictions that in fact aided the reproduction of the very thing it tried to prevent coercion and reproductive violence. I trace back how choice was presented, contradicted and challenged throughout the ten-day family planning training course. I find that despite critiquing the discursive notion of 'choice', training participants and facilitators went on to 'perform' it in their health practices.

This chapter examines the discourse of choice within Maubisse reproductive health landscape. This chapter argues that reproductive developmentality includes a discourse on choice as central to improving reproductive health. Informed decision making has been a key part of the language surrounding global family planning programs (WHO 2014,). The discourse around choice has been central to championing women's bodily autonomy in the reproductive rights movement (Ross, 2006; Ross and

Solinger, 2017) and at the centre of reproductive health and development programs (Whittaker, 2015; UNFPA, United Nations Population Fund, 2018; Bhan and Raj, 2021). This discourse of choice has also been central to several reproductive development programs in Timor-Leste (Wild *et al.*, 2010; Belton, Correia and Smith, 2011; Wallace, 2014). However, reproductive justice advocates have argued that the language of choice does not adequately describe the structural barriers which limit people's reproductive abilities (Ross and Solinger 2017).

To ethnographically ground my concept of reproductive developmentality which presents reproduction as something that can be shaped for not only individual health but also for and national prosperity. I describe how the discourse of 'choice' is embedded in this approach, yet at this approach creates a particular narrative of reproduction, which assumes that given access to contraceptives, people will choose to use them and have fewer children. To examine this contradiction, I critically explore through detailed ethnographic examples how reproductive developmentality reaches communities through global health initiatives, specifically, family planning. As this chapter and its ethnographic case studies show, there is a complex relationship and power dynamic at work between the dominant language of choice and forms of coercion in Maubisse's reproductive health landscape. Coercion can appear as a structural phenomenon rather than an interpersonal one, or someone acting with the intent to coerce (Senderowicz 2019). As shown in the case of Rita, despite the language of choice women's

autonomy over their contraceptive care can be severely comprised.

Senderowicz argues that coercive behaviours in family planning range from the subtle; bias counselling and persuasion to the overt; intimidation, and force (2019). She suggests that a binary idea of coercion and consent needs to be replaced with a broader understanding of how coercion exists as a spectrum of behaviours, so we can better understand how women's reproductive and contraceptive autonomy is impeded (ibid.).

Ultimately it shows how the concept of choice was, at best, diluted, and at worst, appeared to be little more than an illusion. I start by describing the biomedical environment that constitutes the Maubisse Referral Hospital where the majority of the training took place. I introduce some of the main actors and the framing of the training course (3.1) I then examine the critical perspective on 'choice' in medical anthropology and reproductive studies (3.2). Following this provide ethnographic examples from the training course in which the discourse of choice is challenged (3.3 – 3.7). I conclude with a discussion of the choice discourse in relation to reproductive developmentality in Timor-Leste.

3.1 Maubisse's Reproductive Health Landscape

The family planning course for medical professionals was run by multiple stakeholders as part of a programme to improve child and maternal health. Maubisse's several clinics and the large referral hospital

were key points of contact during my fieldwork. I visited them to make observations, regularly accompanied a number of community outreach teams and spent lots of leisure time with medics and their families. I got permission to attend the training taking place at the hospital as both a participant and a researcher from the National Health Institute and key stakeholders.

‘Good for me, good for us, even better for our family’ read a faded sign in the car park of the Maubisse Referral Hospital. ‘Make a plan for your family’, the large text on the sign advised, next to a picture of a smiling couple with two children. The logos of several international NGOs and Timor-Leste’s Ministry of Health could just about be made out underneath.



Figure 12. A large sign outside the hospital in Maubisse reading ‘GOOD FOR ME, GOOD FOR US, EVEN BETTER FOR OUR FAMILY: MAKE A PLAN FOR YOUR FAMILY’.. Credit: Author 2018

The sign was the largest one in the hospital compound, resting by the high wire fence which encircled the hospital. The main hospital building consisted of the emergency ward, inpatient unit with rows of beds, an outpatient's unit made up of several consultation rooms, the dispensary, a laundry and a kitchen. Behind these sat the windowless morgue. The atmosphere of the hospital was always calm and clean, patients could sometimes be seen taking restorative strolls in the gardens between each ward building. Filled with marigolds and roses, the gardens were much admired by staff and visitors alike. The prize piece was a beautiful pink bougainvillea, its thick blossom shrouding a grotto of Our Lady facing the main entrance. Here, people lit candles and prayed for the sick, touching their lips, then the feet of Our Lady as they came and went.

Near the compound gate, adjacent to the main building sat the administrative offices and a large general meeting room with a beautiful view of the mountains across the valley.

'Welcome Participants of Family Planning Training, Maubisse 13.03.2019', read a poster which hung from the wall outside the meeting room. The poster was decorated with red and yellow flowers cut out of coloured paper, mimicking the flowerbeds beneath. Perched on the steps to the meeting room, wearing a bright yellow skirt suit, was Dr Juliana. We got chatting as we waited for more people to arrive.

‘Family Planning in Cuba is different to Timor.’ Juliana explained, ‘In Cuba, condoms are promoted a lot, and free sex is just part of society. Cuba has a big population, so family planning is widely promoted, but in Timor this sort of thing is against ‘culture’ (‘*kultura*), and there is the Church of course...’ She flashed a cursory glance up the valley at the yellow church spire looming over the hospital and the rest of the town. Juliana had completed her medical training in Havana, where a full medical degree had been funded by the Cuban government². Reflecting on her experience, Juliana compared attitudes towards family planning in Cuba to Timor-Leste. For her, ‘culture’ and the Catholic church were the most obvious reasons why family planning and contraceptive use were not more widespread in Timor-Leste. In addition, she reasoned that Cuba’s large population, unlike Timor-Leste’s small one, required family planning to tackle pressure from population growth.

The billboard, and Juliana’s comments about family planning give a insight into the family planning landscape in Timor-Leste. Here international NGOs, the state, the Catholic Church, and local beliefs and practices coalesce around and intervene in reproduction, and the shape of the population of Timor-Leste as a whole. Individual and collective reproduction in this landscape is subject to multiple modes of reproductive

² This overseas training was part of the Cuba-Timor Doctor-training programme which helped to train 1000 Timorese doctors to replenish Timor-Leste’s human resources in health, which were left seriously depleted after the Indonesian occupation.

governance, the mechanisms through which different groups of actors use encouragement, incitement or coercion that produce, monitor, and control reproduction in ways that can be seen as both positive and negative (Morgan and Roberts 2012, p. 243). How do these modes intersect? What are the clashes and convergences of these multiple actors, and how do people navigate such governance practices? And importantly for the focus of this chapter, what choices do or do not exist?

My conversation with Juliana was one of many informal and formal conversations I had with medical practitioners at the hospitals and clinics in and around Maubisse. Particularly revealing were the conversations and interactions with and between medical practitioners who participated in the ten-day family planning training course. Throughout the training the participants themselves confronted this discourse, flagging issues of inequality, as factors limiting clients' medical choices. These included accessibility and availability; transport and infrastructure; human resources; patient rationality; moral judgement; the political power of the Church; and 'culture'. Fears and concerns about using contraceptives were also contextualised in the history of the abusive family planning program that existed during Indonesia's military occupation, which was implicated in accusations of genocide. Some of these limitations on choice can be described as modes of reproductive governance which produce, manage, and control reproductive behaviour. Furthermore, despite confronting the

discursive notion of 'choice', training participants and facilitators went on to 'perform' it in their health practices.

In global health, 'choice' remains central in reproductive rights discourse and advocacy, particularly within the programmes of health and development organisations. Development agencies promote reproductive 'choice' as powerful and empowering for both individuals and the state. UNFPA's State of the World Population 2018 report, *The Power of Choice* states that by providing women with choice to manage their reproduction, women can make choices which benefit themselves, their communities and the national development of their respective countries (2018, p. 5).

However, critics of the discourse of 'choice' in reproductive matters have described such discursive practices as 'a magic wand' (Mol, 2008, p. x) 'a fantasy' (Crist, 2020) and a tool that 'masks' and 'disguises' unequal reproductive environments (Ross and Solinger, 2017, p. 47). Following a reproductive justice framework, I argue that it is precisely the discursive construction of a benevolent image of choice which masks the inherent and very real inequalities people face in exercising choice and autonomy over their reproductive lives. The ethnography presented in this chapter illustrates how this illusion of benevolence is quickly shattered in a local political context where access to healthcare is unequal, and social context where reproduction isn't something only individual, static and biomedical. First however, it is important to situate discourse of the 'choice' in the

historical and political context of the for reproductive rights and justice movements.

3.2 A History of Choice: From Reproductive Rights to Reproductive Justice

As the main principle of women's reproductive freedom, 'Choice' is a politically compelling idea, but it is simultaneously insufficient and problematic (Petchesky, 1980, p. 668). It aligns with liberal democratic values and appeals to notions of equality, empowerment, and freedom, but whilst pursuing these liberal ideals, 'a woman's right to choose' evades the details of when, under what conditions, and for what purposes, choices can *actually* be made (ibid., p. 669).

The emergence of choice discourse has many tributaries. From abortion politics to consumer marketing of new reproductive technologies. In the aptly titled *Beggars and Choosers* (2001) Solinger examines how the language of choice came to dominate abortion politics in the US. She traces it back to the historic *Roe vs Wade* decision of the U.S Supreme Court (1973) which legalised abortion in all fifty states. Before *Roe vs Wade*, the language of 'rights' was central to the feminist activism on reproduction but during *Roe vs Wade*, Justice Blackmun referred repeatedly to abortion as a 'choice'. As a result, women became framed not as 'reproductive machines' but 'individuals capable of choice' (Solinger, 2001, p. 4).

Whilst North American abortion politics might have brought 'choice' to the forefront of some feminist struggles, they didn't encapsulate everyone's experience of reproductive inequality. Native American groups reproductive concerns relate to land rights, pollution, health, and survival, which are often missed out of north American reproductive rights issues represented by middle class and Christian centre debates about abortion and access to contraceptives. A discourse of 'choice' in the movement for reproductive rights' gives the impression of equal footing, but conceals the unequal economic, political and environmental context in which choices can, or cannot, be made (Ross and Solinger, 2017). Black and indigenous feminist activists did not only face issues related to access to abortion or contraceptives, but other inequalities in their respective environments.

The Reproductive Justice movement acknowledges that individual autonomy and choice in reproduction doesn't really exist, pointing out that 'choice' and ability to control the surrounding environment which affects reproduction are not within individuals' control. Reproductive rights thus serve as a building block for reproductive justice, but as an analytical framework reproductive justice moves away from a discourse of choice. Loretta Ross, a key proponent and activist of reproductive justice, describes reproductive justice as a framework that 'analyses how the ability of any woman to determine her own reproductive destiny is linked directly to the conditions of her community - and these conditions are not just a matter of individual choice of access' (Ross, 2006, p. 4). Reproductive justice thus

focuses on the inequalities of opportunity people have ‘in controlling our reproductive destiny’ (ibid., p. 2).

As an activist tool Reproductive Justice doesn’t help in all contexts. For example, South American reproductive justice activists prefer the language of rights to get things past courts, and who already include in their interpretation of reproductive rights many of the things reproductive justice stands for (Morgan, 2015). It is important then to be mindful of how concepts emerge in particular contexts and move into global movements, at the same time recognising that such concepts might be counter-productive in some contexts where another one achieves similar aims.

The displacement of individual choice then is not necessarily always helpful if the systems we have created are built around the rights of the individual. Furthermore, activist terms such as social justice or reproductive rights can be vague and thus, they are open to interpretation from those with aims different to the initial activist agendas they were intended for, or entirely co-opted (Sasser, 2018) For example, reproductive rights are appropriated by the pro-life movement to foreground the rights of the unborn child. Reproductive justice is used by populationists who want to reduce population for environmental or social reasons (ibid., p. 9).

Discourses can be diluted and mobilised by others who lay claim to notions of rights or justice within their own frameworks. This dilution of terms further undermines the work of the initial advocates that challenge the structures of inequality (Sasser, 2018, p. 10).

‘Choice’ can be used as a moral injunction that paints the idea of liberal freedom, whilst excluding wider structural restraints. As outline in Chapter 1, moral injunctions and ethic incitements can appear alongside legislative controls, economic inducements, direct coercion, and ethical incitements as modes of ‘reproductive governance’ (Morgan and Roberts, 2012) Identifying these modes of governance allows us to trace the changing political rationalities of reproduction and how structures of power influence reproductive outcomes how different actors (state, religious, international institutions, NGOs and social movements) use the tools at their disposal to ‘produce, monitor, and control reproductive behaviours and population practices’ (Morgan and Roberts 2012, p. 241).

As an analytical framework, reproductive governance helps us to question where the discourse of choice comes from, what it achieves as well as what it hides. When it is used as a tool of moral injunction, the neoliberal discourse of choice is co-opted and can itself be considered a form of reproductive governance. In the same way language of the feminist movements, such as ‘empowerment’ have been co-opted into neoliberal capitalist discourse (Sasser 2018), so choice can also be co-opted as something that is powerful in other ways. Thus the concept of choice has become part of neoliberal discourses which can be identified as reproductive governance. Through this process it has also become embedded in developmental approaches that see reproduction as something that can be reshaped to influence national development. Before turning to ethnographic

examples I briefly outline how ‘choice’ becomes a tool for development which is seen as a path to capitalist notions of prosperity, connecting this to discourses about reproductive health in Timor-Leste and my concept of reproductive developmentality.

3.2.1 Choice and Development

Another approach to choice emerged in the development of ‘reproductive health’. This approach to family planning was conceptualized in the 1980s by the Ford Foundation, International Women’s Health Coalition, the Population Council and WHO, as a replacement of population policies which were recognised as limited and potentially abusive (Lane, 1994). Reproductive Health presented a rights focused approach which placed women’s needs front and centre of family planning, with a commitment to non-coercive voluntary implementation, e.g., choice. During the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) feminist groups called for a move away from population policies, and the top-down implementation of family planning which had led to coercion and abuse in many cases.

Some feminist activists and observers remained sceptical about the move towards a ‘reproductive health’ approach, concerned that it was simply replacing old methods of population policies with a new language (Lane 1994). That scepticism was not unfounded. Recent studies of some

family planning campaigns show that population control is far from historical. Practices of population control, and advocacy for it, continue today under the guise of social and environmental justice (Sasser, 2017, 2018), and human rights and women's empowerment (Hendrixson *et al.*, 2019; Bhatia *et al.*, 2020). The use of the term 'voluntary' itself requires critical analysis as current family planning programs might reject population control but still target populations with marketing campaigns to increase contraceptive use (Hendrixson, 2019; Nandagiri, 2021).

Individual choice however has become a celebrated ideal in health care, as well as other aspects of life such as education, diet, finance, etc. (Mol, 2008). As a liberal value, choice plays a role in differentiating 'the West', where individual choices are part of idealised modern democracy, from 'the Others', who are viewed as restricted by community and tradition (*ibid.*, p. 3). Choice rhetoric thus acts as a promise of modernity and progress.

In 2018 The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) issued their annual report 'State of the World Population' titled '*The Power of Choice: Reproductive Rights and Demographic Transition*'. The report opens with the sentence, 'Choice can change the world' and goes on to describe how 'choice' improves the wellbeing of women, girls, transforming families, societies, and global development. Thus in the development agenda, choice has gone beyond being about individual rights and becomes a tool that can be used to shape economic development at a national level, 'reproductive

rights are integral to realizing all the sustainable development goals. THAT IS THE POWER OF CHOICE' [their emphasis] (UNFPA, United Nations Population Fund, 2018, p. 1). Shaping particular choices then becomes a matter of expertise. Knowledge is given to *inform a choice*, repackaged as a rational choice of the individual. As Senderowicz notes, there are those who promote family planning to advance reproductive autonomy and those who see family planning as a means to achieve other development goals, economic and/or environmental (Senderowicz, 2019). However target driven practices of development programs concern many scholars who fear that such aims can lead to coercive practices (ibid, Bhatia et al. 2020; Hendrixson 2019).

For true reproductive freedom we must ask how useful this rhetoric is, what has it become and who it is for? In many places having or not having children is now seen as a choice, yet when 'the conditions for human flourishing are distributed so unevenly', choice is little more than a 'fantasy' (Crist, 2020). A discourse of choice thus creates the possibility of equality, whilst simultaneously masking it. In the context of NRTs, Gaard argues that feminists have lost control of the word choice, which has been repurposed and sold back to them as consumers of fertility treatments (Gaard, 2010).

Tracing the modes of reproductive governance and holding firm to the original intentions of the reproductive justice movement can challenge power structures that shape reproductive inequalities and injustices. They

can point out where promises of reproductive freedom, such as ‘choice’, are appropriated or go unfulfilled.

The remainder of this chapter analyses how the illusion of choice ‘falls down’ as it is challenged and contradicted by medical professionals themselves. It doesn’t seek to undermine the work of individuals and groups pursuing better reproductive healthcare but to make visible a discourse that promotes and perpetuates the illusion of reproductive freedom in a very unequal environment and amongst clashing agendas.

As some health professionals told me, Timor-Leste’s family planning policy (2004), ‘looks great on paper’, but it is far from what happens in practice. Looking at what happens in practice, and what shapes practice, participating in training sessions is a useful methodological approach as they are a way of learning *with* and amongst interlocutors. During the training in Maubisse I took part as a participant, studying the material, sitting class tests and roleplaying activities (I passed the assessments and was offered a certificate). Importantly the training afforded a rare moment where actors from all levels of the family planning landscape came together, and where ‘choice’ was *taught*, questioned and discussed, not simply accepted. Choice’s contradictions and contentions played out in practice during the family planning training where choice was central but in the case of Rita’s client, as an illusion. How do the tensions between the obscuring and liberalising tendencies of this discourse manifest in practice? To answer this, I trace the discourse of choice as it is challenged and contradicted by

medical professionals themselves. In line with a reproductive justice framework, I argue that it is precisely the benevolent construction of choice which masks the inherent inequalities people face in exercising choice and autonomy over their reproductive lives.

To be clear, my approach doesn't seek to undermine the work of individuals and groups pursuing better reproductive healthcare, but rather to make visible a discourse that promotes and perpetuates the illusion of reproductive freedom in a very unequal environment. Below I demonstrate how 'choice' was central to the Family Planning training session I participated in in Maubisse. I chronologically lay out how the discourse was presented, contested by health professionals themselves. As will be seen in the next section this discourse of choice breaks down throughout the family planning training, and in Maubisse's local reproductive health landscape. Through the voices of participants at the family planning training course in Maubisse I show not that choice is undesirable, but rather, that the true power of 'choice' lies in the ability of this discourse to create an illusion of reproductive freedom, whilst distracting from inequalities that stretch far beyond the individual. I demonstrate how this discourse, despite its liberating potential, reproduces forms of reproductive violence and distrust. I further argue that such contradictions ultimately deepen local scepticism about the humanitarian aims of reproductive healthcare, perpetuating inequalities and unwittingly reproducing forms of coercion. In this regard, I explore whether the discourse of choice in family planning is simply

misguided, an unintentional consequence in pursuit of equality, or a necessary illusion to veil inequalities and reproduce structures of governance which see reproduction as a tool for development.

3.3 ‘You can’t force us’: Family Planning and the politics of choice in Maubisse

There was a buzz of activity in the large training room. Chairs covered the floor in front of a large wooden oval desk. The room was stark white and undecorated apart from a large banner announcing the opening ceremony of the family planning training session. It was complete with the logos of ministry of health and the appropriate NGO sponsors. The family planning training involved local, national and international, NGOs, the state and religious institutions, community doctors and nurses and medical and policy specialists, and clients. The different experiences, approaches, and agendas of those involved lays bare the network of actors the language of reproductive choice reverberates through.

All together 13 participants, including myself, attended the ten-day training course. We were a mixture of qualified doctors, midwives and nurses and myself, a researcher. The course was made up of several modules including pre and post multiple-choice course tests. It also had a practical element of family planning counselling and administering short and long-lasting contraceptive methods. The participants received 10\$ per day for

taking part, accommodation if they needed it, and had food provided for them.

The training was instigated and financed by The Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) through their ‘Save Mother and Child’ program (*Salva Inan no Oan*)³, targeting the maternal and infant mortality rates in Ainaro municipality which were the highest in the country (GDS, 2017). The family planning training itself was something that KOICA decided to provide in the final months of their programme to use up the remaining budget. Most of the training participants knew each other but they were also a little apprehensive, particularly younger nurses who hadn’t taken part in formal training sessions before. Some arrived late, having only been called to participate at the last minute to make up numbers.

WHO and UNFPA provided teaching materials and training manuals which were in line with WHO standards and translated into Tetun. Delivering the material, the facilitators were reproductive health specialists and educators invited by the National Institute of Health (P, *Instituto Nacional da Saùde*, INS). Several facilitators were INS family planning specialists although two were guests from non-profit health organisations including Marie Stopes International (MSI) and Jon Snow Inc. (JSI). There was also a facilitator from the *Timor-Lorosa’e Centre for Natural Family*

³ Alongside increasing rural outreach visits, disseminating safe delivery information to communities, and providing hospital equipment the project funded several extensive training programs including emergency neonatal and obstetric care (ENOC).

Planning and Billings Ovulation Method, a Catholic organisation housed in the Dili Diocese compound, behind the Dili Metropolitan Cathedral of The Immaculate Conception.

In her opening speech of the training the Maubisse Hospital Director welcomed a room of local officials, and representatives of all the partners involved, as well as the participants themselves. The director apologised for the humble resources and hospital conditions, although it was easily the newest, largest, and most technologically equipped building in Maubisse. This was the first-time family planning training had been run at the hospital the director commented as she thanked the partners for providing. Holding up some patient information leaflets, she also thanked the partners for the helpful materials.

‘you can give [these] to your clients so people may choose what they want,’ she finished, addressing the health professionals present.

Speaking next, the director of the National Health Institute emphasised the responsibility of the participants to make the most of the opportunity.

‘Sometimes there is new science, and you must learn and apply it...Family planning is not new...but you might learn new methods, like Billings for example, and increase your knowledge even more. You mustn't force anyone to use family planning.’ Echoing the Hospital Director, he also highlighted the importance of choice and freedom. ‘They will choose for themselves; you are not forcing them. You are not sitting this training to

then make people use it. It is the right people, of the family, to choose what they want to use, and you are to share the information.' He emphasized that they must 'not force' anyone to use family planning, using the Indonesian acronym for family planning 'KB' (*Keluarga Berencan, I*).

In Maubisse, ideas about choice and voluntary participation in family planning and reproductive health were often framed, by local experts, health workers and community members alike, as 'not being obliged', 'forced' or 'coerced' to use it.

I was reminded of a conversation I had had several months earlier in a dark house with a dirt floor and a single shuttered window I sat with ten women gathered together for a community health meeting. At the end of the meeting two women brought out sweet tea and boiled cassava and I invited them to participate in an informal chat.

'Do people here use family planning? I had inquired.

'Yes,' One woman responded assuredly 'but you can't make us...'⁴. At the time it hadn't been her conviction that surprised me. What struck me as telling was that this was her *first* comment to me on the subject of family planning. The same language of 'not being forced' was being repeated.

Both this conversation and the introduction to the family planning training highlights the necessity of choice to participate or not participate in family planning in Timor-Leste. The Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste

⁴ *sin, maibe ita la bele obriga ami, (T)*

(1975-1999) resulted in the deaths of approximately one quarter of the national population. Amid the human rights abuses committed by the Indonesian military were reports of forced sterilisation, coerced contraceptive use, and the covert injection of women with contraceptive drugs (Sissons 1995). Popular allegations suggested the Indonesian family planning programme (I, *Program Keluarga Berencana: KB*) was implemented with genocidal intent. There is little public conversation about this aspect of the Indonesian occupation, although it was raised by several of my interlocutors, including one key interlocutor in this chapter. Undoubtedly this recent history informs some of the attitudes towards contraceptives and family planning today.

Accusations made against the coercive use of family planning during the Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste go largely unaddressed in general family planning discourse, yet move in the background, present in the language against forcing or making someone use it. Day to day family planning is referred to as 'KB' by the community and medical staff alike, although in formal situations '*planumentu familiar*' is encouraged as the 'correct' Tetun term, adapted from Portuguese. Intentional or not, this language choice distances current family planning services from an abusive history. During the opening speeches of the family planning training in Maubisse, the importance of coercion and choice was pronounced, and the spectre of the Indonesian 'KB' program would come up at various points over the next ten days of training.

3.3.1 Definitions of Family Planning

Gathered around a huge conference table 13 of us sat for the first module for the training course. It began with a lecture on the benefits of Family Planning, presented by Mana Helena, a jolly and confident facilitator. She read out phrases for us to complete.

‘Family planning is not only beneficial to the mother, but to the family, community, the children, and the new-born....?’

‘... babies.’ The participants replied in chorus. Despite the facilitators stated intention of ‘participatory’ learning, participants fulfilled the role of students and were asked to read out the module objectives.

‘Describe how Family Planning improves a woman’s, child’s, families, and communities’ lives.’ recited Dr. Ana, a local doctor in her early thirties. We looked at some slides then addressed the definition of family planning and called out suggestions out to Mana Helena who wrote them down on a flip chart.

‘It allows you to space your children!’

‘It’s a method you use to space your children and plan when to have a child’

‘Some methods are permanent, for people who don’t want another child!’

‘It helps prevent HIV,’

‘It prevents maternal and infant malnutrition!’ The other answers followed on.

Mana Helena read out the WHO definition from our training manuals.

‘Family planning (FP) allows individuals and couples to anticipate and attain their desired number of children and the spacing and timing of their births. It is achieved through use of contraceptive methods and the treatment of involuntary infertility.’

Often, local people used KB to refer to contraceptives, as the director of INS did in his introductory speech. ‘*Planeamentu familiar*’(t), if people had heard of the word, was more widely associated with planning ahead for children, getting a job and setting up a secure household. Ironically, this reflects the descriptions of family planning as defined in WHO reports and in the official 2004 national Family Planning Policy. Yet in professional health settings often ‘Family Planning’ was most often shorthand for contraceptive use. This language picks up on the contradictions in much family planning discourse, where choice is presented as the purpose (Hendrixson 2019), but fertility treatments or contraceptives are the methods, implying some form of engagement with the services provided. More often than not the measurable targets of family planning programs aimed at the global south tend to be contraceptive uptake (Hendrixson 2018). This is evident in the employment of marketing managers with goals to reach higher percentages of contraceptive use in Timor-Leste (Marie Stopes International pers comms 2018).

Mana Helena continued her explanation:

‘According to this definition you can’t force a mother to make a design or choose a particular method. They can choose what they want. You can also involve the men in the decision making about family planning, it doesn’t only have to be the woman who decides. Sometimes, because their understanding is not clear, the in-laws, the mother and father try to stop the couple from using family planning. So, you could say the decisions don’t only come from yourself, but from you, your husband, your family, but this shouldn’t make you become a victim. If you just have babies one after the other and you don’t know the problems, you might face or how to resolve them.’

Here Mana Helena immediately highlighted a key contradiction in the choice of discourse. Reproduction is never something that is individual, rather it is entangled in a web of social relationships and negotiations. ‘Reproduction never involves single individuals, and rarely involves only two people’ (Dudgeon and Inhorn 2004:1381), and reproductive ‘choices’ can be experienced as obligations, to family members, communities or the state’ (Gammeltoft and Wahlberg 2014: 211).

Once Mana Helena had delivered the introduction, an INS facilitator, Mana Edi ran through Timor-Leste’s National Family Policy (2004). The policy references the 1994 Cairo Population and Development conference as an important turn for reproductive health and rights approach to family planning. It also cites Timor-Leste’s national constitution which states each

person has a right to health and medical care and a responsibility to use them. Mana Edi went on to say that actually after three children, each pregnancy a woman has become more and more riskier. But that family planning reinforces people's *right* to determine the number and spacing of their children, however you should *not* force or deny anyone use of it. Nurse Lydia, a mature nurse, was always fierce and open with her opinion. Sat a little away from the table she raised her forehead and muttered, 'But the Church, parents-in-law, societal pressure...'. Mana Edi asked her to speak up and Nurse Lydia said tiredly, 'sometimes people are scared, sometimes they say they will use it but then they don't'. Nurse Lydia challenged the discourse by listing some of the limitations on people's ability to choose for themselves. 'We tell them about contraception after they have given birth, they all say "fine, fine" but then they never come back to get it'.

'You can't threaten them', Mana Edi replied, 'but you should tell them about the risks, of becoming pregnant again too soon after giving birth or having a miscarriage, but you can't threaten them by asking them "do you want to die?!" Negative and threatening language was easily frowned upon, and seen as coercive, but encouraging language, like that displayed in the training slides, which professed the benefits of family planning, was not seen as unduly persuasive.

Narratives of 'empowering' women proliferate in global family planning programmes. The 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development published a program of action in which it renounced the use of coercion in

family planning 13 times (UNFPA 1994; Senderowicz 2019) The idea of offering free and informed choice to women about if they want to use contraceptives, which methods they want to use and helping them realise their desired fertility is presented in a liberalizing discourse of 'choice'. The discourse implies and sometimes explicitly states that women should be free of coercion when it comes to making choices about family planning. However structural and interpersonal coercion affect experiences. The binary of coercion and consent is unhelpful as true free and informed choice sits on a spectrum which is affected by everyday limitations to choice as well as covert manipulations (Senderowicz 2019).

The importance of freedom from coercion is perhaps not surprising given the history of conflict in Timor-Leste's occupation and coercive environment, not to mention the accusations against the Indonesian Family Planning program. The positioning of choice in relation to coercion alludes to choice that is not 'free', rather than a choice of using any contraceptive method as and when they please it creates a dichotomy of choice, in which the subject chooses between using contraception and not using it. Even the positioning of choice in relation to coercion means that choices, unlike coercion, are unconstrained. This creates a dichotomous situation in which the client either chooses to use family planning methods or doesn't use them. The nuance of choice, embedded in the social and political landscape, then becomes lost as 'choice' becomes a desired option, but at the same time implies using contraception as it is presented as the 'best' choice.

3.4 Who Decides?: choice and decision making

The second day of training started in a cloud of rain. We left a pile of colourful umbrellas by the door and sat wrapped up in our coats revising the previous day's material. The importance of choice was once again reaffirmed.

'It's *always* the client that chooses, based on the information you give them', Mana Edi said firmly, then quizzing us 'after the clients have received all the information about family planning, the advantages and disadvantages, in the end, the decision is in whose hands?'

'*Cliente nia liman*, the client's hands', the participants chorused back.

'Remember that they have a right, it's their right to be well informed about family planning, this is in the national constitution, every single person has the right to healthcare. Every person...has the right to choose freely and make an informed decision....' Mana Edi reeled off, her non-nonsense approach showed on her face as she recapped the material concernedly. But her opinion about balancing rights with reality expressed with some sarcasm and dry humour. '... you can help them choose and decide...you can't just say "this one is good! This one is really good, just use this" ... but you don't need to waste lots of time and talk forever, if the client has an idea of what they want just focus on that'.

That morning we split up into twos and threes to role-play counselling sessions. We each received small triangular flip charts, designed

by WHO, to use as communication aids. Inside an introduction page displayed illustrations of the range of family planning methods available: condoms, implant, copper Intrauterine Device (IUD), progesterone and combined hormonal pill, Depo-Provera injection (Depo shot), tubectomy or vasectomy, Billings method and breastfeeding. Another page listed which methods were the most effective on a coloured scale. The IUD and Depo shot were at the top end and Billings Method and breastfeeding at the bottom end. Next followed a page dedicated to explaining each method.

The charts were designed in such a way that the page facing the clients showed simple bullet points and illustrations, on the back, the page which faced the medical practitioner, there were longer bullet points, with more information for the practitioner to tell the client. A page at the back also showed which methods were appropriate methods for postpartum mothers. Accompanying the flipchart was a shiny laminate booklet of flowcharts which the practitioners were supposed to follow when determining if a method was right for the patient. The flowcharts directed the health practitioner and patient through a series of yes or no questions to an answer communicating that the method was 'safe to use' or the client should use another method.

Understanding the Implant Checklist

Read questions 1–6 in the checklist and match them with the conditions and categories on the MEC quick reference chart.

This set of questions identifies women who should not use implants

This set of questions identifies women who are not pregnant

The checklist also gives instructions about initiating implants

Slide #21

Figure 13. Slide showing a contraceptive eligibility flow chart. Taken from the English Language version of the Family Planning Training Curriculum Manual provided by WHO, UNPFA, MdS, INS for the training in Maubisse.

During our counselling role-plays, those playing themselves as healthcare professionals juggled the flipcharts and fumbled through flowchart booklets on their laps whilst at the same time trying to appear attentive to the client. During a break for coffee and cassava, Dr. Marni, a young male doctor complained to Dr. Juliana and I about these communication aids. They were confusing and bothersome for both doctors and potential clients, it would put them both off, he grumbled. When we resumed our role plays, a male nurse raised a similar concern: how would you get through all this counselling and information with each client? A

community outreach visit might require seeing a whole village or two, over 100 people, in one day. Mana Edi clarified that if a patient came in with a specific preference for a method we could jump right to that page in the flipchart, rather than going through *all* the information. As the patient had already made the decision, this saved time. Once the patient had chosen their method she explained, you could simply follow their choice, assess if they were eligible for it using the yes/no questions in the flowchart. If they were not able to receive it for various health reasons, we had to provide alternative options.

As we muddled through and tried to familiarise ourselves with these slightly complicated materials, the facilitators reinforced the message:

'Se mak deside?...Who decides?'

'Cliente ... the client!', we responded emphatically from our role-playing teams, jumpers and white medical jackets pulled around us in the cold mountain air. As Mana Edi pointed out, 'The client choses based on the information you give them'. This actually places a lot of responsibility in the hands of the healthcare professionals, who felt the pressure to explain things clearly, and follow the flow charts to decipher which methods were appropriate for whom, which methods were most effective and ultimately if the client could actually have the method they wanted. The decision then wasn't only in the clients' hands, but also dependent on the expertise of the medical professionals, the guidance of the communication aids and the eligibility decided by the flow charts. Whilst 'Informed Choice' was

described as providing the information to the client and improving their knowledge and helping them to make a decision, it was now being coming clear that the patient's choice had to be balanced with what the patient was eligible for, and the medical ability of the professional to explain the options accurately enough.

Another factor was also critical to clients using a method of their 'choice'. Nurse Lydia, matter-of-factly, described an event that had taken place four months earlier to the training group:

One patient came and said to me "Senyora, I want the injection", but we had no Depo in stock. So I said to the patient to come and sit down and I explained to her that we had no Depo and all of our medicine was out of stock. Our IUDs had expired, the implants had also expired, and all the pills had also expired, so everything was out of stock. We talked to her and asked her if her and her husband had a good relationship [to use the Billings method]...but she was really worried about getting pregnant again, and her youngest child was 10 months old. So we went to ask the CCT clinic if they had any medicine, because sometimes we help each other out...

When Nurse Lydia finished her story, the facilitators were silent for a moment, and Mana Helena and Mana Edi exchanged knowing looks between them. They were all too familiar with the problem of medicine being out of stock. In one interview, a senior midwife at the hospital showed me months of blank records from 2018 where contraceptives had been

totally unavailable. Lack of availability was the most basic level at which a patient's choice was undermined.

‘Yes, you should coordinate with other clinics, like CCT so that the patient can get Depo’ Mana Helena advised.

‘Sometimes CCT is also out of stock’, murmured someone next to me, and I recalled a few months earlier how a woman had approached the CCT medical team asking if CCT had depo in stock yet. The woman was turned away and told to wait for the Marie Stopes family planning team to bring some the following week. The provision of contraceptives was a problem family planning stakeholders in Timor-Leste met to discuss later that year. Whilst in large part choice is made defunct by inequalities of access, choice also interacts with other discourses. Mol describes how a *logic of choice* and the *logic of care* interact. She refers to patient choice as a rhetorical ‘magic wand’ (Mol, 2008, p. x), which magically closes a discussion about the best form of care for a patient. It perpetuates an ideal where all care is turned into private decisions, foregoing explanations, questions, and discussions (ibid.).

Societal expectations and personal relationships added another layer of complication to something that was supposedly the ‘choice’ of the client. During some of the role plays the participants spoke very quietly and respectfully as if they were in real consultations, whispering to each other as clients and doctors often did when communicating with one another in consultation areas that lacked privacy. Few of the consultations I had

witnessed on outreach visits were truly private, as there simply wasn't a private room for doctors to consult people in. Even when there was, people often walked in and out of consultation rooms in clinics. I was told people who were unmarried *might* ask, but if they did it would only be in a place, they were sure not to be recognised by anyone. Women might also lie about their husbands giving them permission. But it was a risk that the information might get back to him if someone was to see her at the clinic. Privacy in a small-town hospital and clinics was a big issue. Many patients complained to medics about not wanting people to talk, or to know about their health. The fact that if you went to the CCT clinic on a Thursday, when MSI visited, everyone knew you were using contraceptives.

During the roleplays, participants acting as clients used 'positive' examples from their practices in the role play 'I've come to get the pill because I have too many children already' or 'my husband says we should use contraception' or 'I want to space my next child because money is thin'. In these they avoided any complicated scenarios. When I took the role of the client in these roleplays many participants asked me, out of habit, if I was married, if I answered that I was not, many of them stumbled, looked nervously around about how to proceed.

In 2017 a proposed revision of the family planning policy was drafted and presented in public consultation. Controversy surrounded the language the draft policy used which described family planning users as 'married couples' (*kaben nain sira*). Just before the public consultation concerned

government partners had leaked the draft policy to activists so they could challenge its restrictive elements. Local activists pointed out that describing family planning users as 'married' was a way of restricting younger and unmarried peoples' access to contraceptives, and was likely influenced by the Church, which taught abstinence outside of marriage. An interview I later conducted with a senior Ministry of Health official who specialised in Family Planning described this as an issue of misinterpretation. '*Kaben nain sira*' was used to describe couples because it was beneficial that both the people in the (heterosexual) relationship were involved so they could understand how it worked. In addition, they had to set boundaries to make sure that they weren't given to children. So 'couple' was a better term than 'adult' or 'child'. However, they thought that school or university age students who weren't shouldn't be needing it anyway because they should be concentrating on their studies.

During the training, Mana Edi loudly reminded us that 'ANYONE' could receive family planning, married or unmarried. Despite this many of the participants, and facilitators told me they would not give contraceptives to unmarried people, particularly if they were young and still studying at school or university.

'I'd tell them to focus on their studies first and tell them to go back to school' Nurse Lydia admitted to me 'they are still young, they would be too scared to come and ask for it anyway, someone might see them'. A young

female medic once asked me ‘why would they need it?’ when we talked about giving contraceptives to young people.

Many participants were also in favour of husbands' permission to use family planning being sought by married people. This was also encouraged in the training: if a woman came alone to the family planning consultation, she should be asked if her husband was waiting for her outside, and if he would come in to join the conversation. This was not so much so that the husband allowed his wife to use it, but to make sure he was in agreement, and improve the husband's understanding. In the long term this could reduce the risk of domestic violence and any conflict and violence from the woman's family towards the medical staff, which reportedly happened on several occasions.

In the end, despite reinforcing that the client had the right to decide what she wanted to use, the training material and the challenges posed by the participants acknowledged that the decision to use family planning services wasn't solely the choice of the individual but that it confronted by issues of eligibility, availability and entangled in a web of wider relationships. As Mana Helena has pointed out early on clients can choose what they want ‘but the decision cannot only come from yourself but those around you’. Reproductive rights which categorize rights in terms of the *individual* never quite work out, precisely because there is never only ever one person involved in reproduction (Dudgeon and Inhorn 2014).

Reproductive rights discourse, particularly the language around choice and decision making has become embedded in a reproductive developmental approach that serves the state and masks the structural inequalities that individuals face. In this discourse the state and its international partner appear to be liberalising and empowering, whilst pushing responsibility towards individuals to make the right choices, despite having little agency to act autonomously in this domain.

The idea that the 'client' decides has slowly been problematised throughout this section of the training, as issues of accessibility, availability and social stigma clearly affected clients' experiences, alongside the limitations of policies and religious teachings. Rather than such things being deemed as simply 'poor quality' care, Senderowicz argues that coercion has been under-theorised and unaddressed in family planning (2019). Coercion is often taken to mean as an act of physical force from one individual on another, or coercing someone to do something by holding power over them. However, a theory of coercion in family planning must take into account how coercion comes through individual actions and structural forces, even if there is no malintent (ibid., :3). Furthermore, it can occur in both 'upward' and downward ways, either in attempts to compel women adopt a particular method or limit fertility (upwards) or through preventing women from accessing family planning or a certain method (downwards). Both affect contraceptive autonomy.

Using Senderowicz's theory of contraceptive coercion allows us to map the multiple and intersecting constraints to achieving reproductive justice - that is the way in which contraceptive autonomy is limited, even by people working 'in good faith' (ibid.). Unnithan (2020) has also traced how rights based approaches and coercion can coexist in Family Planning policies. In India she argues that a discourse of rights in maternal and reproductive health works to empower the state more than enhancing reproductive autonomy of family planning users (Unnithan 2022; 118).

Despite the language that women and indeed facilitators used in Timor-Leste reinforced the importance of 'not being forced' and the right of the patient to choose, it was plain that individual and structural limitations to free and informed choice proliferated and governed reproductive choices as much as individuals found ways or struggled to 'work around' limitations.

3.5 Between choice and care: 'Do we give them medicine to kill themselves?'

Whilst in large part choice is made defunct by inequalities, choice also interacts with other discourses. Mol describes how a *logic of choice* and the *logic of care* interact. She refers to patient choice as a 'rhetorical magic wand', which magically closes a discussion about the best form of care for a patient. It perpetuates an ideal where all care is turned into private

decisions, foregoing explanations, questions and discussions (Mol 2008). On the second day of the training, as I describe below, questions arose about the tension between individual choice and the balance with the health workers duty of care. This contradiction challenged health workers understanding on their roles and the patients autonomy.

At the end of the second day of the training Mana Helena took over the session.

‘Your job is to *help* the client, the decision should be made based on their...’. She broke off waiting for us to complete the sentence.

‘... Needs,’ we hummed back at her. When Dr. Ana, Dr. Juliana and I trudged back home at the end of the day we passed Nurse Crista, on the way to her night shift. Crista laughed at our sullen faces and moaned to her that we were exhausted from the training, particularly the role-plays and call-response questioning.

‘They keep saying it's up to the patient to decide, always,’ Ana complained. ‘But what if they pick something that isn’t right for them?’

Crista made a face and seemed concerned. ‘If a patient asks for medicine that is going to kill them...*do we give them medicine to kill themselves?*’ she asked rhetorically.

Ana and Crista got straight at the contradiction of the first few days' training. It was constantly reinforced that the decision, the choice, was in the client’s hands. Yet it was up to the doctor to tell them what was best for them. In a scenario where a client asked for a method of contraception that

conflicted with an existing medical condition and the doctor was supposed to provide an alternative, guided by the flipchart. This was similar if the husband wasn't in agreement, or if the medical professional didn't want to give contraceptives to a young unmarried person, or if contraceptive methods were unavailable.

The next morning after the recall test Nurse Ruben, a young male doctor who was not local to Maubisse questioned the tension between choice and care:

'What if we tell a patient that a method isn't good for them, but they still want it anyway? Should we give it to them?' The message of choice, and 'the client decides' was reinforced so heavily that Nurse Ruben questioned if it came to override his expertise as a medical practitioner. Mana Edi replied firmly, 'No, you never give them something that is harmful.'

Choice serves as a tool which implies freedom to choose, but in fact has an intimate relationship with care. Mol (2008) shows how the logic of *choice* interacts with a logic of *care*. At times choice is able to magically end discussions when a patient has made a decision, and where the doctor is respecting patient choice (Mol 2008). At other times a patient might choose a treatment, but when the patient is seen as incapable of making a good choice, the choice lies then with the doctor. Sometimes pursuits to ensure either patient choice and good care go hand in hand, other times they clash. Choice or 'good' care also becomes generalised and interpreted in different ways. It is not only in reproductive issues that a 'rhetorical magic wand' of

patient choice looms, but where patients are deemed 'clients' the language of choice carries more weight, as they are transformed into consumers of a product rather than patients in need of curing.

Ana and Crista's conversation, along with the question asked by the young male doctor, highlight this contentious relationship between care and choice. If family planning users are treated as 'clients' who can choose for themselves, at what point does this override medical expertise? According to facilitators, choice comes first, but choice is also determined by the information given to clients. Choice, then for multiple reasons was thus then not as simple as it was made out to be, and potentially put medical professionals at risk.

Mana Maria, a facilitator who taught us about the side effects of the IUD, was a strong advocate for its use. The side effects, she said, were mostly non-existent. As a personal user of the IUD herself and with over ten year experience fitting them Mana Maria talked down any dangers in the training and also later to potential clients in the clinic.

'What if a woman *wants* an IUD, but she's in the window between 48 hours and 4 weeks postpartum?'" Dr. Ana asked. This window of time was regarded as unsafe to insert an IUD because the woman's reproductive organs are healing.

'Well you have to tell her "no"', Mana Maria said, 'If you tell her it's unsafe, and she asks you to insert it and you do, that's *unsafe*, she could take

you to court! The client can decide what they want, *based* on the information you give them to meet their needs, providing it's safe.'

During another part of the training we had been over the need to do a pregnancy test for any female client who wanted the Depo injection.

'Some people come and ask for the injection and they are pregnant, but they hide it,' said Nurse Lydia, 'and if you give them a pot for a pee sample, they fill it with water or ask someone else to pee in it.

'But you can't do a pee test for every client' Mana Edie said.

'Otherwise you're going to run out of the pregnancy testing sticks fast', she laughed.

'We do run out, but if we ask them if they are pregnant and they lie, then we give them some contraceptives, we could get in trouble.' complained Nurse Lydia. 'And if we only ask those we think are lying, it's discrimination! So better to get them all to do the pee test'.

Not only did the heavy assertion of patient choice confuse the duty of care medical professionals had but the issue of pregnant women requesting contraception also showed how the medical staff felt the need to protect themselves from being criminalised for causing harm. Most crucially, however, Nurse Lydia's complaint drew attention to a severe constraint on patients' reproductive freedom in Timor-Leste, the criminalisation of

abortion⁵. ‘The DMPA doesn’t cause abortion anyway, so the child wouldn’t be harmed.’ Mana Maria tried to reassure the participants. Striving for choice is surely something good to aim for when it comes to contraceptives, but the limitations on using contraceptive drugs, as well as their availability, show how ‘choice’ gives a false perception or what is happening in many cases. What might be perceived as freedom is actually constrained by a number of factors outside of the person's control, from access and availability to physical eligibility, social relations and legal constraints. These sorts of inequalities, caused by varying modes of reproductive governance, are what reproductive justice might refer to as ‘environmental’ or ‘community’ conditions. Furthermore, when it comes to making choices, much of the training material and seniors assumed a rational actor making a ‘prior-informed choice’ but left little scope about what to do in spaces of uncertainty or when actors were not acting towards a particular imagined future. In demography and global health that reproduction intentions are coherent, stable and articulable (Johnson-Hanks 2005:363). But in an environment without access to abortion, a woman might seek a depo injection in the hope it will induce an abortion. Tellingly, this was the only time abortion came up during the ten-day training session. The next section of the training shows in part why this was. Conservative Catholic views, as

⁵: Only to be done in the case of danger to the mother’s life, with the authorisation of three doctors (one trained in OB GYN, and a fourth doctor to carry out the procedure. See Belton et al 2009, also Chapter 4.

Dr Juliana alluded to when we first arrived at the training, were present in the form of the facilitator who led the training on the Billings Method. As we will see, despite taking a conservative and misogynistic approach, the facilitator's honesty and transparency, as well as his pronatalist views, gained the trust of the health workers.

3.6 The Body Method: Contradictions and Trust

Subverting the global health discourse of choice, one module of the training brought forward a different narrative. Maun Flávio, who led the module on 'natural methods', came from the 'Centre for Natural Family Planning and Billings Ovulation Method', a small health centre attached to the Diocese of Dili, in the grounds of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception.

'The woman is like the land, she receives. If you plant, cassava you get cassava. Plant cabbage, you get cabbage. If you plant bananas and get tomatoes, uh oh, something's wrong!'

Maun Flávio's joke hinted at infidelity. This foregrounded his approach to teaching about 'natural' methods. It differed from the rights and rationality approach, as it started from an assumption that people acted on impulse, and the body, and God, were in control. Maun Flávio stood in front of several large colourful illustrations he had hung up himself that morning. Two large hand-drawn diagrams of the female and male

reproductive systems and a third showing the stages of the menstrual cycle. The lining of the womb was coloured fluorescent red.

‘I won’t listen to anyone explain Billings to me, if they don’t use it themselves’, Maun Flávio spoke with an authoritative tone, his severity softened by regular and often crass jokes.

Unlike the other facilitators, Maun Flavio deviated from the WHO training slides and used his own. Billings was not a ‘traditional’ method but a scientific ‘body’ method. It was scientific, but also *natural*. He dispelled the ideas of Billings being less modern or scientific, and promoted it as ‘natural’ and ‘god-given’, highlighting the absence of ‘chemicals’ and artificial materials and plastics which are often negatively associated with health.

‘Some people say family planning and contraceptives (KB) are the same, it’s not, this is wrong. Family planning is about deciding how many children, how much money do I have, is the house good or not good, are we eating well...KB are just methods’.

Making a distinction between family planning and contraception, Maun Flavio used ‘KB’ to refer to biomedical contraceptives. It wasn’t that Maun Flavio’s approach was ‘anti-science’. On the contrary, he pointed out his sources repeatedly and shared matter-of-fact calculations:

‘A woman has approximately 400,000 eggs’, Maun Flavio scribbled the numbers on the flip chart which stood at the top of the table. ‘Only 400-500 of these eggs will be released from the ovaries during a woman’s

lifetime', he recited, formulating a sum on the flip chart. 'So a woman releases 400-500 eggs in her lifetime. The eggs that aren't released by the woman are given back to God, they are not ours.'

He took us through a fast calculation, and we tried to keep up with the arithmetic.

'What age do women start menstruating?' He called out to the participants.

'16, 17, 18 years old', people muttered amongst themselves. One midwife looked at Dr. Ana across the table and mouthed '11', pointing to herself subtly. Dr. Ana raised her eyebrows.

'It can be between 13-29' Maun Flavio carried on as if he hadn't heard any of the answers. 'How old are you?' He picked on Rita, a young midwife '31,' Rita answered timidly.

'So, you had your first period at what age?' he asked.

'16 years old.' She reddened.

'So if you release an average of 12 eggs a year over the last 16 years, so far you have released 192 eggs. How many eggs became children?' Rita replied she had one child. 'Ok, so a woman releases approximately 400 eggs in her lifetime, minus approximately 192 so far. So that means you've got 208 eggs left.'

The female participants in the room, including myself, exchanged looks. We were a similar age to Rita and the way Maun Flavio put it we were approximately halfway through our own eggs. With these calculations Maun

Flavio was reinforcing a natural authority of the body, pointing out that time was *not* a choice nature was giving us.

Mana Lydia, a midwife with 20 years experience chipped in. 'I knew a girl once, she was 29 when she got her first period, but she didn't release any eggs. It's always the woman's fault', she muttered. Maun Flavio picked up on the topic

'Today we are going to learn about the woman's body. Why? Because it's always the women that face the problems' he said, somehow sympathetic. But at the same time, his approach was openly sexist and his reasoning biologically determined:

'A man is ready 24 hours a day, but a women is only available three days, four days, eight days maybe ... it depends on the woman's body ... we [men] could go and have sex, make a baby, and then leave, and go somewhere else and make another baby, in one day we could make a baby three times'. The participants gasped and laughed in shock. 'We men are the *huun* (beginning or origin), you women make the children, but we men came from the beginning, you came from the rib, this is reality ... if you don't believe me go and ask the priest.' The body's abilities in Maun Flavio's explanations were pre-ordained, by god or nature.

Maun Flavio didn't play into the discourse of choice. Rather, he told people what was better for them, and what he used, based on experience. This didn't mean people always agreed with him. However, in a similar way to other presentations, making 'the right choice' or the best choice, seemed

to be based *on knowledge and awareness* of something that was predetermined by nature, made by God. Thus reproduction was malleable but ultimately out of individual control and in the hands of God and nature.

The difficulties we were having with the gridded charts, and the challenges of identifying different types of mucus in the photos had required maximum concentration, alongside learning the symbols, flowers, lines and dot that made up the Billings charts. Maun Flavio told us we found it difficult because we didn't understand properly yet. If we did, it would be easy.

Dr. Marni and Dr. Juliana both turned to me: 'It must be easy for you, what do you think?' I explained that I was learning Billings for the first time too, I had never learnt it at school or university. 'Your country developed' Dr. Juliana said, a little puzzled. 'Why does a country like ours have to start at the bottom?'

Whilst Maun Flavio didn't talk about 'choice, he sold Billings as the *better* method because it gave people more *options*. It could help you *have* children as well as stop having them. And supposedly even a way to plan for a boy or girl. In addition Maun Flavio also placed Billings in a broader political context that other facilitators remained silent about:

'Do you know how much money the ministry of health spend on contraceptives? Not a cent. It comes from the agencies, UNFPA, how much do they give? \$200,000USD. The agencies see Timor Wand think, oh Timor needs help, let's help. But not enough money comes....to

destroy us...the Ministry of Health doesn't give any money. So when UNFPA stops buying depo, the medicine, where is it going to come from? Are you going to go to the sea and collect water? So earlier Mana Lydia talked about not have well managed stock, but one alternative is natural methods. Dr. Billings wasn't creating anything new, no medicine or contraceptives, he was working with what God had given us. He had discovered something people already have and used it. Medicine, and clever people, look to make things better than God made them, but God made everything good already. Clever people, experts also love to show off, like they are God, but if our heads are empty, we will all die, then who will be left alive?'

The happy snapshot of reproductive choice is created through omission, of what choice *fails* to address (Gaard 2010). The narrative of choice thus obscures, disguises, alludes - assuming equality across different reproductive environments. On the way home that day I walked with one of the younger midwives, Mana Lili, Dr. Natalia and Dr. Juliana. They discussed the condescension they felt from some of the facilitators, and Maun Flavio's rude jokes.

'His position is very clear though, he supports Billings all the way,' Dr. Natalia said with a laugh. His honesty seemed to have earned him a bit of respect and at least he didn't treat them like children.

'I think Billings is the best,' Mana Lili said, 'it fits in best with *kultura* and religion ... *and* it helps you get pregnant.'

After class three female participants stayed behind to ask his advice on getting pregnant. One was a good friend of mine. We often sat in her bed watching Indonesian soap operas, sharing snacks and keeping warm under her blanket on cold rainy afternoons. Three months after the family training she told me ‘Mana Lau! I’m pregnant, I used Billings for just three months and it worked!’. She was overjoyed.

Crass and judgmental as he was, Maun Flavio never asserted that ‘choice’ was in people’s hands, in a scenario where the supply of biomedical contraceptives was reliant on international aid and development funding and supplies often ran low. In a way, by acknowledging that reproductive choice was not only down to individuals, playing into local ideals, pro-natal desires, obligations, and religion as well as stating his opinion openly, Maun Flavio gained trust. Whilst global health family planning discourses are shaped by an anti-natal bias (Bhatia et al 2020), Maun Flavio’s pro-natal stance supported an option most people were open to – getting pregnant. Furthermore, by not participating in a discourse of choice, one that the participants had easily picked apart, Maun Flavio’s views, sexist and dogmatic as they often were, were seen as genuine. The way Maun Flavio sold Billings, ironically, seemed to expand options and open up choice, such as getting pregnant or choosing gender (families favoured an equal number of boys and girls). Ironically Maun Flavio’s paternalistic sexism shows how important ‘choice’ is when gender inequalities prevail. It also highlights

how the discourse around choice in family planning can be contradictory, leading to confusion and lack of trust.

3.7 People are Softer than Dolls: Reproductive Choice in Practice

The final day of the training, after many days of theory and roleplays, were dedicated to practicing Implant and IUD insertions. Several medical dolls arrived in hard cases on the training room table. We were led through a few demonstrations by the facilitators. Jadelle implant insertions were in fact for the implant insertion, a minor surgery, green surgical cloths and an array of instruments prepared. My course mates made faces and some shuddered as Mana Helena demonstrated inserting the ‘trocar’ pipe under the medical doll’s rubber ‘skin’, then pushed the two small plastic rods of the Jadelle implant. I asked Dr. Natalia, who had been stood next to me whilst we watched

‘Would you like an implant?’

‘No way’ she said, wincing with a sharp intake of breath through gritted teeth. ‘I don’t want one. Have you had one?’

‘No, never,’ I replied, realising suddenly that I had always been worried about the side effects of prolonged bleeding, headaches, dizziness and nausea, without giving much thought to the insertion or removal procedure itself. We went back to our desks to take notes.

Later, in twos and threes, we practiced inserting implants in pairs on the dolls. Pressure ran high as doctors knew this was the last chance to practice before trying insertions on real patients. I watched Dr. Natalia and Nurse Rita, a young midwife, struggle with the implant insertions, both determined and concerned.

'It's so tough', Dr. Natalia said, struggling to get the trocar under the rubber skin. Nurse Rita murmured and sighed in agreement as she pulled an implant she had inserted on another doll, from underneath the rubber, The implant got stuck under the rubber and stretched as Nurse Rita pulled it with the forcep scissors. It pinged back like an elastic band against the doll's arm.

'Don't worry', Mana Eva said, coming over to help wrestle the implant free from the arm, '... people are softer than dolls'.

When it came to the insertion of IUDs, Mana Angelina performed an insertion for the group slowly and methodically, stressing the importance of talking to the patient, and telling them what was happening. Nurse Anita was asked to role play and addressed the doll as if a patient, with a concerned tone. Once the insertion was complete, she checked in with the patient to make sure all was ok.

'*Deskulpa*, sorry,' Nurse Anita apologised, as, guarding the doll's privacy, she gently closed the curtain over a little viewing window into the doll's uterus, then placed her hand reassuringly on its abdomen.

We split into three groups to look for clients at one of the two clinics and hospital outpatients. Some of the participants had tried to warn the facilitators that the Maubisse Health Centre, the government clinic in Maubisse, was run in partnership with the Church and didn't give out contraceptives, only natural family planning methods. The trainers brushed it off. As a government Health Centre, the clinic ought to give counselling on a full range of methods - but it was decided that administration of any contraceptives would be done at the hospital, as in any case, implant and IUD insertions should only be done in larger facilities. At the clinic the facilitators and participants jumped into action, asking women lining up outside if they would like to talk about family planning, and ushering them to consultation rooms.

Dr. Marni attended to a client with her two-month-old baby in her arms. Her baby had been delivered by caesarean section. She was shown the chart of family planning methods. Dr. Marni used a very positive encouraging tone as he asked how many children she wanted.

'Five' she replied, 'three boys and two girls'. She then mentioned quietly she wanted the implant.

'These are the methods available', Dr. Marni doctor said moving through each one and listing a few of the side effects. 'This method you can use,' he said quickly explaining the Billings method. 'But this one is better' he said pointing to the implant. 'Which one would you like to use?' She chose the implant. The client said she wanted a 2 year gap.

‘It’s actually better to space by three years,’ the supervising facilitator interrupted.

‘But can I get it taken out after two?’ asked the client.

The question was ignored as the facilitator in the room asked if her husband was waiting outside. He was invited in, and the implant and its benefits explained, the side effects mentioned briefly and the procedure described as ‘goes under the skin’. It was then explained that it lasted for 5 years, but after more questions from the client, it was confirmed it could be removed after two or three. The client seemed sated with this answer and confirmed she wanted the implant, with her husband in agreement. She was taken straight to the hospital, whilst Dr. Marni and the facilitator cleared up some issues around her eligibility over the phone with another doctor.

Nurse Rita, a young midwife, was the training last participant to receive a client. Rita’s supervising facilitator reminded her that she needed someone to practice the IUD insertion with, and she should try and see if the client wanted it. So far a number of clients choosing implants had left for the hospital, but no IUD clients yet. The client was nursing her one month old baby and her husband who had been brought in from outside. Nurse Rita explained Family Planning:

‘We won’t force you,’ she said with a smile, ‘but you can use the methods to space your children and give them more love (*domin*).’ The midwife started by naming the condom and pointing to the pictures on the chart. This was followed by a simplified explanation of the by the Billings

method: 'you count the days'. Next she described the pill: 'you must take it everyday'. She followed with a description the IUD: 'you put it in your womb (*oan fatin (t)*), this one is really good, it doesn't have side effects, and when you remove it you can get pregnant again.'

By glossing over the other methods, but explaining the IUD and its benefits she used the language and description to highlight this as the best method. 'It has no side effects and no 'medicine' (hormones), and you will have a period every month'. Having monthly periods was seen as something that was normal and healthy, and many women did not like the idea of their periods stopping. Nurse Rita promoted the IUD above the other methods with encouraging language. When they were asked which method the couple would like to choose, there was a small pause of breath in the room as the midwife sat smiling and the facilitator looked on. The woman's husband chose the IUD immediately. The client, who had been tending to the small cries from the blankets swaddling her child, looked up at her husband, then nodded. Nurse Rita, still smiling brightly, jumped on the moment and said: 'If you want to have it taken out at any time if you don't like, and you will have a period every month ... We are not forcing you, we are just letting you know (*laos ami obriga, ami fo hatene imi (t)*). You can take it out anytime.'

The clients were whisked down to the hospital once they had consented to the procedures. The maternity procedures room in Maubisse hospital had two birthing beds. 'It's much easier with people, they *are* softer than the dolls,' whispered one of the midwives to Nurse Rita and I. Nurse

Rita was congratulated on recruiting the only client who had chosen the IUD. In general implants had slowly already been becoming more popular with family planning users in and around Maubisse, and most medical staff acknowledged that it was word of mouth that assured people it was a good option. Trusting the IUD would take more people using it, and more time for good word to spread was the general consensus.

There were no curtains in the procedural room around any of the beds and I helped a nurse adjust the curtains on the windows. As far as I had observed no explanation of the procedure had been given up to that point. I moved over by the door once the client was told to undress, so I would be well out of the way. She was told to lie down on the bed, and given a tiny white sheet to cover her naked lower half. She pointed her knees inwards to try and keep some privacy from full view of the room, but the facilitator told her coldly to move down the bed and open her legs. The client kept sliding uncomfortably down the bed every time she tried to lie down. Watching her struggle, I rushed over and held a plastic pillow in place so she didn't fall off. The facilitator told her loudly to open her legs again—'wide, like your giving birth'—and her ankles were grabbed and stuck awkwardly in the stirrups.

The insertion of the IUD was uncomfortable to watch, and painful for the client, who was postpartum and still healing. She was addressed only by the nurse and facilitator who barked at her to relax and no reassurances were given when Nurse Rita struggled to measure the length of the patient's

uterus with a sonde. Shortly after the insertion an emergency patient was rushed into the room and the IUD patient who was about to be debriefed on how to take care of herself, was ushered outside as a pregnant lady, bleeding heavily was carried into the room. I had felt a massive disservice had been done to the IUD patient, who had been cajoled into accepting the IUD and then treated with little respect. More so, the performance of choice, for the sake of the targets of the training, left me feeling a little sick.

When reproduction is medicalised, it lies somewhere in between autonomy, care and coercion. It is not a static event in which consent is given, nor can a decision be solely based on the information that is given to you. As we have seen in this chapter, the knowledge about contraception is constructed by an assemblage of actors. Contradictions and tensions between information, care responsibilities and structural conditions ensue. 'Dilemma's' (Collantes, 2016, p. 78) rather than choices or decisions are a more appropriate way of describing the information, structural conditions and agendas women and men must grapple with in the process of reproduction, and as this chapter has shown, particularly within health domains.

3.8 The Discourse of Reproductive Choice: Unmasking The Illusion

In this chapter I have described how the discourse of choice was challenged during a ten-day family planning training session in Maubisse. The Reproductive Justice movement highlights that it resists the idea of 'choice' in reproduction due to the set of unequal and complex relations and environments in which reproduction takes place. The discourse of choice can become another form of control, one that has neoliberal origins, language that has been co-opted from previous attempts by feminists to assert bodily autonomy in a bid to escape oppressive structures and relations. In this, it risks reproducing the very coercion it tries to challenge.

Reproductive developmentality points to how this approach to reproduction presents reproduction as something that can be intervened in for the good of communities and the nation. In this case the aim of the family planning training was to address the high maternal mortality rates in Ainaro. The material on the course reinforced family planning as not only an individual health care choice, but one that benefits the wider community. However the contradictions within that discourse, such as free and informed choice being out of the hands of individuals when it came to accessing family planning, and being influenced by different actors, including family planning training materials and training facilitators. Whilst there is a will to improve reproductive health care, the governance of

health actors, state, religious and international create contradictions, influence trust and reify forms of coercion through the very act of training health care workers. These healthcare workers point out and challenge contradictions.

If reproduction is distributed rather than individual, if it takes place in unequal relationships and social and political economic environments we must dismantle discourses that place responsibility for reproduction solely within individuals and particularly within women's 'choices'. But how do we do that in a way that doesn't remove women's agency, rights and desires? We must *acknowledge* the inequalities, the uneven environments and the structures which influence, guide or coerce, in other words, 'reproductive governance' must be challenged, and with it the developmentalist thinking that approaches reproduction as a point of intervention for community and national prosperity.

This family planning training course in Timor-Leste's central mountain area showed that choice is not undesirable, but it creates an illusion of reproductive freedom, whilst distracting from inequalities that stretch far beyond the individual. Despite its liberating potential, the neoliberal discourse on 'choice', reproduces forms of reproductive violence and distrust. The contradictions of choice ultimately deepen scepticism towards the humanitarian aims of reproductive healthcare, perpetuating inequalities and unwittingly reproducing forms of coercion.

As the events of the training course shows, choice is a dominant discourse that informs clinical practice – yet in many ways it remains a powerful illusion. The language of choice also serves to mask inequalities, illustrating the need for *real reproductive justice and freedom*, which includes transparency around health interventions and equal access. Lastly it shows how this illusion of choice goes beyond masking inequalities but perpetuates them by positioning individuals as choice-makers who need to be stirred towards ‘the right’ choice.

Despite recognising social, economic and structural barriers to choice, programs present choice as a singular, static and benevolent idea of choice, masking these very inequalities that prevent people from exercising autonomy over their reproductive lives in the first place. Through the voices of participants at the family planning training course in Timor-Leste, this chapter has shown that choice is not undesirable for patients or clients accessing reproductive health services. However, the true power of ‘choice’ lies in the ability of this discourse to create an illusion of reproductive freedom, whilst distracting from inequalities that stretch far beyond the individual and obscure ‘the modes of reproductive governance’ that monitor and control reproduction, such as the politics of global health, state injunctions and religious institutions (Morgan and Roberts, 2012, p. 241). The contradictions of the choice discourse within global reproductive health frameworks ultimately deepen scepticism towards the humanitarian aims of reproductive healthcare, perpetuates inequalities, and unwittingly

reproduces forms of coercion and violence, such as the experience of Rita's client in the opening vignette. These contradictions arise as the sector adopts reproductive healthcare for economic means. This is similar to what Wilson (2015., p.2) calls 'Gender Equality As Smart Economics'. This neoliberal approach makes clients, in this case women responsible by placing the burden of choice and decision making, whilst providing information that it has constructed from a biomedical perspective. It does so not only or not always to improve individual health but to improve development metrics such as maternal mortality and fertility rates that are connected to global metrics and economy. At the same time, it does little to address structural issues. This ultimately only deepens inequalities as true informed individual choice is an extremely difficult promise to fulfil. As I have mentioned, reproductive 'dilemma's' might better described the way that clients must way up one reproductive health outcome over another. (see Collantes 2016,. p.78).

My aim is not to suggest that choice itself is a problematic ideal to aim for, but that the promise and practice of choice in this context does not instil trust and glosses over much of the inequalities and structural violence that limit it. Described by family planning advocates as powerful, many critics of the discourse of choice attest to its imaginary and masking qualities. However, this does not mean that a better choice is not worth striving for. As Mol argues there are alternative pursuits to 'patient choice', ones which place care at the centre, treating *people as people*, not objects or

contained individuals (2008). Thus, there are other ways to think about reproductive choice and freedom, and different approaches that will be explored in this thesis explore can help us to think about reproduction, justice, and freedom differently.

As I explore in the next chapter, structural inequalities around sex and reproduction are not unrecognised by health advocates in Timor-Leste, but there are also a variety of moral approaches towards sexual behaviour that make complex and intersecting inequalities hard to untangle.

Unfortunately, these weigh heaviest on younger women who through other modes of reproductive developmentality are politicised through a gendered politics of what survival means for a post-conflict nation.

4. Unplanned Pregnancy, Child Abandonment and Infanticide:

'Obstacles' to national development.



Igreja Katólíka kontinua apela oinsá sosiedade Timor-Leste atu kuidadu no labele soe bebé. Meiu sensibilizasaun Igreja nian ne'e liuhosi monta publicidade iha edifísiu Komisaun Justisa no Pás, Igreja Katedrál Dili. Imajen Tatoli/ Eugénio Pereira.

Figure 14. 'OUR CHILD, DON'T THROW IT AWAY!! MORE VALUABLE THAN: A GOOD NAME, ECONOMIC REASONS, WANTING THE WORLD', Billboard outside the Dili Metropolitan Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. Credit: Eugénio Pereira(Silva, 2019)

The poster of an infant cradled in a hand appeared outside the Dili Metropolitan Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in June 2019. 'Our child, don't throw it away!! More valuable than: a good name, economic reasons, wanting the world', it read. A large illustration of a small white baby was held up by a single black hand: 'It's not a burden, it's not

shameful, it's not an animal'. The billboard could be visibly seen from the road, at a main junction close to two university buildings. It was a clear response from the Catholic church to the proliferation of cases of infant abandonment, colloquially referred to as 'baby dumping' (*soe bebe*) that had appeared in the media that month. At another church in Balide, another area of Dili, a billboard of Mother Teresa appeared, along with one of her many quotes in opposition to abortion 'it is a poverty to decided that a child must die so that you can live as you wish'. These quotes demonised abortion as a selfish act that had no regard for the 'sanctity of life', a key message of the Catholic Church. The Catholic doctrine teaches that human beings are made in God's image and life is given by God, therefore life is precious and a gift from God. This chapter considers the multiple moral discourses of reproduction that manifest in debates about unplanned pregnancy, child abandonment, infanticide. These three issues are encapsulated in the Tetun phrase '*soe bebe*'.



Figure 15. A billboard at the Cathedral Parish of the Immaculate Conception of Balide Cathedral, Dili reads 'IT IS A POVERTY TO DECIDED THAT A CHILD MUST DIE SO THAT YOU CAN LIVE AS YOU WISH'. Credit: Author2019.

'Soe bebe' commonly refers to abandoning a child, literally meaning to throw away or get rid of a baby. The word *soe* or *so'e*, means to throw away, or to discard, something. You might 'soe' a piece of litter. This choice of word is particularly poignant, as in many of the reported cases infants, most often dead, were found in rubbish piles and garbage tips. An English equivalent is 'baby dumping', which is a term often used in Malaysian and Indonesian English language media. More formal translations such as *infanticide* (*infantisida*) or *abandonment* (*abandona*) are used in police reports and legislation. In this chapter I continue to use the local term *soe*

bebe, despite its problematic overtones, because this is the term my interlocutors commonly use. In addition, infant abandonment, infant exposure¹ and infanticide, all have different legal definitions, but *soe bebe* was commonly used to refer to all three and was often implied to be the result of unplanned pregnancy.

Between 2011–2020 Timor-Leste’s Vulnerable Police Unit registered 48 cases of infanticide, 20 cases in Dili, and 28 cases outside of Dili, between 2011–2020 (Pintão, Dili Weekly 2020). This would suggest around 5 reported incidents a year in total for the whole country. However, between June–July 2019, 5 cases alone were reported in Dili in just one month². Moral panic in the media and amongst religious and political leaders came to a head towards the end of June. At that time media reports emerged about the case of a newborn infant was found alive in an empty house in Lahane, a hilly suburb of Dili. The man who had found the child wanted to keep him and offered to take the infant in as part of his family. However, when the child’s mother was identified— a young unmarried girl from the community— child protection experts advised that the child should stay with her until court proceedings had ended, so that the child could be breastfed. The case stirred controversy. Media reports and public discussion emerged around who was responsible for the child. The mother claimed she did not abandon

¹ Infant exposure refers to leaving the child where it is exposed to harm and possible death.

² Comparative data on child abandonment is not well documented and definitions in law vary in each country, making the number of cases in Timor-Leste difficult to put in comparative context.

him but simply went to get clothes to swaddle him in. However, others, including the man who had discovered the child, questioned the mother's willingness to look after him since she had supposedly 'left him to die'.

In Maubisse the Lahane case was the subject of conversations amongst the health workers I spent time with. However, this was nothing new, as before this case and subsequent media storm, *soe bebe* had not been absent from my research. When stories often appeared in the media, they were talked about among my interlocutors, who would share stories about other cases they had heard of or had seen themselves. Seemingly, *soe bebe* was more common in Dili. In the city, abandoned babies, dead or alive, were regularly found in litter piles or waste dumps in poorer and more run-down areas of the capital such as Taibessi, Becora, Comoro, Bebenuk, or Marconi. For example, in late 2018 two young boys found a baby in a plastic bag as they collected tins to sell from a rubbish dump (GMNTV, 2018). One non-Timorese health worker I knew well told me how they had *twice* come across the remains of abandoned babies on the beach whilst out walking. In Maubisse, my friends swapped stories they had heard or seen on the media where children had been found dead, and shared concerns about friends or young women they had seen acting suspiciously on the street. One nurse told me how young women might provoke a miscarriage by doing heavy work or getting their boyfriend to ride them over rocky roads on the back of motorbikes. If this didn't work, they might look for abortifacients from

Indonesia, and with few options left they might have little choice but to abandon the child.

For a woman to have a child that is not recognised by the father's family was deemed shameful, thus adolescent or 'early' pregnancy (*isin rua sedu*) was widely held to be the source of the issue leading to child abandonment. 'Early' pregnancy means different things to different groups and individuals, as I will discuss below. But it normally refers to?? an unplanned pregnancy of a young woman or adolescent girl who isn't physically, emotionally, or otherwise ready to have a child. 'Early' pregnancy was a key point of intervention by health and development programs in Timor-Leste during my fieldwork. Adolescent pregnancy is a world-wide phenomenon and is considered a global health and development concern³. Historically, concern about the risks of adolescent pregnancies has largely been due to their association with severe medical problems, particularly for very young teenage mothers⁴ (Kirchengast, 2016). However more recent studies show that teenage pregnancies are not risk to obstetric problems per se, rather the risk depends on access to health care and social stigma (*ibid.*).

In this chapter, I explore the sexual politics around 'early' pregnancy and '*soe bebe*' which are at the heart of present-day reproductive politics in

³ See the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal Indicator 3.7.2: Adolescent birth rate (United Nations Statistical Division, 2018)

⁴ Below 15 years old

Timor-Leste. The topics became the key theses of two National Youth Debates that took place in Dili in 2018-2019. The motions at each debate were 'early pregnancy is an obstacle for national development' and the other '*soe bebe* is the women's fault'. Here I examine and analysis these moralising discourses around *soe bebe*. What do discourses about 'early' pregnancy and child abandonment and infanticide and tell us about Timorese concerns for individual futures, and collective survival and national prosperity? And how is gender politicised in the project of saving lives? I examine how sex, development and gender intersect drawing on discussions that took place in Maubisse and the conversations that emerged at the national youth debates. These conversations and debates show how concerns about survival underlie gendered discourses in which women are held responsible for their reproduction, having children, maintaining, and sustaining life and how reproduction has become intimately tied with moralising discourses about the future and prosperity.

I will how reproductive politics in Timor-Leste is built on a 'gendered politics of survival' in which young women become 'sexual stewards' (Sasser, 2019) of the nation-state and cultural identity as their reproductive behaviour is judged as good or bad for national progress. I argue that this is part of 'reproductive developmentality', a subsection of reproductive governance in which reproductive health and development work focuses on sexual and reproductive behaviour to shape the economic and social future of a particular place.

In the section below I start with a conversation about concerns of early pregnancy and *soe bebe* in Maubisse, showing the concerns different community members had about cultural participation, education, employment. Here concerns for social continuity are coupled with suspicions towards young adolescent girls at school or university (4.1). The multiple moral discourses that are exposed are then reflected in my account of the first national youth debate on ‘early pregnancy’ in Dili (4.2). Through an analysis of this event, I show how sexual practices have become tied to ideas about development and how moralising discourses about cultural continuation and Catholicism become intertwined with reproductive developmentalities which often place responsibility on women for controlling their reproduction to progress national development. The debate shows how the issues of sex, gender and development are intimately entwined, but also how they become entangled with religious and cultural discourses. Analysing the way in which these discussions have become gendered but also very opposed I discuss how these debates around gender and responsibility illustrate underlying concerns about continuity of life (4.3). Engaging with the work of Murphy (2017) and Sasser (2019) I argue that these concerns coupled with reproductive developmentalities create a gendered politics of survival through both reproductive developmentalities and religious and cultural discourses for continuation in the post conflict context.. I connect this illustrate this further by examining in detail the perspectives given at a second national youth debate on the issue of *soe bebe*

and women's responsibility (4.4). Finally, I reiterate how the value of children in post conflict context is at the heart of these conversations, despite them being caught up in discussions about gender (4.5) Drawing on these examples I conclude with a discussion about how despite contradictions and contestations in values of multiple actors of reproductive developmentality is reproducing and reshaping gender norms in Timor-Leste (4.6) is.

4.1 'Early' Pregnancy, abortion, and child abandonment in Maubisse

On a dry Easter Saturday in Maubisse the morning batch of vegetable fritters (I, *bawang*) were sizzling in oil over the fire. Rina, Maria's youngest daughter, mixed shredded carrots and cabbage and dunked them into thick yellow batter. Picking out great globs of vegetable and batter, she stuck it to the side of the large, blackened pan. The lake of fizzing oil in the middle of the pan lapped slowly away at the edges of the batter, until the fritter turned deep yellow and slid away to bask in the hot liquid. Whilst we savoured this morning ritual over our tea and bread, Rina, home from the capital for the weekend, updated her mother on news from university. A classmate of hers was pregnant. Maria stayed silent, attending to her chore. 'Are they married?' I asked Rina. 'They *will* get married now they are pregnant', Maria said determinedly. Generally, when a girl got pregnant there was the

expectation for her and the father of the child to marry and start their family life. Maria told Rina to watch herself, '*quidadu-an*' (T), her tone serious and concerned. Maria had a tough stance on pregnancy before there was a house or a job to go to. She had married at 14 and had ten living children. She had lost two children in infancy and had eight miscarriages. She was extremely proud of her children, but she felt strongly against getting married and having children before school was finished, before there was a job, and crucially, some money to support the family.

'Are lots of people getting pregnant now?' I asked Rina.

'A few', she told us, 'Some are in Senior High School, and one even in Junior High School.'

'It's no good,' Maria said, 'they haven't finished school, they don't have jobs, but they have a family already! They will be asked to contribute to customary payments (*lia*) where will they get the money?!'

Married couples starting a family were considered adults and expected to contribute to the gifts of animals, money and foodstuffs at customary ceremonies connected to ancestral houses. Previously they would have been counted as sons or daughters of their parent's families, but as a household of their own they would be expected to contribute separately, and customary gifts could run up large debts. We all sat and looked at the fire mulling it over. Rinas started playing a new Timorese pop song on her phone: '*I'm sorry baby, we must break up....*'. The lyrics rang out around the now still kitchen.

Maria worried about her daughters becoming pregnant whilst they were young, unmarried and in education. She herself had worked hard to put her children through school, and many of them had studied abroad in Indonesian universities. Whilst her husband brought home a respectable but small government salary, she baked bread to sell in the market until her older children had an income of their own. It was sustaining life as it was lived in Maubisse, it was their continuity as a family and their ability to participate in customary practices that Maria worried about. Payments for customary practices were often cited as a barrier to children's health and education, with officials in Maubisse concerned about how children were going to be sent to school if all the money was spent on customary exchange (*lia*). Customary practices were a central part of life in Maubisse and one to be taken seriously. Customary practices involved exchanges of gifts between families at veneration of ancestral houses, weddings, and funerary rites. They were a key part of maintaining good relations with kin and ancestral spirits. It therefore was a key factor for Maria in her motherly concerns about pregnancy and marriage.

Farther afield a similar view was held by Jorge, a young village leader (*xefe aldeia*) in Maubisse. He agreed that early marriage (*kaben sedu*) was problematic because it meant stopping school and starting a family. However, he reasoned, once people finish school, they see that they must have a family anyway. People don't have more education options or anything to do, they are doing agricultural work or doing small business

trade, and the next step is getting married and having a family. He acknowledged that having lots of children could be a problem, but also said that after four children parents receive some social support (*bolsu de mae*) to help them send the children to school. In his view a government programme about family planning was a positive step to prevent young pregnancies, but government health teams showed up later at community meetings and people didn't get any information.

I heard of a few cases of child abandonment in Maubisse. At a local clinic, a health worker told me that several years ago a baby was found in a vegetable garden, a dog had bitten and mauled the baby's lower torso and legs. Someone managed to get the infant to the hospital, but it did not survive. One village leader told me and a community health worker of a case in his village, where the body of a new born child had been found in a plastic bag full of chilli, which had presumably been used to kill the infant. The 'mother' (although the identity was unknown) was thought to have come from outside the community and had taken the opportunity to travel and abandoned the baby during a national holiday. The health worker suggested the baby had probably belonged to a young unmarried woman who had hidden her pregnancy from her family.

Responsibility often fell on the women to 'watch themselves' and abandoned children were presumed abandoned by mothers. When I discussed the cases of *soe bebe* in Dili with a group of female health workers

in Maubisse, they shared suspicions about young women they had seen carrying ‘heavy’ backpacks early in the morning.

‘It would be best to take it to the nuns,’ one health worker told me, ‘but you might be seen. There are the nuns in Pantai Kalapa⁵ that would take them. Or leave it in the hospital then someone else can have a healthy baby.’

Two teenagers I talked to told me that *soe bebe* was something done by sex workers and other university students told me that it was rife in the market of their own town in one of the eastern municipalities.

The moral outrage about *soe bebe* was a talking point on social media, and on television news and provoked length messages from religious leaders,

The crime of *soe bebe* ignited related discussions about abortion. On a cool day whilst picking coffee in the river valley, Tina, a high school student played some music from her phone. We were filling our *bote* with the small red gems of coffee fruit on Tina’s father’s land. We chatted about Monika’s plans to look for work, now she had finished school, when a ballad started to play softly amongst the coffee trees:

*‘I see from this this that you are not peaceful,
you look for a way to loose me,
I cry here but you don’t feel,
You don’t know I want to live,*

⁵ An area of Dili close to Motael Church

*But I am sad,
You are not happy with my presence,
I don't have any strength mama...'*

'What's this song called?' I asked Tina, 'what is it about?' We reached for the coffee berries at the top of the tree we were working on, bending the long branch down towards us.

'They are singing about women destroying (*estraga*) a child, leaving it in the street or drinking medicine', Tina replied.

Religious pop music is popular amongst many young people in Timor-Leste. The lyrics of the song, *Abortu* (abortion) are written by musician and priest Natalino Gusmão, and speak from the perspective of a foetus inside its mother's womb.

'Why do people do that?' I asked Tina.

'They aren't married yet, they aren't ready'. Tina replied. There was plenty of talk and suspicions about teenage pregnancy, *soe bebe* and abortion in Maubisse, on social media and in the media at large. One clear assumption was that those who were abandoning their children were young teenage girls who were not yet married. Abortion is strongly criminalised in Timor-Leste. It is not even acknowledged in the otherwise progressive National Reproductive Health Strategy (RDTL, República Democrática De Timor-Leste, 2004) or the National Family Planning Policy (Ministériu da Saúde, 2004) (2004). Abortions had been criminalised under Indonesian law

which remained in place after Timor-Leste regained independence. However, in 2009 a new Penal Code criminalised abortions. It permitted them only on the grounds of imminent risk to life with no other medical option but termination of the pregnancy. Furthermore the woman, a spouse or other person must consent and three doctors need to agree to and approve the procedure, with a fourth doctor agreeing to perform the termination (Belton *et al.*, 2009).

In an Easter Special of RTTL's *Ritmu Muzika* program, Nataliano Gusmão preformed a collection of his songs. After the performance of *Abortu* the female TV presenter seemed closed to tears and Natalino said 'Don't make an abortion', and nodded understandably at her as she put her hand to her heart and shook her head gently, eyes slightly teary.

'You can't have sex without being prepared, he went on, like the music reflects your situation in Timor-Leste after independence, there is lots and lots of 'free sex', parents are neglecting to control their children, social media has a very big influence. People shouldn't force themselves to something that is dangerous to themselves, other people and especially to people who are innocent.

The TV presenter than said 'wow this is music with a message, especially for women,'

'And men too! Especially men,' Nataliano interjected. The TV presenter laughed awkwardly, admitting her mistake 'yes I'm only talking about women' she chided herself.

Largely what was missing from much of the dialogue around these issues were reasons people might not want to get pregnant, and the fact that sex without pregnancy might be something they desire. Instead of the addressing of these key questions, media in Timor-Leste was full of messages about abstinence, moral conscience, and control.

In Maubisse the responses to adolescent pregnancy were not necessarily surprising, particular those like Maria's, who was concerned for the wellbeing of her daughters socially and culturally through their participation in customary practices. However, the level media and moral messaging that appeared around the cases of *soe bebe* also carried other moral messages about sex, education, religion, culture, economy, and development. Sex is often a vehicle for moral objectives and the objectification of sex itself is a moral action (Pigg and Adams, 2005, p. 1). Whilst sexual practices may be embedded in moral codes and objectives, it is also important to note how moralities are constructed by political arrangement, health programs, conceptions of biology, reproduction, and nationalisms (ibid).

In the following section I examine how gender, reproduction and national development were intertwined at a national youth event in Dili which addressed early pregnancy. Through analysis of the event and conversations around it I show how reproductive developmentalities which focus on the reproductive health of young girls can inadeptly lead to

gendered assumptions about reproduction and development, as well as be reinterpreted and entwined with religious and cultural discourses.

4.2 Obstacles of Development: National Youth Debate on ‘Early Pregnancy’

I was taken aback but not altogether surprised when I first saw the topic for a National Youth debate: ‘Early pregnancy is an obstacle for national development’, announced on a Facebook post. This was the statement up for discussion at the first of two National Youth Debates focusing on reproductive health issues. This debate was part of a series of National Youth Debates organised by The Youth Leadership Development Program Timor-Leste (YLDP-TL). The YLDP-TL leadership told me the National Youth Debates aimed to provide a public forum to discuss issues concerning young people in Timor-Leste. Their leadership team had discussed and voted on the debate topics, choosing these as issues of concern that needed public discussion. The motions of this debate, and the one I discuss later in the chapter concerning ‘soe bebe’, show how sex, gender and development are intimately entwined in the discourses of those seeking to guide young people in Timor-Leste, and thus become prominent topics of concern for young people themselves.

In global health language in international NGOs in Dili, women who get pregnant below the age of 20 are considered to have ‘early’ or ‘teenage’ pregnancies’ (Cummings UNFPA 2017). The WHO recommends avoiding

pregnancy before the age of 20, and statistics for Timor-Leste show that mothers between the ages of 15-19 die nearly twice as much as mothers aged 20-24 (Cummings 2017). Furthermore, in Timor-Leste 'early pregnancy' (*isin rua sedu*) can refer to teenage pregnancy, but in cultural terms also extends more generally to young unmarried women at university who are not ready to have children.

For policy makers, preventing 'early' pregnancy in a global health and development context is a matter of preventing deaths, but also improving lives through ensuring pregnancies are planned and wanted. A further priority is to ensure that women are able to continue education. Sex, gender and reproduction have thereby become intimately linked in development discourse, leading to the calculation that reproduction can be adjusted to shape the future of national economies. In this regard, 'development is the best contraceptive' was a key idea that circulated in population discourse in the 1970s (Correa and Eichmann 1994:2). It was born out of the association of high fertility and population growth with poor economic development that high fertility was actually a 'barrier to development', which influenced in the policy discourse of the 1990s (*ibid.*, :1).

I followed the opening speech to the first debate on early pregnancy on Facebook. It was given by Timor-Leste's First Lady, Cidalia Lopes Nombro Mousinho Guterres.

‘Young people who become pregnant at an early age provoke a big emotional crisis, because they aren’t supported by society or their families. Emotional and mental stress can drive them to suicide, abortion, or to abandon their children because they face bad treatment, stigma, and discrimination from society. They face diverse social implications in society. These effects also contribute to increased poverty’.

In her speech, the First Lady was sympathetic to the effects of early pregnancy on young women, making a plea about the importance of supporting and not judging or criticising young people too harshly. Yet her speech highlighted her view that early pregnancy led to increased poverty. She was ‘FOR’ the debate’s motion that early pregnancy was an obstacle in women’s participation in society, and therefore an obstacle to development. She suggested a solution to the issue: promote sexual education which was ‘appropriate’. This meant teaching young people to abstain from sex, as the path to prevention. Parents, she added, also had a responsibility to communicate, consult with, and share religious values with their children. The First Lady’s suggested approach aligned with the Catholic values that she and other elites strongly promoted. In speeches by Timorese elites, economic progress and Catholic morality conjoin to provide a template for young people’s sex lives, recasting their bodies as symbolic sites for, or obstacles to, national development and prosperity. This hybridisation is a

feature of reproductive developmentality, and places individuals, particularly young women, and their capability for reproduction uncomfortably 'in the way' of a collective future goal.

In an interview after the debate, a feminist activist admitted she found it 'disturbing' that there was a panel arguing FOR and AGAINST pregnancies as an obstacle to development. To her it didn't seem right that a side of the debate would have to argue in agreement with the motion, which to her seemed abhorrent in the way it suggested women were to blame for the issue of *soe bebe*.

Initially the motion of the debate had also made me uneasy, but as my fieldwork progressed it became clear that in Timor-Leste, and particularly in Dili, it was common for public health and socio-economic issues to be discussed as roads or barriers to national development. Yet it turned unplanned pregnancies and their associated results into as a problem, a burden that impeded improvement. In Dili, a capital city heavily populated with foreign and international NGOs, framing early pregnancy as a 'development' issue was not uncommon. Framing reproductive health as a development issue has a long precedence in health and development programs as sex has become entangled with economic development thinking (Murphy 2017). In their analysis of family planning under the banner of development, Murphy (2016) and Sasser (2018) draw on Foucault's analysis of biopolitics (1976) to show how governing structures, such as states requires the production and control of bodies, both at an

individual level and over level of population. The quest for development and prosperity therefore makes sex and reproduction a site of intervention.

Sexuality is 'located in dense webs or socially meaningful moralities' but the repercussions are that sex becomes attached to ideas of population control, human rights, disease prevention, child and maternal health (Pigg and Adams, 2005)

After the debate in an interview with a member of the leadership of the National Youth Debate committee, they revealed their thinking and motivation behind the motion for the debate focusing on 'early pregnancy as a barrier to development'.

'If this core value imagines a young person marries early and becomes pregnant but they are still happy, is there a risk to their development in the future? Like is there still an economic risk or risk of domestic violence? ...We [YLD-TL organising committee] observe, we read, discuss, we make comparisons with the international point of view, and we see that there is a problem...the youth debate topics are like advocacy to help the government, to help the state, and particularly we target young people for advocacy. This is mainly to bring consciousness, like giving awareness (*konsiensia*) to young people by giving information.'

The organisers of the debate had carefully proposed this motion because they were aware of the existing tensions between developmental, cultural,

and religious perspectives towards early pregnancy. Particularly between cultural and religious morality, feminist perspectives and 'international' global health messages. They felt the need to raise awareness and conversation about it. What they termed 'to help the state' was not just a way of spreading information, but a form of advocacy and provocation, a platform to have these sensitive issues discussed openly bringing together multiple perspectives and the assemblage of actors involved in reproductive debates.

In the debate itself, a panel of three people one panellist on the FOR side of the debate, a feminist activist addressed the crowd, and the video was later shared on social media:

'Unemployment is a huge problem. So when someone gets pregnant, regardless of if the father takes responsibility or not, how are people going to live? We talk about people who throw away their child (*soe bebe*), so what is the solution? Before they abandon their child or kill their child? Before they get pregnant, before they have sex? There are many methods to prevent pregnancy!'

Teenage pregnancy, and baby dumping was embroiled in discussions about living conditions and connected to issues of unemployment and poverty. By referring to 'other methods to prevent pregnancy' this panellist aimed to push the conversation towards a discussion of contraceptives,

what was in many ways the elephant in the room when it came solving issues of teenage pregnancy. Young feminist activists were often frustrated by the reluctance of discussing access to contraceptives for young people. They were also particularly wary about naming contraceptive methods themselves as they knew it would invite further criticism from those who saw contraceptives as immoral.

I spoke to members of the FOR panel a few weeks after the event. Sitting in an open-air cafe in a Dili carpark I chatted with one of the activists on the FOR panel, a young feminist activist who had won scholarships to study overseas. She was accompanied by her friend, and both had worked with local and international organisations based in Dili. They described the tough opposition and arguments they faced at the debate. For example, they told me that a UN Youth Representative on the AGAINST panel argued that people shouldn't discriminate against women who got pregnant early, particularly as no one on the FOR panel had even had a pregnancy, let alone an 'early' pregnancy, so they couldn't speak on the behalf of young pregnant women. The FOR panel brought up statistics about early pregnancy from the National Demographic Health Survey conducted by UNFPA. The AGAINST panel dismissed this as 'outside' or 'foreign' information that had no relevance. In the end the FOR panel gave up trying to present 'evidence', something they understood was necessary for debate. They resorted to hypothetical scenarios, asking the AGAINST panellist how they would react if one of their young sisters became pregnant. We shared

our uneasiness about the framing of the debate, placing teenage pregnancy in opposition to national development. Strategically placing early pregnancy in the broader national context might draw attention to an issue that could otherwise be ignored by the state, but in the same instance it transforms early pregnancy into a measure of national economic development. As one of the activists said:

‘They talked about baby dumping but they all fell into the Catholic trap of blaming the woman. They come with this pro-nationalism, like going back to our culture, our traditions, is the best thing, and it’s like this radical movement... a group of people from a Christian group sabotaged it, they said that getting pregnant was good for development, no matter what age, because Timor-Leste needed more people.’

This argument shows how reproductive developmentality and the idea of ‘people power’ interconnect. The notion that the land is empty and needed more people thus became not only an example of ideas about loss and replenishment but was mobilised in arguments about using reproduction as a means for development and national prosperity.

Claims about culture and tradition were used to back up religious arguments about immorality in the act of *soe bebe* too. The Bishop of Dili said in a TV news interview that baby dumping was not part of ‘Timorese culture’. This was echoed by a leading police officer, who added that

Timorese people had lost their 'morals', particularly young men and women that continued to end babies' lives. The battle for what is 'Timorese' and what is foreign is certainly a battle for identity and morality, but it also builds upon the survival of Timorese lives, this includes saving the lives of teenage or young mothers from death in childbirth, loss of education, poverty, or suicide, as well as preserving life as it was lived culturally as a Timorese group identity.

In 2019, The Women's Parliamentary Group (*Grupo Mulher Parlamentar Timor-Leste: GMPTL*) held a public seminar 'Love Babies, Love the Future, say no to Infanticide' to identify the cause of infanticide and the possible solutions for preventing it. Participants included representatives of the state, the Catholic Church, civil society, and academics (Quintão, 2019). The media attention around *soe bebe* in 2018-2019 demanded a response from these key political actors. Unlike other societal issues such as economy, water, or agriculture, debates around *soe bebe* were heavily addressed by the Catholic Church. The Church leadership in Timor-Leste is highly regarded as a source of moral guidance and great sway comes from the role the Church played in the movement for independence, defending human rights and promoting liberation theology. In television interview the head of the Catholic Church in Timor-Leste, the Bishop of Dili Diocese, stated that baby dumping was 'not new' but neither was it 'part of Timorese culture'. He blamed the phenomenon on people simply doing what they wanted, not thinking ahead, or controlling themselves, which led to baby

dumping 'destroying the value of Timorese life and culture' (GMN TV 6 August 2019). He also criticised the media for promoting casual sex (*sexu livre*) (RTTL 8 June 2019) as well as Institutions and NGO's which promoted 'diverse products' (contraceptives) that make Timor-Leste suffer, and destroy the nation's future, culture and identity (GMN 6 August 2019). In another speech he told women to 'be careful and respect themselves' (C. Ximenes, 2019). The Church leadership also blamed outside influences and immoral individual behaviour for ruining the future of the country which in their view should be more strongly built through a mixture of traditional Timorese identity with Catholic morality. Despite the Pope announcing his support that condoms could be used for the protection of HIV/AIDs, the head of the Aids Commission in Timor-Leste maintained that he would not promote the use of condoms because they were not 100% percent effective, and therefore abstinence was best. Posters citing the ABC method for AIDS prevention usually read: A, Awareness, B, Be faithful, C, use a Condom. However, the ones issued by the AIDS commission thus read A, Abstinence, B, Be careful, C, Control yourself.

These messages played on post-conflict values of humanitarianism using the language of 'saving lives', but also invoked a mistrust of outside influence. The loss of life and particularly of children during the Indonesian occupation is still widely felt. An estimated 4,000 children were abducted from Timor-Leste during the 24 year occupation as part of a concerted strategy to defeat the Timorese resistance movement. Many of the children,

now adults, have not returned to Timor, and programs run by human rights organisations are still working to reunite families. In this way, Indonesian military tactics targeting women and children directly threatened the survival of the Timorese population. The Catholic teaching of the sanctity of life thus lends itself to values of protecting life and rebuilding after decades of violence and oppression.

Civil society responses towards cases of baby dumping reflected the social conditions that were drawn into debates. FOKUPERS⁶, A local women's rights organisation attributed child abandonment to socio-economic problems, and increasing numbers of young people, largely students, living away from their family homes. The move to render students responsible for baby dumping quickly led to the policing of student accommodation. In turn, this would limit the ability of young people to visit each other at night, and thereby prevent sexual activity, unwanted pregnancies, and consequently, *soe bebe*.

The debates show the complex ways that cultural and religious morality aligned. The result was a discussion that exposed the core values and discourses of conservative, liberal, catholic, cultural, feminist, nationalist, traditional, humanitarian, and capitalist ideas for prosperity. The assemblage of actors, with different perspectives and agenda's cast the figure of a young pregnant woman and an abandoned child symbolised on

⁶ Forum of Communication for Timorese Women, (*Forum Komunikaun ba Feto Timor Lorosa'e*)

the one hand as both a burden to economic progress and social justice on the other. Whilst on the other the figures represented the survival and continuation of Timorese citizens and culture. In these discussions young women's bodies and babies became obstacles to one form of prosperity in terms of economic development, but at the same time they are the means to ensuring another form, that of cultural identity and continuity. ⁴

To broaden the comparative lens it is useful to consider some of the similar narratives that appear around reproductive politics in the wider region. For example, the maxim of 'study first' is a strong narrative in Indonesia where young people are encouraged to finish secondary or tertiary education before they engage in relationships and start a family (Munro 2012). Similar to Timor-Leste, the stigma around early marriage and pregnancy in Indonesia is embedded a discourse maintaining social and cultural morals as well as a development narrative for young people to 'develop themselves as good human resources' for the state, but especially for Papuans who face racial stigma of promiscuity and primitiveness. Munro (2012) found that for Papuan students, both childbearing and educational achievement are important for cultural and political agendas. Papua⁷ is a contested part of Indonesia that has suffered genocidal violence at the hands of the Indonesian state, for Papuans continuity of life as well as educational attainment are important parts of cultural continuity, and the

⁷ I follow Munro here by referring to the area as Papua rather than 'West Papua' as the naming of the contested territory is increasingly politicised.

maxim of 'study first' evokes aspects of racialisation in the context of accusations of genocide. The 're-traditionalization' of religious morals acts as a form of political and moral ethnocentrism as it enables the belittling of critical populations.

As Widmer shows through her research in Vanuatu, governing sexuality and reproduction in pursuit of progress is by no means a new tactic of development, however, but began early in the colonial era and applies as much to both situations of population decline as it does to population growth (Widmer, 2012). During Vanuatu's colonial period (1880-1980, then the New Hebrides), there was rapid population decline. Plans to boost the population, for plantation work, were adopted by the Anglo-French colonial administrations and subsequent joint rule. More recently, Vanuatu's rapid population growth has led to fears that a young and largely unemployed population will cause a Pacific uprising akin to the Arab Spring. This echoes similar fears about Timor-Leste's 'demographic danger'. In Vanuatu, as in Timor-Leste, in the debates about 'teenage mothers' the associated development and policy discourse links the individual with national development in a gendered way (Widmer 2012, p. 321). By focusing on the problem of motherhood in youth and associated transitions of education to marriage, transforms the symbolic figure of a young mother into one who has failed to follow a path, and 'whose life circumstances now stand in the way of the development of the nation' (ibid.). The moral messages around teenage pregnancy and *soe bebe*, and the integration with

discourses of reproductive developmentality are thus not unique to Timor-Leste.

In this section I have shown how the public debates surrounding teenage or adolescent pregnancy have evoked different moral discourses associated with culture, religion. *Soe bebe* and 'early' pregnancy provoked conversation and debate about the making (and unmaking) of life, not only of people as individuals or family members, but as a collective of national citizens and Timorese people, or 'children of Timor' (*Timoroan*).

As this section has shown, key actors in the debate around early pregnancy drew on contradictory and contingent arguments. Youth activists, development workers and the Catholic Church evoked ideas of national prosperity, Catholic pronatalism, development rhetoric and indigenous activism, all of which harboured concern for particular types of future national prosperity. Early pregnancy and child abandonment are disavowed by both Catholic values and development narratives in Timor-Leste, yet whilst actors might differ in their conservative or liberal approaches toward sexuality, in public discourse it is the sexual activity of young, unmarried people, particularly young women, that are primarily associated with early pregnancy, child abandonment and infanticide and moral and social degradation

In what follows below I outline how sex and reproduction have become intimately tied to the idea of a national future in Timor-Leste. I expand on the concept of reproductive developmentality which captures the multiple

ways different actors evoke nationalist development narratives in relation to sexual behaviour and reproduction. Specifically, I consider the gendered accepted of these debates which place young women at the centre and how this reveals reproductive politics in Timor-Leste to be at its core, a politics survival in a post-conflict environment.

4.3 Reproductive Development: sex, survival and the nation's future

How do we understand how concerns about *soe bebe* from an anthropological perspective? And how have they become attached specifically to young women and national development? During fieldwork considering how to make sense of the many opposing views that surround what should be done about sex and reproduction on issues around early pregnancy and *soe bebe*. Actors on all sides of the debate called for better sexual education, but there was little conversation and agreement about what this meant. Was it teaching abstinence? Offering contraceptives? Or something in between?

I begin by exploring in greater detail the ways in which reproduction has become inherently tied to the idea of nation and development. In his influential study of nation-states as an 'imagined community', Benedict Anderson argues that the concept of 'nation' involved the secular

transformation of fatality into continuity (Anderson 2006[1983]: 6).

Anderson asks:

‘[w]ho experiences their child’s birth without dimly apprehending a combined connectedness, fortuity, and fatality in a language of ‘continuity’?...In a range of religions, fatality has been dealt with by its transformation into continuity. Fatality thus becomes concerned with the connection between the dead and the unborn, the mystery of regeneration’ (ibid., :11).

Similarly, Foucault’s assertion that the power of the modern nation-state, its biopolitics, is concerned with managing fertility and morbidity *and* optimising life through interventions, ensures its continuation (2003 [1976]: 244-245).

As outlined in the introduction to this thesis scholars of reproduction have drawn on Foucauldian notions of biopolitics to show the link between sex, population and development, not only within nation states but beyond through in international development. Many of them have also positioned themselves against narratives which envision that children, and in particular young girls, are the answer to solving problems that threaten humanity’s future.

In *The Child to Come* (2016), Sheldon argues that whilst the link between children and futurity might be seen as naturalised and self-

evident, it has a distinct origin in the 19th century. Through a developmental model which linked embryonic growth to evolutionary forms of the species the child became a symbol of the deep biological past, but also 'a recipient of specific biology inheritance freighted with consequence for the future' (ibid., : 3).

The focus on young girls' health and reproduction in development campaigns can be found in Timor-Leste through various celebrations such as 'National Day of the Girl' and '16 days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence'. These campaigns whilst well-meaning use the language of investment and empowerment to shape the lives of girls into ones that are not only safe and healthy, but 'educated' and productive as 'tomorrows workers, mothers, entrepreneurs, mentors, household heads and political leaders' (United Nations 2022). Promotion of gender equality thus becomes a tool of the economy as 'ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls is not only a basic human right, but it also has a multiplier effect across all other development areas'(ibid). As we saw in the previous chapter, reproductive health, and family planning also then becomes a gendered intervention in which women's fertility and healthcare decisions are not only the concern of their individual health, but the wider society.

In her research exploring climate change, development and family planning, Sasser (Sasser, 2018) argues that this neoliberal construction frames women as private, logical and individual choice-makers who embody responsibility to achieve development goals. Sasser points out that

‘sex, sexuality, reproduction and life itself both at the level of individual and population are objects of study and intervention’ precisely because the knowledge production around life and population turns them into targets (2018, p. 23). Sasser steers clear of using the term ‘biopolitics’ but she draws on Foucault to show how knowledge and discourse around reproduction are tied to questions of power, authority, and sovereignty (ibid.). She presents the figure of the ‘sexual steward’ (Sasser 2017, p. 20), a constructed idea of a model woman: one that ‘manages her fertility and the environment for the greater good’ (ibid, p. 4). Sasser’s ‘sexual steward’ refers specifically to women who bring female empowerment and address climate disaster by using contraceptives. Sex becomes a moral object of scientific knowledge production, and a site for expanding notions of progress and modernity (Sasser 2018: 23). This leads to a ‘gendered politics of population’ in which women are held responsible for the issues associated with population growth and environmental degradation whilst men, masculine roles and values are absent from the discussion (Sasser, 2017, p. 354)

Murphy ((Murphy, 2013) also engages with Foucault to describe how the biopolitics of the modern state was transformed through ideas that led fertility and economy to be planned synchronously. The power of the state transitioned from an approach of ‘*make die and let live*’ to ‘*make live and let die*’, to what is now a policy of ‘*some must not be born so that future others might live more abundantly/consumptively*’ (Murphy 2013, p. 146). A direct threat of fatality has thus been transformed into a constant anxiety about

continuity. Murphy argues that life and capital became entwined in the late 20th century, making the management of reproduction central to managing the economy (2017, p. 9). Within this 'economization of life', capitalist imaginaries emerged. In particular, the figure of the 'Third World Girl' became the target of development campaigns. In global 'Invest in a Girl' campaigns, 'the Girl' became the target of intervention through investment in her human capital potential (ibid.). This character and narrative feature heavily in development projects which promote investment in girl's education as a way to reduce fertility and increase her earnings, both of which, it was calculated, would contribute to GDP (Murphy 2017, p. 113). Education was framed as cheaper than contraception for reducing fertility, and 'the Girl' thus became a 'feminist solution to the world's mess' (ibid., p. 113-117).

As we can see from the youth debate discussed in 4.2, both the figures 'Third World Girl and the 'sexual steward' are evoked in the debates about adolescent pregnancy in Timor-Leste by both international and local actors who draw on a variety of moral approaches. Young women are those that continue the cultural and national future. But at the same time, their social success and protection (from the harms of early pregnancy) is paramount for the future economic wellbeing of the nation state. Women's reproductive behaviour and their children are also symbols of life considered all the more important in the wake of conflict and struggles for identity. In her analysis of the children born of rape during the Indonesian

occupation of East Timor, Harris Rimmer draws a comparison between those lost (orphaned and stolen children, lost parents, and children by born rape) during the Indonesian occupation, with the baby boom that occurred soon after Timor-Leste regained independence (Rimmer, 2007). 'The baby as a symbol of both wound and healing is clearly at play in Timor at the present time', she writes (*ibid.*, p. 2).

Through this section, drawing on Sasser's model of sexual stewards, and Murphy's concept of the economization of life I argue that reproductive developmentalities describe how reproduction is governed towards a vision for prosperity that involves economic progress and narratives of sustainability and survival. Reproductive developmentalities draws sex, gender and reproduction together, managing them to ensure continuity and progress. Reproductive developmentality is a discourse of progress that imagine a better future can be achieved by governing sex and reproduction.

Reproductive developmentality casts reproduction as something to be shaped for prosperity, the great good, of the nation. It is present in the notion that teenage pregnancy is an 'obstacle' to development, and that preventing it will improve lives and the nation as a whole. It also manifests in ideas of national identity through cultural continuity, in aspirations of economic progress and modernity, in religious restrictions and societal norms that prevent 'moral' decay, and in fears of erasure and concerns for survival. It is a part of the wider notion of reproductive governance, but one that is specifically applied in narratives of future prosperity. It incorporates

the concepts of 'economization of life' (Murphy 2017) and 'sexual stewardship' (Sasser 2019). In Timor-Leste the reproductive developmentality works together with religious and cultural moralities and concerns about continuity to create a gendered politics of survival. Through this politics women are held responsible for the creation and loss of life in the nation, specifically when it is seen to hinder national economic and social prosperity. In the following section I provide another account of the second national youth debate I attended, this time on the issue of *soe bebe*. It further demonstrates the way in which a gendered politics of survival is manifests in Timor-Leste.



Figure 16. 'IF YOU HAVE SEX FREELY YOU CAN CONTRACT HIV AND DESTROY YOUR FUTURE' A LED billboard close to a Church in Ai-mutin, Dili., An announcement from the National Commission for Combatting HIV/AIDS in Timor-Leste. 2017/8. Credit: Author 2019.

4.4 A Blessing or a Burden: National Youth Debate on 'Soe bebe'

I now turn to present the discussions that emerged at a second National Youth Debate, that took place a few months after the first. 'Is a baby a blessing or a burden?'⁸. A small girl in a school uniform asks her question through a crackling microphone. Hundreds of people have gathered for a National Youth Debate at the Ministry of Social Solidarity in Dili. The school age girl looks up at the stage. The debate motion hung over on a banner over the six panellists: 'Is 'soe bebe' a woman's fault?'⁹. The

⁸ T, 'Bebe gracia ka problema?'

⁹ T, 'Será Que Soe Bebe Feto Nia Kulpa?'

snack boxes and bottles of water, which were always provided by organisers at public events, were opened, and litter discarded on the floor. The main hall was stretched beyond capacity as hundreds of young people crowded in. I predicted there were close to 1000 seated in lines of plastic chairs and standing four to five rows deep at the back of the hall.

The debate the FOR panel was made up of the head of Timor-Leste's Aid Commission, known for his conservative Catholic views; a young female health activist; and a male UN Youth Representative. The AGAINST panel includes a prominent feminist politician and two male activist researchers, one of whom worked on a recent development report about teenage pregnancy. The observers, who have been invited to witness and comment on the debate are the Secretary of State for Equality and Inclusion, and a representative from The Asia Foundation (an international development agency). All the panellists and observers were Timorese, apart from myself I saw only one other non-Timorese person in the crowd. This had clearly been organised with the criticisms of 'international' interventions from the last debate, in mind.

In this event the representatives of the state, development agencies, the Catholic church and activists had been brought together, in front of much of Dili's youth, to discuss 'baby dumping'. The young girl's question, 'is a baby a blessing or a burden?' neatly captured two simple but contradictory messages that emerged in the debate: is pregnancy something to be desired or to be shamed? During their opening comments members of

the FOR panel argued that a baby was a gift from God and getting pregnant and then ‘dumping’ it was ultimately the fault of the mother - although they later conceded that others had responsibilities for the child’s existence as well. The AGAINST panel argued that the contexts in which babies are abandoned are not all the same. If a woman becomes pregnant when she is not ready to have children either physically or socially, or is forced to become pregnant, this can be burdensome to the woman's health, as well as economically and socially troubling, leading to abandonment. These issues were discussed with language that was heated and heartfelt. Nevertheless, the lengthy debate which ran over three hours lead to detailed and nuanced points to be raised. The panellists and commentators returned to issues of when reproduction is considered ‘right’, and for whom. Alongside this they discussed the associated contentions about how many children people should have, who is responsible for them, and how to control sexual behaviour and pregnancy.

‘Babies are a symbol of love between man and woman,’ a representative from the Ministry of Social Solidarity said in his introductory speech. ‘In the past people fought for independence, and now everyone has a responsibility to develop the country.’ His speech emphasised the connection between religious institutions, the state and society, and women's responsibility to their children. It was long and rambling speech that went on for close to an hour, and with the key message that ‘mothers should not throw away their babies’.

‘He doesn’t understand,’ a friend next to me whispered. It was becoming clear that the representative did not understand that the event was a *debate* to discuss *if* women were solely responsible for *soe bebe*, rather than an event to simply lecture women about not abandoning their children. Some people in the crowd started to boo. Amongst the friends I had sat with were vocal young feminist activists. They started clapping over the speech, a tactic that sparked the whole audience into a round of applause which eventually forced the representative to finish up and leave the stage.

After some more speeches from various representatives, the panellists were introduced. Each was given several minutes to speak and present their views on the debate motion. Of the six people taking part in the debate, there were two women and four men, and the debate chair was also male. On the FOR panel, a male UN youth representative explained why he believed child abandonment should always be considered a woman’s fault:

‘We need to give space to everyone's rights, we need to see the struggle for the nation, and the cultural and religious aspect. Life is the fundamental right of everyone, but if we don’t respect peoples’ rights they are not human. We need to respect people's life as a human, not a devil or an animal. We struggle for freedom, and a baby is part of that. It is a woman's fault if they throw away their child. We are mostly Catholic, a baby is a woman’s own blood. They need to respect culture, continue culture, having children is a part of that. When it is wrong it's wrong! A

woman isn't an animal or a devil. All women in the world produce babies. Women are the creators. Is it is their fault'

On the same panel, a woman who worked in international development spoke for the rights of the child. Abandoning a baby was like killing a person, she argued, it should be considered a crime, and the perpetrators punished according to the law. 'It's not about blaming people,' she explained, 'but giving the child a good life.' She looked somewhat uncomfortable between the outspoken UN youth representative and their other teammate, the Director of Timor-Leste's AIDs Commission, who offered his perspective next.

'The problem is love' he said. 'And the question is, in the context of love, do both people have responsibility? The baby's spirit is given from God, but in the context of love it is the responsibility of both people, not the woman alone.' Sex, he argued, was therefore only to take place within a loving marriage. Whilst conservative, he was sympathetic to blame being placed solely on women, although he later argued that when a woman abandons her child, she had made two mistakes: the first, having sexual intercourse; and the second, abandoning the child. The FOR panel therefore presented views with invoked a mixture of indigenous cultural continuity, the struggle for independence, human rights, and Catholic views on abstinence before marriage.

When the AGAINST panel got their turn, they drew attention to the role of men and women in society:

‘We are responsible, men are responsible, we are Catholic, men are born. How is it only the woman’s fault? Women are like flowers in the garden, they are not only in the house. They feel pressure from society,’ one of the male researchers said.

He was followed by Bella Galhos, a former independence activist, politician and LGBT advocate. Galhos was sold to Indonesian soldiers as a child, taken to Indonesia, then after getting a student visa to the USA she escaped to Canada and claimed asylum. There she became a voice of the diaspora movement for independence (Loney, 2018b). Galhos is originally from Maubisse and now runs the former Portuguese residence, the Pousada, as a hotel with her partner.

Galhos started with a single question: ‘Where is the *man*?’ She let a moment of silence follow whilst staring into the crowd. Then she continued, ‘We always talk about two people making a child, but we only talk about *women* when abandoning them ... when a woman is a virgin, she is a good girl, when a man isn’t a virgin he is just a man.’ In this comment Galhos was highlighting the double standards of gender expectations in society, which were heavily critical of women’s behaviour.

The debate went on to cover a range of issues including love, sex outside of marriage, prostitution, and rape. Over the next few hours, the speakers addressed if sex was just sex or if sex meant love; if a woman became

pregnant from rape was she *still* to blame if she abandoned her child; if a girl was raped by a family member is she still responsible for her actions?

Gahlos was largely in disagreement with the central panellist on the FOR side of the debate Daniel Marcel, head of the AIDS commission. Later at a key point in the debate he asked rhetorically, 'Why do young people abandon children? They are scared and ashamed. In the context of pregnancy when men don't want responsibility it's the women's fault. Children are the grace of God.'

Galhos responded:

'are we talking about abandoning children here or are we talking about what is a women's fault? If a woman has 7 or 8 children, has mental health problems, we can't call her a mother. You are not just a mother because you are pregnant. The name mother is when a woman is ready and wants to have children. There are also women who are infertile. We can't only talk about women as mothers.'

Taking another opportunity to speak, the UN youth representative launched into a tirade about people who abandoned children being 'stupid' or 'backwards' (beik). He spoke rapidly about the importance of ancestral houses (*uma lisan*) and people's responsibility to produce descendants. His comments drew on Timorese indigenous values, but with misogynistic tones. When a member of the AGAINST team pointed out that a recent study

of teenage pregnancy showed young mothers said that it had been their boyfriend's idea to sex, the UN youth representative made the outlandish claim that women 'needed' sex more than men, a comment that received cheers from a group of young male students in the audience.

The debate got more and more heated as the panellist spoke rapidly and with voice raised despite the microphones. Various people on both sides of the panel tried to direct the debate towards solving problems, highlighting the need for better sex education, and working together, but the debate continued to get heated, with much encouragement from some of the audience. It eventually descended to personal and homophobic insults, directed by the AGAINST side towards Bella Gahlos, who in 2016 was the first prominent Timorese woman to publicly come out as bisexual. Eventually the organisers of the debate called for questions. For gender equality purposes, stated the organisers, three young men and three young women would be selected from the audience to ask questions. One of them was the young girl in the school uniform who we encountered at the beginning of the chapter.

'Is a baby a blessing or a problem?' she asked.

'The baby is *always* a blessing', the head of the AIDs commission responded.

The female health advocate sitting next to him on the FOR panel continued: 'If a young girl gets pregnant the baby is still a blessing, if the

baby is born from sexual assault, the baby is still a blessing, the sexual assault is the problem.'

Galhos responded for the 'AGAINST' side of the panel: 'Some people want to have the next generation, descendants, but if a young child has a baby in their stomachs this is not a blessing, this is a problem.'

As we see from the debates about 'early' pregnancy and *soe bebe*. Cultural, religious and development moralities objectified sex and reproduction. Often they led to gendered assumptions and forms of discrimination against women, even if the intentions (such as development campaigns) aimed to 'empower' women. In these discussions women were cast as responsibly for getting pregnant, and responsible for the effect that had on national development. In the section below I argue that beyond gender divisions and misogynistic attitudes, the content of these debates also revealed the politics of survival and value of new life in the post conflict context.

4.5 The Value of Children after Conflict

Child abandonment and infanticide was perhaps the most visible and visceral of issues in sexual and reproductive health. This stemmed from other issues of unwanted or mistimed pregnancy, illegal abortion, and lack of access to contraceptives. The strong responses of people and institutions to the increase in cases of *soe bebe* show how children have become strong

symbols of survival in Timor-Leste, and how reproduction after conflict is implicit in discourse of future national progress. The way in which a child and new life is represented in the discourse around *soe bebe* is entangled in debates and silences about controlling sex and reproduction and obscured by divisive debates about gender and responsibility. In turn, these have become trademarks of development discourse, showing how life, and how it is created and sustained, becomes entangled with gendered and reproductive politics.

For example, when I visited a social justice NGO to discuss the issue of *soe bebe* the connection between reproductive politics and survival was made very clear. In our discussion as I approached the subject about abortion in connection between child abandonment and Timor's laws on abortion. One of them responded, 'there must be children, we mustn't abandon or destroy them, Timor needs people, because of the war'.

This politics of survival also was shown in the case of the child abandoned in Lahane which swept the media by storm in June 2019. This was an unusual case of child abandonment to be reported by the media, because in this case, the child, named Cristovão, lived. Interestingly however his mother was still accused of his death. In the eyes of some of the community the act of killing her child had already been committed, and according to them she should be punished for the crime of killing her child as she had left it to die. To all those involved, the survival of the child was of the utmost importance. Cristovão's mother received the majority of blame for the

situation even before the details of the case had been made known. In many ways this was not surprising and gender politics steeped in patriarchal Catholic discourse and a post-conflict militarised masculinity, are central to social stigma espoused towards Cristovão's mother and women in general. However, the widely debated and researched issue of gender inequality in Timor-Leste shies away from the underlying concern at the heart of the debates about reproduction and gender: the *value* of children and life in Timor-Leste. This in itself can tell us why so much responsibility and stigma is levelled at women for their role and responsibility in reproduction, and the way in which reproduction comes to be governed by an array of actors.

In the second youth debate, ideas solving the issue of *soe bebe* were mostly met with in a call for better education, by both sides as a way to prevent teenage pregnancy which was held to be the main reason for child abandonment. Whether the members were in favour of contraception or teaching of abstinence was only inferred by the panel members liberal or conservative association Contraceptives, and certainly not condoms, were only brought up by a brave female activist who asked the panellists to explain their definition of 'family planning'. This was a tactic I had noticed at several events, young activists steered away from directly promoting or talking about contraceptives themselves, but instead asked questions to provoke senior figures to address it themselves.

One seminar about preventing teenage pregnancy was organised by a civil society group at a public library. Here a representative of the Secretary of State for Education talked to the audience of young high school and university students. She emphasized her argument for promoting abstinence through the use of specific language about 'knowing and understanding yourself' (*hatene ita nia a'an*) and 'self-control' (*kontrola a'an*). This was the most popular approach to sex education and followed the Church and government 'line' which lent heavily towards favouring abstinence of young unmarried people, and heavily away from contraception.

At this event, a group of young feminist activists became frustrated when over an hour into the discussion no one had mentioned contraception, even the Timorese representatives of international development agencies such as Marie Stopes International (MSI) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) trod carefully so as not to jeopardize their partnerships with government ministries. The representatives talked about the need for better sexual and reproductive health education, without any mention of contraceptives, what they were, or how to use them. When question time came, a female rights activist marched to speak before the panel of presenters. She accused the panel of 'not teaching anything at all' to the group of students. She pointed out that they had spoken of nothing to prevent teenage pregnancy, despite the fact they were all aware of many

methods of prevention. The MSI and UNFPA representatives responded carefully, one of whom tentatively mentioned 'condoms'.

The frustration of many people with the church, and the state, was that it condemned infanticide and abandonment, yet, it didn't educate people about sex or about contraceptives. There was a contradiction between the Church and State's moral judgement of early pregnancy and baby dumping, but their refusal to promote contraception as a preventive method infuriated many activists. In their study on the strict abortion laws in Timor-Leste, Belton et al, articulate the Church's contradiction in a quote from a Timorese ministry of health employee:

'For myself, I think when girls or women are not ready there should be terminations of pregnancy, I can imagine that a woman does not want a baby; she may neglect it or abandon it. I even asked the priest about that, he said family planning and abortion are the same thing. I said OK tell me what is better- to prevent an unwanted pregnancy, or infanticide or neglect. These are the real choices for women'. (Belton, 2009, p. 6)

There were contradictions in both the Catholic and development values and attitudes towards sexuality. Young activists blogged about the contradictions: why, if a baby is considered a miracle, is there so much pressure on women? (Antonieta, 2018) Another wrote that it was the failure of liberal capitalism and western individualism that eroded society and

directly contributed to behaviour like *soe bebe* (F. Ximenes, 2019) The church wanted to prevent the deaths but did not provide a way to do so. The development agencies wanted people, particular women, to have fewer children and be more economically productive, without providing the jobs to do so. The political contrast then becomes one between religious institutions that wield significant power and the motivation to protect the country's future and culture from 'outside' immoralities, and that of a strong development discourse attempting to promote contraceptives for better health indicators, lower fertility, and economic development whilst at the same time promoting sexual freedom. Both have a humanitarian discourse to save lives. However, in attempts to control reproduction collective national futures become tied to young people's behaviour, young women in particular and their sexual behaviour, by both development discourses and religious institutions. Women become sexual stewards of continuation and development through a gendered politics of survival.

Infanticide is a widespread practice but hasn't gained a huge amount of direct focus in anthropological work (Aengst, 2014). This is perhaps because infanticide is a difficult term to define: was an infant killed intentionally, accidentally, exposed, and left to die, or purposefully or strategically neglected? Furthermore, the killing or total abandonment of children challenges an ethnographer's moral framework and is a particularly complicated topic to deal with outside of one's own cultural framing (Aengst 2019, p. 413). To do this often requires the researcher to

first explore the significance and politics of reproduction in a particular context and experience in the first place. For example, Nancy Scheper-Hughes controversial study challenged the notion of motherly love as natural and universal (Scheper-Hughes, 1993). She wrote that the mothers on the Alto do Cruzeiro in north-eastern Brazil were strategically neglecting infants they thought were unlikely to survive. These mothers lived in a social environment where food and water were scarce, amidst poverty and violence caused by the political and economic chaos of a military coup, and with no access to birth control. Scheper-Hughes argued that neglecting infants under such circumstances could be seen as a survival strategy in desperate conditions (ibid).

Infanticide elicits moral discussion, not only in cultural comparison but in local contexts, through rumour and public outcry (Aengst, 2014). At the same time, silences around stigmatised behaviour such as premarital sex and abortion prevent the actual acknowledgement of cases of infanticide. Aengst notes how in Ladakh the actual details of infanticide cases were little known, even though the cases themselves were widely known about informally (2014). As a result, they couldn't be recorded or acknowledged. Infanticide interrupts the socially accepted and normative pattern of reproduction, and along with abortion and miscarriage can be considered as 'reproductive disruption', (ibid.; Inhorn, 2008). Aengst argues that whilst infanticide disrupts reproduction it affects experiences of undisrupted reproduction too (2014). For example, discussions within a

local population about infanticide shape discourses about multiple other reproductive experiences such as adolescent sexuality, access to abortion, and choice (Aengst 2014, p. 413). Therefore, it is not useful to look at reproductive events such as sexuality, pregnancy or childbirth in isolation. Rather, they must be viewed as part of a wider singular experience of reproduction as a whole (Butt and Munro 2007).

My ethnography from Maubisse and Dili suggests that baby dumping is not a survival strategy in Timor-Leste in the same way that Scheper-Hughes proposes in her fieldsite in Brazil. I do however show how the often-gendered debates that come to the fore in debates about reproduction are embedded in a politics of survival. Following Aengst (2014), I agree that infanticide shapes experiences of reproduction as reactions to it moralise sexual behaviour such as early pregnancy, yet obvious silences around teenage sexuality mean arguments for contraceptive availability are stifled. Drawing on both Aengst and Scheper-Hughes' arguments, I propose that the politics surrounding reproduction in Timor-Leste, exemplified through the discourses and moral judgements around infanticide, are in fact about the politics of survival, which builds on people's experiences of conflict and loss of life, and the need for it to be rebuilt. It also draws on the Catholic church's notion of sanctity of life and the latter fits in with development narratives about economic progress and the future. These discourses become particularly clear in the debates about sexuality, pregnancy,

infanticide, and gender which frame young women as sexual stewards of the nation, its survival, continuity, and development.

4.6 Contradictions and Constraints: Reproducing and reshaping Gender after Conflict

In conclusion, the moral panic around teenage pregnancy and baby dumping was fuelled by several things 1) post-conflict narratives of survival; 2) Catholic values of pronatalism, sanctity of life and controlled sexuality; 3) development values of progress, modernity and economization. I argue that reproductive developmentality entwined with religious and cultural moralities around sex is reproducing and reshaping gender norms and responsibilities by focusing on women's behaviour, both in terms of cultural ideas of continuity, abstaining from sex and in the gender mainstreaming of programs directed at girls.

Pigg & Adams (2005) recognise that there are multiple moral investments in sex that are shaped by science, medicine, technology, and planning rationalities. Sex is objectified as a moral act and development projects play a role in this objectification. In the case of *soe bebe* actors in projects of development projects have religious cultural and nationalist motivations. Sexual and reproduction science attempt to create sexual norms - but there are repercussions of development project that claims to be neutral and objective. Moralities are constructed, shaped and constrained by political arrangements, health programs, conceptions of biology and reproduction

and nationalisms (Pigg and Adams). Morality matters because it is contested, debated and refigured in the interventions that target or indirectly shape people's sexual lives. What kind of moral object does sexuality become? In the case of Timor-Leste, 'The Third-World Girl' and the babies which are abandoned become moral objects of the success and continuation of the nation. Pigg and Adams (2005, p. 2) argue that it is necessary to move beyond facile divides between modern and indigenous values. Pigg asks how are normative and normalising possibilities taken up, put to use, modified or contested by various actors? What kinds of action become possible as a result? (Pigg 2005, p. 58). This chapter has shown how in Timor-Leste, young girls become both vulnerable and in need of protections, as well as autonomous and responsible for sexual behaviour, but not just for their own good, but for the good of the nation.

Whilst fundamental values clash, and actors often disagree on best roads to action, these divisions obscure how the state, the Catholic Church, NGOs and civil society, are all entangled in a project to save lives and move towards a prosperous nation. These discourses sit comfortably alongside post-conflict expressions about replenishing life, rebuilding families, and repopulating the land. These are further supported by Catholic values of pronatalism and life as sacred and God-given.

However as gendered and intergenerational politics hold young people, and particularly young women responsible for the future of life in Timor-Leste, young people are subject to more judgement and policing.

Young women are promoted western liberal feminist ideals, whilst at the same time responsible for sustaining and making life for future prosperity and development. Whilst judgements about sexual behaviour and reproduction are often attributed to patriarchal politics and traditional values, what makes them so potent is how gender discourse intersects with the politics of survival: Health and development discourses disavow unplanned or mistimed pregnancies, particularly for young women. At the same time, through their reproductive capacity, young people, and young women in particular symbolise the continuation of cultural life and identity through public discourse. These dual responsibilities, embody conflicting ideas about sexual behaviour, pregnancy, and abortion which these same young women bear within their psyches, and their own bodies

The importance of replenished life of life after genocide and violence has been seen as a form of reproductive justice (Haraway, 2018). However, it becomes a form injustice when it is incorporated into the discourses of religious institutions and developmental aims which attempting to restrict and limit reproductive and sexual behaviour. Furthermore, the stigma levelled at women as those who produce children adds further inequalities in a place dominated by patriarchal hierarchies of the Church and former militarised movements. However, it is also what the life of a child symbolises, the future it embodies, that is at the core of debates about child abandonment and early pregnancy. This centres around disagreements about the purpose of sex and reproduction. Cases of abandonment, or soe

bebe have forced discussion towards issues of contraceptives and their availability, if only by the will of activists, who strategically lobby to get leaders talking about the issue. They are aware that advocacy coming from themselves alone will not be well received as is too easy for those against them to take down the arguments advanced by these young female activists, particularly as many had studied abroad, and they are therefore seen people influenced by foreign (*malae*) ideas, as well as having no experience of pregnancy of their own. In this regard, international and civil society activists therefore highlight the strength of messages coming from Timorese women, rather than external actors, to avoid opponents labelling feminist arguments and ideas as ‘foreign’ and going against Timorese values.

Butt and Munro (2007) write that in West Papua, national development is a primary goal that is embedded in religion, education, and reproduction. The settler gaze casts indigenous Papuans as backward, a view that persists in everyday realisation of state initiatives which govern health and education (Butt and Munro, 2007). These promote ‘appropriate’ ways to act and think and sexual restraint within a monogamous legal marriage was promoted. The slogan ‘Two Children Is Enough’ was embedded in the program for national development during Suharto’s dictatorship in Indonesia and young people’s sexuality is still strongly moralised in Indonesian today, with premarital sex and pregnancy remaining highly stigmatized (Butt and Munro 2007).

I draw a similar comparison between sex and education in Timor-Leste. A number of the health workers I talked with in Timor-Leste labelled the women in Maubisse who had many children as 'stupid' or 'unaware'. Blame was often placed on Timorese '*kultura*' for poor education. However, the decades of Indonesian education and healthcare are important. As Butt and Munro (2007) point out, the changing sexual practices characterised as Papuans have sex for the first time at younger ages is only partly explained by the intensification of individualism. The norms of children within a couple, rather than single motherhood is drawn from cultural practices, family cohesiveness, Christian ideals, and setter values of monogamous reproduction. Unmarried mothers are not viewed as rebels, but rather constrained in the 'overlapping folds of kin and colonialism' (Butt and Munro 2007, p. 594). Women and their families judge themselves based on the norms of the Indonesian settlers, and education, religious proprieties, and indicators of modernity and progress shape their experiences of reproduction. Indonesian settlers use visibility different sex and reproduction outside of the Indonesian norm as proof of backwardness and poorly controlled reproduction. Similarly in Timor-Leste, a 'lack of education' or 'lack of awareness' led to education being named as the answer to solving the issues of teenage pregnancy. However, there was little open and public discussion as to what that might entail.

Events and public discussions took place in Dili on the connected issues of early pregnancy and *soe bebe*. During one such event a representative of the

Secretary of State for Education talked about the problem to a group of young high school and university students. To prevent early pregnancy and *soe bebe* she explained the importance of ‘knowing and understanding yourself’ (*hatene ita nia a’an*) and ‘self-control’ (*kontrola a’an*). This was a popular way to address the issue of sex education, whilst following the teaching of the Catholic Church and/or promoting abstinence rather than talking about other methods of preventing pregnancy.

Discussions and public sector investigations in Dili have focused on the causes of *soe bebe*, highlight on changing socio-economic conditions and poor reproductive education. Very few publicly mention the limited access that young people have to contraceptives, and no one mentions the strict anti-abortions laws, although there was a big attempt to reform them in 2006 (see Richards). The importance of sexual education, however, is a point on which people on different sides of the contraception debate can agree on; although there might be different ideas as to what this ‘education’ includes. For some it meant teaching biological sexual education, explaining biomedical contraception and teaching about healthy relationships, for others it involved reinforcing religious messages about abstinence before marriage and explaining the outcomes of sexual intercourse. This being less taboo than teaching about consensual sex or contraceptives and could also be taught under the banner of ‘healthy’ relationships.

In a wider theme, the debates around *soe bebe* easily highlighted how the social stigma and judgment often fell on women as the reproducers,

Fortunately, in subsequent conversations and debates some leaders have more clearly stated that *soe bebe* is not *only* a women's issue, it comes from every part of society, and everyone has a role to play for continued collective life and progress: parents, children, the Church, the State, teachers and educators. The responsibility has been spread at the very least and the value of the life of the child, implicit in the conversations about *soe bebe* and *early pregnancy*, have forced conversations to be had about how to mitigate it, with actors finding some common ground in the space of reproductive and sexual education. What does become clear is how the tensions between the past, conflict, and future development shape the way in which life is measured and valued, either as something that needs to be blessed and plentiful, or as something that needs to be responsible and sustainable. Despite common ground these agendas inevitably clash at junctions – such as on the issues of abortion, access to contraceptives and the need for 'more' or 'less' births, and the role of women in supporting and sustaining the country.

National development is envisioned in contrast to past conflict and loss of life, as something that should bring new life, and protections of those lives to enable them to flourish for future prosperity. In this discourse children and young people come to represent the future survival of Timorese people and the nation state. 'Love babies, love the future' was a statement made at a press conference about research into the proliferation of child

abandonment cases in 2019. When babies are the future, women's wombs become a target for intervention.

Reproduction, and ultimately survival is politicised, through the moral values, discourses and anxieties that accompany these issues in Timor-Leste's particular 'post-conflict' and 'development' environment. Debates around early pregnancy and child abandonment proliferate, not only because of the modes of reproductive governance which moralise around this issue but also because it is synonymous with a humanitarian discourse around saving lives for the future of the country. In this process gendered norms are reproduced in which women become responsible for reproduction and the future of the nation.

However, returning to some of the comments from the first section of this chapter, from conversations in Maubisse, it is clear that some people see themselves apart from the state, outside of that narrative anyway, if the state doesn't provide education, jobs and family planning. Regardless of whether early pregnancy and reproductive behaviour is a barrier to national development, if people see themselves as apart from the state, why would they follow directives from the state? Neither Maria nor the community leader saw early pregnancy as a positive thing, but their reasons were different. For Maria, taking part in Maubisse cultural life meant being about to contribute to customary payments as well as raising a family. For Jorge, early pregnancy could be challenging, but it was part of starting a life that the state wasn't providing. Jorge and Maria's concerns about education,

work, money and family life in relation to teenage pregnancy in Maubisse weren't a mile apart from the debates in Dili. But rather than associating reproduction through the eyes of national identity or development, Maria and Jorge related it to maintaining and getting on with life in Maubisse, which was less concerned with the state and less divided in its judgement of gender responsibilities on these issues. In some cases, nationalistic messages that incorporate aspects of cultural continuation and economic or social progress for the country don't appeal or apply to those who do not ultimately benefit from pursuits of development.

Mateus, a project manager on a maternal health project in Maubisse, pointed out that the aims of the 'Save Mother and Child' project in Ainaro district were part of saving the population. In Mateus' view the population of the country was small, and the land was empty. Much of the countryside and mountains was wild land, with no agriculture. Infant and maternal mortality rates were high, and that was why the government supported maternal health programs like *Salva Inan no Oan*, so the population could grow. Otherwise, the population would decline. Not only did he think that the land was empty and untamed, but that saving lives also meant building the population, not only maintaining it. For Mateus maternal health was aimed at saving lives that are alive now as well as those that were to come.



Figure 17: 'Soe Bebe, A Moral Degradation'. A print newspaper headline declares soe bebe a degradation of morality. Credit: Author 2018



Figure 18: 'It's Better to Share CONDOMS Randomly Than Abandon Babies Randomly', 'Use one of these in order to prevent soe bebe.' A Facebook post showing a hand holding out a condom. Post is anonymised.

Health work comes with humanitarian aims, but in places where populations are under threat this can be interpreted as a way of ensuring continuation. In Papua, Munro describes how HIV health workers and volunteers see their work as ‘part of a broader effort to save their people from extinction’ (2020:636). She situates health workers and their practice at an intersection of global health and settler colonialism. Papua has been under Indonesian occupation since 1960s. Health workers there demonstrate a radical and cautious ‘medical citizenship’ which expresses a shared indigenous identity, collective suffering under occupation, and a humanitarian response to the threat of depopulation (2020: 636)

The above examples show how reproduction becomes a politics of survival in places where the continuation of a life as a collective has been under threat. These relate to this thesis’s wider engagement with conversations about reproductive justice. In recent discussions about reproductive justice have seen feminist scholars use the reproductive justice framework to offer solutions to ‘earthly’ survival (Clarke and Haraway, 2018). Part of the reproductive justice framework concerns protecting populations so that they can flourish. Reproductive justice thus works with reproductive rights but goes beyond to ensure that people are enabled to live in healthy environments that enable them to live well. However, as we have seen in many places reproductive justice has easily been co-opted, but for those working with the framework, real reproductive justice must go

beyond protecting reproductive rights and include protecting the conditions for human flourishing.

Child abandonment in Timor-Leste, and its associated issues such as teenage pregnancy and maternal and infant health have been targets of programmes of health and development. Whilst these come from frameworks designed within global health and development for sustaining population growth and curbing factors associated with low economic growth, for local people, they represent a process of saving lives, and growing a depleted population for a strong national prosperity.

Conversations about sex, reproduction and survival get to the very depth of existing.

In her detailed account of family planning in a Haitian slum, Maternowska shows how gender and survival are tied together through the politics economy of fertility (2006). Men and women, and particularly women, as individuals don't have the power to overcome the cultural and economic forces that tell them *not* to use contraceptives. Being macho for men was related to finding work and a suitable partner. For women, being in a union was a means of survival, as they had the right to ask support, furthermore, having children is a major source of bartering power in relationships; 'if you close your vagina, you'll eat shit' (ibid., p. 74). Children guaranteed you help in the household, including raiding trash piles for leftover food and recyclables and becoming a form of social security if they got work when they were older this is not to say that children were only

valued in economic terms, they were cherished and loved. Importantly, households were far from the idealised 'norm' and traditional ideas about sexuality and fertility were changing. Not only because of biomedicine, but because of the effects of structural and even state sponsored violence against the poor.

In Timor-Leste some people remarked that children were 'wealth' (*soin*), or that children were invaluable for picking coffee, a key cash crop in Maubisse. A maxim was 'we are poor in money but rich in people'. Many people commented on the UK and European people who had no children 'but who will bury you when your die?' Children were not just a symbol of survival of the nation, but part of day-to-day survival, support, and continuity. The point of having more than two children was also often made. A mother of one friend said 'if you only have two, what happens if one dies? You only have one left'.

Children represented survival and are survival, in many ways the 'blessing', yet at the wrong time, or in the wrong circumstances they were a 'burden' that could lead to the loss of a young mother (if she had issues in childbirth) or the death or abandonment and suffering of a child. As Mateus, the health worker involved with the 'Save Mother and Child' program in Maubisse pointed out - if a man loses his wife and child, he loses two people at the same time.

Unfortunately, as in Maternoswka's observations in Haiti, (2006), in Timor-Leste reproductive responsibilities took on gendered form. Women

shouldered the blame when it came to infertility, and men when there was no work. Young people in Dili and Maubisse told me that young men were putting off getting married in favour of going to find work abroad, because they could not pay the high *barlake* prices that families were asking for to secure an alliance. Young women told me how some women were selling their bodies to pay for university or even high school. Others were marrying foreigners they couldn't communicate with, such as Chinese shop owners who would give them children and look after them, even if they weren't able to speak a common language. There were thus gendered expectations for men and women, but when it came to stigma around *soe bebe* and young pregnancy women suffered the most judgement. There was responsibility of all young people, male or female, to control themselves. However, women suffered the double discrimination of being framed as both promiscuous and vulnerable and were often guarded. 'Women should not walk alone at night' one police chief publicly declared, much to the uproar of feminist activists. However, my female friends in Dili often gave me the same warning. 'Don't go out after 8pm in Dili', they said, and told graphic stories about women being attacked and sexually abused. Several incidents that happened to me and friends of mine confirmed their concerns.

Mobilising *kultura* the Church distanced misogynistic behaviour from something that was Timorese and was able to blame outside influences such as pornography, social media, and individual behaviour. The Church did the same with *soe bebe* and teenage pregnancy, placing the onus on bad

behaviour and lack of awareness and conscience (*kosciensia*) rather than social conditions. It was up to other civil society organisations to weigh in here. A well-established Timorese women's rights organisation attributed the increase of cases of child abandonment to socio-economic problems and changing living situations, in particular young people living away from home (Fokupers 2019). Unfortunately a similar line of thinking led police patrolling areas near student accommodation and weekend camping trips to prevent young people getting up to any activities which might lead to baby dumping.

In Papua, Butt and Munro (2013) demonstrate how the context of colonial domination has limited the options for young women who have children outside of marriage. The 'settler gaze', colonial norms and judgements, regulate reproduction. They question if statements about sexual freedom, and events such as pregnancy are really expressions of individual agency as some empowerment narratives suggest. Such narratives position young women as agents resisting social norms. But the authors suggest viewing sex, pregnancy and children birth as a single unit of reproduction, allows us to consider the wider political context of young women's experiences. They argue that women's sexual and reproductive experiences are ones of constraint and control, rather than agency or assertion. In Timor-Leste recently it has seemed the argument has gone the other way, young women's sexuality, and pregnancy outside of marriage is characterised as women have 'little' agency when it comes to sexual decision making

(Cummins 2017). This characterisation is also problematic, as it presents young women as a-sexual and Timorese men as the initiators and dominant actors when it comes to sexual activity. This narrative was countered in the *soe bebe* youth debate when the head of the AIDS Commission state that women ‘need’ sex, whereas men just like it, outrightly stating that it is women who want sex more. Both narratives focus on needs of individuals rather than looking at wider sets of relationships, sexual behaviour and pregnancy occur. The gendered debates must be unpacked to examine with where ideas of correct behaviour come from in the first place. In Timor-Leste presentations of sexual morality and responsibility come both from reproductive developmentality *as well as* fears of depopulation, alongside Catholic teachings.

In the next section of this thesis, I examine in detail fears of depopulation, narratives of replacement, and the ways in which reproduction is distributed and counted amongst people in Maubisse. Local conceptions of reproduction, whilst clashing and converging with reproductive developmentality, show how gender expectations, ideas of survival and prosperity are being shaped. In subsequent chapters, I then build on and expand Murphy’s concept of ‘distributed reproduction’: not in direct opposition to the approach of reproductive developmentality, but as approach to reproduction which positions amongst wider social and environmental relations.

Section II:

Distributed Reproduction

5. The Empty Land:

Making Kin and Population in Maubisse¹

Section I of this thesis described and analysed several ethnographic case studies which illustrate developmental and nationalist discourses on reproduction choice, sex, development, and how they relate to the wider landscape of reproductive politics in Timor-Leste. Theoretically, these ethnographic examples illustrate how reproductive developmentality is embedded in biomedical training and debates about sexuality and child abandonment, focusing sustained analytical attention on the tensions and challenges that arise from this.

By contrast, in this section, Section II, I ethnographically document and analyse how reproduction is conceptualised and experienced in other, culturally specific ways in Timor-Leste through local relationships with the landscape and spiritual environments. Here I argue that reproducing life after conflict, loss, and destruction, involves reproduction as a set of distributed relations. As discussed in the Chapter 1, 'distributed reproduction' describes the diverse relationships and social infrastructures shape which forms of life persist and thrive, and which are destroyed, injured, and constrained (Murphy 2017, pp. 141-142). Reproduction can thus

¹ A version of this chapter has been accepted for publication as part of a special issue on 'Reproductive Abandonment' (Muro and Widmer, forthcoming) in *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*

be thought of as ‘a politics of redistributing relations, possibilities, and futures’ (Murphy 2018:11).

Applying the concept of ‘distributed reproduction’, in this section I bring approaches to reproductive justice into a dialogue with ethnography of relations with the spiritual landscape in Maubisse. In this chapter, I explore through ethnographic case material how families in Maubisse are balancing relationships. I show how families replenish those lives lost in conflict, with those of the next generation through counting and recounting narratives of people and environment.

My interlocutors in Maubisse described the land as ‘empty’ and the population as ‘reduced’ due to decades of conflict. As people rebuild houses and family relations, they talk about replenishing life and ‘fixing’ families by having more children. This local perspective contradicts development discourses that favour lowering fertility to achieve sustainable ‘development’. Capitalist calculations which tie reproduction to development through certain modes of counting reproduce colonial violence. However, people count ancestral lineages connecting kin and landscape, showing how reproduction is ‘distributed’ beyond individual bodies. Whilst critical of practices of counting and calculating reproduction, I argue that pursuing reproductive justice still requires considering how people count themselves.

Whilst reproductive developmentality is intertwined with population thinking, counting fertility rates, and calculating benefits to national

economy, in this chapter I ask what happens when counting occurs within families and ancestral groups, at a local level. What do numbers mean to people, particularly after conflict? And how does number shape their perceptions of development and future prosperity? What does an ‘anthropology of counting’ involve, in Maubisse and Timor-Leste more widely? To answer these questions ethnographically, we must attend to local people's understandings, desires, preferences, their lived experiences of reproduction and their future imaginaries. In this section we two families through some encounters with ancestral houses. Then I consider from an anthropological perspective the ‘politics of counting’ through which people count and recount kin and how such cultural practices clash with developmentalist assumptions about prosperity, which promises development by sacrificing life for economy. First however, I start below by introducing Maubisse, its landscape and the human and non-human agents in it. I analyse in more detail the description introduced at the start of this thesis in which Cristiano and his father described the land as ‘empty’ (*rai mamuk*).

5.1 Rai Mamuk: Maubisse and the Empty Land

‘It's so green and fresh’ Manuel said to the Xefe Suku² of Maubisse. The three of us stood at the edge of the Church gardens looking out over

² The elected leader of the administrative village area.

Maubisse's town and the valley. Manuel, a friend of mine from the eastern municipality of Bacau, was in awe at the lush landscape. Maubisse's central town or 'villa', is tucked on one side of a large, rounded valley. Smaller villages and hamlets are spread over the mountain sides which stay green all year round. Patches of ironwood forests shelter coffee plants which thrive in the high altitude (1000-1500m). Rows of cabbages, beans and corn grow in people's gardens and there are some new larger strawberry farms. A lot of green hills and unfarmed land lies on the steep slopes of the mountains. Most of the houses are concentrated around the market, where the *pousada*, the old Portuguese colonial residence, sits on its own conical hilltop. Below stand the primary and secondary schools, and the hospital--newly built, unlike the market's worn concrete shop. Government offices or houses, concrete, or corrugated iron, some painted, others bare. Amongst it all there are traditional thatched and wooden houses and their terraced gardens. Maubisse's land is fertile ground, and its potential for agricultural and tourism development are emphasized in speeches at local events and meetings. Its fertility was abundant as we stood together and looked out over the landscape.

The Xefe Suco described to Maneul how Maubisse had a long-wet season (November-May) when the mountains fill with clouds, mist, and storms; in the dry season (June-October) some of the main water sources dry up under clear cold blue skies. Maubisse had no senior high school, only an agricultural technical college. Those that could went to the capital for

further education. Maubisse also suffered frequent power outages and difficulties with its water supply. The Xefo Suco strongly emphasised the importance a strong 'community' and 'local development' rather than relying on the state.

'The town used to be full of Portuguese and foreigners', he added, referring to the Indonesian soldiers and the UN peacekeepers who followed the referendum on independence. He pointed out the deteriorated Portuguese houses, painted white with orange tiled roofs. 'Where the *pousada* sits ...,' he gestured to a small hill sticking up in the middle of the circular valley like a belly button, 'there used to be seven ancestral houses, but they were taken down so the Portuguese could enjoy the view.'

In Maubisse, ancestral houses that were destroyed during the Portuguese and Indonesian colonial periods were in the process of being rebuilt. The Mambai traditional style of house were built on wooden struts with large conical thatched roofs. They can be seen on the mountain tops around Maubisse, a noticeable part of the landscape. Both physical houses and markers of group identity, ancestral houses (*uma lisan*, T, *fada lisa*, M)³ trace the heritage of family groups through patrilineal lines. Family members of an ancestral house are connected to living descendants and ancestral spirits through participation at customary events. Ancestral houses are connected

³ In Maubisse local people rarely referred to ancestral houses as '*uma lulik*' as ancestral houses are widely referred to in other parts of Timor-Leste. *Uma lisan* were certainly considered '*lulik*' but *uma lisan* was more widely used and closer to the Mambai etymology, '*fada lisa*'. I thus refer to ancestral or customary houses as *uma lisan*.

to one another through marriages between members, tying the houses into obligatory exchanges of gifts at marriage and mortuary events. Ancestral houses also connect members to the local landscape through harvest festivals and animist customs related to specific trees, rocks, water sources and other features of the environment which are considered *lulik* (T), meaning these places are both sacred and taboo, potent and powerful (Bovensiepen 2011; 2014; McWilliam and Traube 2011; Trindade 2012).

Land that was not used for houses or farmland was not uninhabited. Alongside *lulik* places, wild animals, plants, non-human agents and other forces enlivened it. People's connection to land has been a significant concern in the aftermath of a conflict in which many were forcibly displaced from mountain villages to central towns. As people return to the land of their ancestral origins, engaging with the land, through customary practices including the rebuilding of ancestral houses, is part of local post-conflict recovery (Bovensiepen 2015).

Despite the various structures and inhabitants of the landscape in Maubisse, a number of people described the '*rai mamuk*', or 'empty land'. This included Cristiano and his father who we met in the introduction. As local people explain, this descriptive term is related to the loss of life during the Indonesian occupation. Multiple phases of colonial rule had left ruined places in the landscape. This generated a strong feeling of abandonment and destruction by colonial powers, but it was also a reminder of the absence of development that had been promised with independence. Although

independence had brought a new school and hospital and school funded by international aid, there were few new buildings, and the main road through Maubisse was only finished and tarmacked during my fieldwork in 2018.

These material absences added another sense of 'loss' to the genocide and destruction of the occupation that had threaten people's survival.

'Reproductive abandonment' (Munro and Widmer, forthcoming) describes situations where peoples whose reproduction is unwanted are subjected to reductionist or unwanted assistance, as well as circumstances in which support for reproduction is unmet. Reproductive abandonment manifests in the discourse of the demographic dividend, which encourages reduced fertility rates to stabilize health and economic indicators. Here I examine how reproduction is now being conceived in the wake of abandonment by previous colonial regimes and new development narratives.

'*Rai mamuk*' or empty land is a phrase that litters conversations about land rights (Cryan, 2015) In this context, *rai mamuk* as a state discourse describes land left without owners after the occupation, which since 2010 has been considered to belong to the state. This includes land without an identifiable owner, abandoned properties, and any land once used by the Portuguese or Indonesian governments. This state land grab proves to be a larger concern for communities than land disputes between neighbours (Cryan, 2015). However, here I draw attention not to the state discourse of *rai mamuk*, but how people used this phrase to describe the lack of people on the land, the loss of lives in the conflict and the reproduction of a new

generation. Bovensiepen (2015) has analysed ethnographically how recultivating productive relationships with ancestral land has been a key part of post-conflict recovery in Timor-Leste. This was done through the rebuilding of ancestral houses and conducting ceremonies according to traditions passed down through the ancestors (ibid., :15). The renewal and proliferation of ancestral or customary practices in the aftermath of independence has been acknowledged by anthropologists as a strategy for rebuilding group identities, solidifying local and national identities and restating political hierarchies (Bovensiepen 2015, McWilliam and Traube 2011, Trindade and Barnes 2018).

It was not only lives that were lost during the Indonesian occupation, but previous infrastructure that was destroyed in violence following the referendum on independence. In 1999, after 70% of Timorese voted in favour of independence, the Indonesian military left in fury of violence and destruction. Much of the material infrastructure such as the hospitals and schools were destroyed. The sense of destruction and abandonment is felt in the remnants of the ruined buildings that litter the landscape, uncultivated land and cultural sites that are being revived by communities. Despite improvements since independence, development of sectors such as health and agriculture are being left behind in the pursuit of oil wealth (Bovensiepen, 2018; da Cruz Cardoso, 2020). The oil reserves are quickly diminishing, but new potential oil fields, remains the promise of prosperity for the future of the nation (Bovensiepen 2018).

In rebuilding life in Maubisse people emphasise their number through the expression of *rai mamuk*. This perspective clashes with technocratic forms of counting that in demographic terms values slower population growth for economic prosperity. Critics of demographic counting and calculation rightly point out the objectification that takes place as people are counted and categorised, but also the assumptions that get made when social relations are converted to numbers (Greenhalgh, 1995; Guyer *et al.*, 2010; Murphy, 2013). Birth rates, population growth rates, and world population, or what Haraway calls ‘Big Numbers’ may be problematic, but she argues, they are also inescapable. Whilst they might not explain structured inequalities, but they are not ‘phantasms’ (Haraway 2018, p. 72).

Haraway uses big numbers to back her slogan ‘make kin not babies’ to counter human and environmental degradation. This approach tries to uphold values of reproductive justice, by naming it ‘multispecies reproductive justice, but at the same time echoes populationist thinking that holds human numbers responsible for social and environmental ills. How do we decide who is allowed to create more or less life? How do we know what will be more or less sustainable and damaging? She also argues that those who have been forcibly diminished, should be able to replenish their kin. But who decides who qualifies as those who should be able to replenish generations lost? Haraway’s provocation leaves many questions unanswered, but the part of her argument I want to further is the matter that numbers cannot be overlooked in matters of reproduction. This is not

however because of the 'big numbers', the demographic calculations, and the issues they cause. Nor is it because the structures of reproductive governance rely on qualitative calculations heavily to enact programs which target reproduction. Rather, numbers matter because of human numbers to families, ancestral groups and communities. Numbers matter locally, particularly in the aftermath of conflict.

As outlined in the thesis introduction, Chapter 1, at the time of my PhD fieldwork, Maubisse had the highest fertility rate in Timor-Leste (DHS 2016). In development terms, this was also a poor indicator of economic development, which has long associated lower fertility levels with better economic outcomes. In Maubisse, women had on average six children, although many of the older women I talked to had around ten living children and in addition, also told me about infant deaths and miscarriages. In international development discourse, high fertility rates are negatively associated with unsustainable population growth. Development reports on Timor-Leste warn that high fertility and unsustainable population growth leads to poverty, poor health and education, unemployment, and threat of violent unrest (Hosgelen and Saikia 2016; Saikia 2018; UNDP 2018). These reports connect these indicators to higher-than-average mortality rates and poor nutrition, and competition over resources in line with Malthusian notions of overpopulation. Some analysts also paint a bleak picture when compared to the small amount of land deemed viable for agriculture and the lack of agricultural development that negatively impacts on nutrition and

child development (Bulatao, 2008; Thu and Judge, 2017) In these reports, it is not just that the population has grown rapidly, it is the productivity of the land, and the effectiveness of the state that leads to a poor quality of life. In development logic the easiest solution is to slow population growth by adjusting fertility and making economically more productive citizens with fewer dependents to support, and more disposable income, raising GDP. This rests on the assumption that workers will have economically productive work and discounts things like domestic labour. It is in this way that fertility becomes entangled with the economy, which makes reproduction the target of development programs that deems adjusting them as a solution for economic prosperity.

In Maubisse people like Cristiano's father, described the land as empty (*rai mamuk*) or spacious, and the people as few. As Cristiano and his father felt the land was empty, and they were few, less and 'reduced' (*ami menus*). Being 'less' represented being both small and small in power. In Portuguese times for example Portuguese country was referred to as '*rai boot*' the 'big land', that which governed. It was also thus deemed richer, more developed, and civilized. Nelson (2015) found that in Guatemala, counting the dead was also about counting how many had died, but also figuring out *who* counted, as in whose lives were valued and looked after, and how inequalities are calculated. In a similar way the description of being 'few' applies to the fact that people are few in numbers. However being 'few' in number often was described alongside being 'small', as in at the

bottom, or being a small country. In the interviews I conducted with local people these references inferred not only to the fact that they felt the population of Timor-Leste was small, but also, to the lack of political power and status the country had.

This description of Maubisse shows how reproduction has been distributed through the uneven relations and infrastructures through the colonial violence of occupation. In particular it shows how life has been destroyed injured and constrained. In the next section I turn to the story of one family who are replenishing and rebuilding relations. Here I show how people are counting themselves and how numbers matter for those who are rebuilding their lives.

5.2 From Two to Twenty: replacing family members

One morning I stoked the fire whilst Maria prepared a tea of hot water, sugar and tangerine leaf in a plastic jug. The citrus scent soothed the kitchen's tense atmosphere. Maria was concerned. A nephew was getting married, which meant gifts (*barlake*) would need to be paid to the bride's family. Thus, would mean calling in debts and gathering money together, not to mention negotiating how much Maria and João's household would contribute as part of the larger family. Maria was worried about how the young couple, who didn't have any income, would participate in customary life as a new household. On top of making customary contributions (*lia*), she complained they would need to build a house and raise children. She

reminded me how she had warned her own children to study and work first, marry later.

João, Maria's husband, came into the kitchen to warm his hands over the fire. His angular jaw was freshly shaven showing just a whisp of grey stubble. He adjusted his loose suit trousers as he took a seat in the plastic chair by the hearth. I asked him if he thought couples should have children soon after they got married.

'Usually they do', he told me, adding 'in Timor people have lots of children. However, in Indonesian times there was a policy. People were only allowed three⁴ children because the population of Indonesia was very big', he explained. When he visited Java and West Timor for his teacher training and children's graduations, he had seen for himself that Indonesia had many poor people and not enough food. 'You can see people begging in the streets, sleeping under bridges, cleaning shoes or playing the guitars at roadside restaurants for money. But Timor isn't the same, there are poor people here, but in Indonesia there are many, many more.' He went on: 'Timor needs people because we are few and the land is spacious (*rai luan*).' He described how the population of Timor-Leste was only about 1 million people. Once the population is bigger, he reasoned, in the future people might reduce the number of children they have again.

⁴ The official Indonesian Family Planning program promoted 'two children is enough', but it was implemented to different degrees in different regions. A number of people in Maubisse reported that three children were all that would be supported if you had a government job.

João and Maria were extremely proud of their ten children, and so far had five healthy grandchildren. Most of their children had completed high school, some had diplomas and worked as public servants in clinics or schools, and one daughter had even become a nun. Maria and her husband had worked hard to keep their children safe and were careful to steer them in the right direction if they were acting out. They had also taken in a young girl to look after, Mila who was their 'adopted' daughter (*oan haikiak*). Mila's parents were João's daughter's husband's family who lived in a remote mountain hamlet, far from the local primary school. Like many other young family members, she had been brought down from the mountains to attend school. In return, Mila helped in Maria's house with cooking, cleaning and the grandchildren, particularly now that Maria's youngest daughter, Rina, had gone to university and could no longer work in the household. When Rina was back from university for the holidays, she would resume her role helping in the kitchen.

One Saturday, Rina and I were dawdling by the fire, keeping warm and cooking banana fritters. João joined us, and asked Rina how her studies were going. She was training to become a teacher, like her father. She wanted to teach in Maubisse when she was finished, to help improve education in her hometown. This holiday she had an important assignment, she told her father. She needed to record the story of her ancestral house (*uma lisan*) and present it back to her class. She spontaneously took out her phone, and looked at a photo of her study assignment.

‘What is the name of your *uma lisan*?’ she read out from a list of questions.

‘Hu-kai,’ João responded automatically.

‘Wait Dad ...,’ Rina said, and began reading out more questions. ‘What is the origin of your *uma lisan* ...’ João interrupted her and started to tell the story.

‘Wait Dad! We need to go to the *uma lisan*,’ she said. She needed photos and a recorded interview as part of the task. The rainy season had made the small dirt paths up the mountains to the family’s ancestral village incredibly muddy and difficult, but the sunny Easter weather was starting to dry everything out. João decided there and then that we should all go to the ancestral village that afternoon. Maria joined us, along with Rina’s older sister Bella, her younger brother, and one of Maria’s grandchildren, and we set off in a convoy of motorbikes.

After one and a half hours of driving, up through the mountains to the west of Maubisse, we arrived in the village. João pointed out the house he had been brought up in, a wooden house with a thatched roof that had now fallen over. He pointed to where the cattle used to be kept on the slopes of the mountain, and then to the *uma lisan*. The house was built on wooden struts, with a conical shaped low-hanging thatched roof. It sat on a cliff that jutted out, overlooking the narrow valley, its path lined with bright yellow wildflowers. Following tradition in Joao’s family, the house was not occupied, and was entered only by house members. Other ancestral houses

have different customs and are sometime also domestic houses, whereas others are not allowed to be entered at all even by house members.

As we walked towards the *uma lisan*, Maria told me that the uncle who guarded the ancestral house was very proud of her and their family. João and his siblings had been ten altogether. But eight of them had died before they could have children. There were just two left: João and his brother. The grandfather had expressed his pride to Maria because she and her husband had ten children. João's remaining brother and his wife also had ten children. Together they had made a new generation of over twenty. They had gone from two to twenty. Maria beamed with pride.

João had recounted this story of the rejuvenation of the family to me on more than one occasion. Once over breakfast outside his house he said, 'We were ten, then two ... but now we've had ten children each, we've "replaced"! (*troka fali*).' He explained that his siblings had died because there had been no medicine to save them when they had fallen sick. In the end, it was just him and his brother left.

In Tetum and other local languages people in Timor-Leste talk about themselves and their siblings as a collective. Rather than saying 'I have one sibling', they say 'we are two'. 'Only two!' João and Maria often reminded me of João and his brother. Two was thought to be a small number, which is why João and Maria remarked on it. When I told people I was one of three siblings, this was met with shock or a comforting '*quitadu*', 'what a pity'.

When we reached the ancestral house Rina put on her university blazer and instructed her sister Bella to take photos with my camera. The guardian of the house, João's uncle, joined us from the field he had been attending. After some explanation, Rina, João and his uncle sat down on the stone altar next to the house to talk '*kultura*' (culture). Rina began asking questions, pulling out her phone to record the interview. I did likewise.

The questions Rina read from her assignment inquired about the structure of the village, and the history and material structure of the ancestral house, the *uma lisan*. The village, Suco Liurai, had four hamlets (*aldeia*), and each had an *uma lisan*, João explained. The name of this *aldeia* Hohonaru means cliff or steep mountain (*foho naruk*). The *uma lisan* named *Huu-Kai*, had been founded by two brothers. Their ancestors came from Mantasi, in Ainaro, then broke away to Hautmera, in Dare. The two brothers had married two women in Dare, João went on, but they never had children. Whilst fetching water from a spring the wives had turned into eels and joined the river. Their husbands couldn't find them, or anyone else, anywhere. The two brothers moved again to Manusae in Lauhili, but the land there was too small. Then they heard about *Satdu-dusurema*, where people practiced customary exchanges called '*lia*'. If the brothers wanted to marry any women from there, they would need to give animals in exchange. They had no livestock, so they caught a bird and a snake, but they were told they needed to give buffalo. Eventually they found two buffalo, one male and one female and were able to marry two women, but they still didn't

have any children. So they and their wives moved to Erhitu, a little nearer to Hohonaru, but still no children were born. Finally they married women from Hohonaru, where there was an *uma lisan* named Hohonaru Hurhe, and lots of children were born. The *uma lisan* Hohonaru was now split into two parts, east and west (*lorosae and loromonu*, M, *ailalan - brouwa*). There were two hearths inside to represent two groups.

At the end of their story, João and his uncle explained to us that to this day, they follow the traditions and customs (*lia*) that the ancestors passed down to them, and ‘worship their culture’ (*adora kultura*) asking that they will always have descendants (*bei'oan bele ba nafatin*) and continue in to the future (*avansa ba oin*).

Rina studiously asked about the material structure of the *uma lisan*. João and his uncle conferred that *Huu-kai* had eight pillars, four male, four female. Inside were *lulik* (sacred or powerful) objects, including swords (*surik*), large gold or silver disks worn like pendants (*belak*) and a necklace of orange clay beads (*morten*). Maria was ushered over to show the necklace she was wearing. ‘It is important, she said, ‘because it is *lulik*. If I wear the necklace and a bead breaks, it means that one of the members of the *uma lisan*, a man, is going to die.’ Her expression looked grave for a moment. The *uma lisan* had two sets of these bead necklaces, João went on, one called Mau-Mali after an ancestor. The other set had been lost during one of the times the *uma lisan* had been burnt down. It had been burnt a total of maybe five times, João counted. In the Japanese occupation, again during the

Indonesian invasion, and another time during the 2006 crisis, Bella, his elder daughter added.

From an anthropological perspective, the story of Hu-kai is one of looking for people, looking for good land and looking for children. The survival of João, his wife, his brother and his brother's wife, and their now twenty descendants who, in turn, were starting to have children of their own, is focalised through the story of the ancestral house (*uma lisan*). It is a story of looking for more life, survival, rebuilding and replenishment through periods of struggle and destruction. The telling of this story was led by João, but others who sat around and listened joined in with additional information, including Maria and Bella, their elder daughter. According to their traditions, their *lisan*, the house guardian explained, *telling* the stories of the generations, from the ancestors to the descendants was extremely important. Re-counting these things meant they were all tied together as one, not individual families, and here they used the Indonesian word, *keluarga*, for family. It was also viewed as important by local people to narrate the stories together as a group. Gathering together and meeting one another was also important because of the incest taboo, meaning any one from the *uma lisan*, who are considered 'maun-alin' (siblings), cannot marry. Knowing who a member of your *uma lisan* was also meant knowing who you could and could not marry.

An atmosphere of calm had settled in over everyone as the story was being told. 'If you don't follow *lisan* you won't have lots of children,' Rina's older sister Bella summarised the story simply.

I turned to ask Joao's uncle, how he felt as the guardian of the house, when he saw that the *uma lisan* had many members.

'We are grateful,' he responded. 'When the *uma lisan* has lots of members, the guardians (*uma nain*) are also happy. We grow the generations, some stay here and continue our *lisan*, others go and join another house. We count how many families we are, how many come, how many go, and if we are a lot'.

João added, 'We recount our stories to continue for the next generation. We know where we come from, and recount (*konta tuir*) to the next generation. Other groups to the east or the south don't do that, they leave their *uma lisan* and forget.'

Counting and recounting for João and his family are part of continuing practices and traditions. Crucially, as we have seen, they are also linked to the rebuilding of life, creating descendants, and replacing those lost. Rebuilding life, in this sense, meant not only building physical houses and following their *lisan*, but is entwined with creating descendants and making up for those that have been lost. In this way, João and Maria's *uma lisan* represented a generation which had gone 'from two to twenty'. This was part of moving towards the future and ensuring continuity of life. Maria and João's family valued an abundance of life and the liveliness of the *uma lisan*.

For Maria, the impracticalities of getting married young before you are ready to participate in exchange obligations and other economic responsibilities are an important consideration. Yet having children, contributing to the life of the *uma lisan*, whose origin story is in itself a struggle for survival, is equally significant. Quality of life wasn't discounted by quantity of people, rather it added to it.

The need that local people feel to replenish a generation after so many were lost to war is not surprising. Sudden structural changes such as violent conflict have been linked to high fertility rates in what is termed a 'replacement effect' (Schindler and Brück, 2011, p. 3). Timor-Leste's high fertility rate has been described both as a 'peace dividend' (McWilliam 2008:5), or a 'post-war baby boom' after the loss of family and friends (Belton et al 2009: 20). The ideas that Timor-Leste needed more people, and that people were few, were expressed to me in other interviews outside of Maubisse, as is also show in the previous chapters. This narrative appeared during the debates around teenage pregnancy and *soe bebe* (Chapter 4).

'Replenishing stolen generations' is vital for 'genuine reproductive justice' (Clarke and Haraway 2018, p. 31). Haraway is careful to preface her most provocative of views - that the human population needs to decrease to save the planet - with the caveat that those whose existence has been threatened by genocide and war should be allowed to replenish their numbers. However, there are no limits set out for who would replenish, and

how, or how many would be enough. Haraway is aware that her view is one that many feminists associate with imperialist and racist population control agendas. However, she sticks with this 'trouble', asking feminists to claim 'population' back from environmentalists and 'population' professionals (Haraway, 2016, 2018). These professionals are often part of the development industry, and such imperial and racist population control agendas are embedded in development logic (Hendrixson, 2019).

Another way we might think about population growth and loss in relation to constraints on reproduction is through the concept of 'reproductive abandonment' (Munro and Widmer, forthcoming). This describes the absence of technologies that enable survival and the failure to consider understandings, experiences, desired preferences, futures. It includes those who not only have been forcibly disappeared, but also those whose reproduction has been abandoned in the absence of policies and technologies that enable and assist reproduction. In many ways, renewal of life through customary means, that which is both social and biological, can be viewed as a response to reproductive abandonment in Timor-Leste.

On the basis of my own ethnography, life at a local level is valued in abundance due to the lack of involvement in development and that national economies. This contrasts with the development logic that associates fewer dependents with better economic development. Abandonment by the former, Portuguese, Indonesian and current state in the process of development, that is, the structural inequalities created, means that life is

valued in abundance through local ways of counting. In a related way, reproductive developmentalities and their interventions are asking people to abandon local ways of counting and valuing life in favour of economic progress. The question that my ethnography raises is: why, when being abandoned by the state in terms of development, should people abandon their approaches of reproduction?

The story of Hu Kai and João and Maria's family show how alternative ways of counting matter to people locally in Maubisse. The story shows how reproduction is distributed through familial relationships, through ancestral practices and traditions as well as journeys through the landscape. Reproduction here is distributed in the way that Jose and Maria's family sense the existence of their generations over time, including the uneven relationships such as violence and conflict, colonial occupation and lack of development that have constrained and destroyed life. At the same time part of reproducing generations relies on the customary practices, story, counting and replenishing kin that enables survival.

5.3 Making Kin or Population?

I now turn my attention to recent debates about population, reproduction and environment. As I have previously addressed, these grapple with the issue of population and survival in the face of environmental destruction and multiple forms of violence (Clarke and Haraway, 2018; Dow and Lamoureaux, 2020, Murphy 2017, 2018; Nelson

2015; Sasser 2019). Counting and number are recurring themes in these debates, raising key questions such as: What quantities and qualities of life do we have, and how do we measure these? What sort of life, and how much of it is encouraged, and what is discouraged or abandoned? Scholars have adopted the framework of reproductive justice to capture the way social and biological reproduction are inexplicably tied to unequal relationships. This intersectional approach originates from Black and Indigenous feminist activists in the US in the 1990s. They advocate for a wider understanding of reproductive rights to include a more collective sense of reproduction and the right to raise children in safe, health environments free from racism, environmental toxicity, and other forms of violence. Reproductive justice therefore aims to address and remedy divisive structural inequalities, including issues linked to gender, class, and race (Ross and Solinger, 2017; SisterSong, 2022).

Donna Haraway argues for '*composition, not accumulation*' when it comes to creating human life (author's emphasis, Clarke and Haraway 2018: 93). She calls for radical feminist scholars to champion the different ways we know kin can be made, beyond biogenetical baby making, to imagine a future in which babies are 'rare, nurtured, and precious' (ibid., p. 91). Haraway thus proposes the cultivation of alternative kinship relations, in which people and kin are composed through social experiences. In Clarke and Haraway's *Making Kin* volume, several authors show how extended kin networks, spiritual connections with ancestors (Benjamin 2018), and non-

monogamous relationships (Tallbear 2018) are very much part of this multi-relational, multispecies, multi-spirited kin-making. Haraway (2018) argues that through nurturing such relationships, we can make fewer babies, for a less human-heavy earth where all species have a better chance of surviving all together (2018, pp. 91-99). She proposes a controversial maxim: 'make kin not babies' (ibid., p. 91) However Sasser suggests Haraway's approach is 'populationist', (Strathern *et al.*, 2019) in its view that human *numbers* are socially and environmentally problematic, and should be reduced through non-coercive rights based solutions (Angus and Butler, 2011; Sasser, 2018). Sasser (2019) argues that populationist thinking stems from, and reproduces, forms of racism that cast aside considerations of consumption and inequality, in favour of reducing life in particular forms e.g., non-white lives in the global south (Sasser 2018). Murphy's chapter in *Making Kin* (2018) argues that 'population' as a concept needs to be done away with as through colonial practices and racist science population has tied reproduction to economy leading to the notion that some lives are economically valuable, whilst others are not even worth being born.

Responding to these discussions to these discussions, the ethnographic material here shows how numbers do and counting reproduction matter, and how people count themselves, particularly in the aftermath of conflict. Below I give another example of how families view and count themselves in the aftermath of conflict. This time we revisit Cristiano and his family, who featured in Chapter 1. Here I examine a similar

perspective about the need for replacement and the importance of children to families in Maubisse and explores the way life is remade through ancestral relationships and cultivating a sense of liveliness in the empty land. I draw on the regional anthropological literature from Timor-Leste to analyse the way reproduction is distributed in Timor-Leste through a broad set of relationships which in this case enable and encourage life to be remade in a place that has experienced loss, death and destruction.

5.4 Broken houses, fixing families

Throughout the dry season of 2018 (May–October) in Maubisse, many of the families I knew well were overwhelmed by a large number of deaths. One morning I woke up to a missed call on my phone from Cristiano. When I called back, he told me his uncle had died and I should join them to pay my respects with his parents and siblings. After a short walk from Cristiano's family's house, we arrived at the house of his deceased uncle (*uma mate*). We were served coffee on the concrete veranda and shortly afterwards, a relative guided us inside the corrugated iron house to pray by the body. Cristiano's uncle was laid out on a table. He was smartly dressed in a suit and wrapped in traditional cloth (*tais*)⁵ with his portrait photo at his feet. One of his daughters, dressed all in black, cried over her father's body. A group of older women and children sat on the dirt floor, huddled together, praying, and crying (*halkirik*). A long line of *tais*, brought as customary gifts,

⁵ *Tais*, traditional woven cloth used in customary ceremonies

were hung out on a string along the corrugated iron wall. We said our prayers, and soon returned outside where we were served more coffee and fried banana.



Figure 19. A photo of women and children, many dressed in black mourning clothes walk along a road in Maubisse. Credit: Author 2019

After a while, Cristiano and his father hurried off to talk to relatives. Meanwhile, from our seats on the veranda, Cristiano's mother and I watched a flurry of activity around us. Young girls fussed over a tablecloth for lunch. Guests arrived with trays of beer and soft drinks, rice, oil, and *tais* as part of their contributions to the family. Pigs, goats, buffalo and horses were brought as part of customary gifts to the host by their wife givers and wife takers. Some were taken behind the house to be slaughtered for meals

to feed the guests. Cristiano's mother called out greetings to people and narrated some of the goings on to me. Just opposite where we were sitting a troupe of small children arranged themselves on a bench made of old tree trunks. As one jumped down to the ground and an eruption of noise followed from the others as the bench moved beneath them. Cristiano's mother and I chuckled at them.

'Timorese like to have lots of children,' Cristiano's mother announced matter-of-factly.

'Why?' I asked.

'*Ema la iha ... there are no people,*' she said. 'If you have a farm, you need children, you can't be alone. The girls leave to go to their husbands' land, and you need boys to stay with you.'

I asked what she meant by '*there are no people*'.

'During the war many people died, people were lost. Now people need children. They are fixing (*hadia*) their families.'

Cristiano's mother connected the loss of people to conflict. The idea that people were few, related to the need to protect the reproduction of children, and the social structures which enabled people's livelihoods, such as having enough people to work on the land. Her comment about people 'fixing' their families implied a replacement of people, making up for the family members who had been lost.

Her comment about men staying within the family and women marrying out highlights the common preference for families in Maubisse to want an

even number of children, and in addition, a balance of male and female children. Upon marriage a husband's family (the wife-takers, T, *fetosan*,) pledge gifts (*barklake*) to the woman's family (the wife-givers, T, *umane*) in return for her leaving her *uma lisan*. In Maubisse people described to me how they were 'looking' for another boy, or another girl, to 'complete' their families, and enough boys to stay and manage the land, as well as to go away and work. When daughters got married their leaving would mean that gifts of money, animals and traditional sacred objects would be exchanged between the families. Gifts between the two families would then be obliged at other events, such as funerals or events relating to an *uma-lisan* of either family. Marriage alliances such as these are widely seen as reproductive, in that they ensure continuity of *the flow of life* (Fox 1986, p. 1).

In Maubisse, obligatory gift giving is commonly referred to as '*lia*' in Tetun, and the ceremonies where gifts are exchanged as *lia moris* (life ceremonies such as births of people, marriages, and consecration of sacred sites such as houses or places in the landscape) and *lia mate* (death ceremonies, including funerals and funerary rights that continue for a year or longer after a death). *Lia mate* and *lia morris* ceremonies are attended by the members of the ancestral house (*uma nain* or *mau-alin*), and family members joined through marriage, the wife givers and wife takers (*fetosan-umane*).

Anthropological literature from Timor-Leste emphasizes the importance of ancestral houses and customary rituals that celebrate the life and death

ceremonies. Traube describes Mambai ancestral houses as ‘a source of life’ (1986:66). The concept of relatedness is a condition grounded in past events and rituals conducted at the ancestral house, which themselves are a reconstitution of wholeness and unity. Members of an ancestral house gather from afar to contrast divisions and separations and become one as a group. Hicks also emphasised the role of rituals dedicated to ancestral ghosts to ensure fertility and continuity through generations (1988). Here I re-emphasise the role of *uma lisan* in reproducing life and ensuring continuity, not only through reproducing social relations between people, but reproducing the existence of members, enabling life, and counting people as families and groups are replenished. Ancestral houses are not buildings, but ‘people’, Boldoni argues (2021, p.19). To have many relations, including many children, makes all these relations precious in number, particularly when a group feels they have been diminished.

Addressing the literature on the importance of relationships between ancestral houses as a form of political alliance and economic exchange, in her work on Flores, Allerton (2013:) describes the importance of ‘liveliness’ (I, *ramai*, T, *rame*), as is mentioned during the inauguration. on the sociality it brings. *Rame* or *ramé* describes a heightened sense of sociality and can be productive of all sorts of things, processes, substances and sounds which Allerton calls ‘liveliness’ (2013, p. 54). This can also provide a sort of protective force. A perceived stinginess in the provision of hospitality, or a lack of liveliness does not threaten individual potency but the success of an

event in generating good health and fertility for a couple and their descendants (ibid.). *Rame* indicates a sense of liveliness which is productive and can also be reproductive in the sense that people are brought together to renew and embed social relations and ensure good wellbeing.

For example, one evening in Maria's kitchen, Rina and I played with Maria's two grandchildren who lived with us. Rina usually lived with some relatives (her older brother and wife) who were struggling to conceive, and so there were no children in the house 'Children make the house *rame* (lively)' Rina commented. 'It's great, it's better like this.' She pulled her niece onto her lap as the child squealed with delight. When I ate with Rina's sister Bella, and Camillia, one of the other renters in my house, they often commented about how poorly they ate when they ate alone. When new renters moved in, the house became noisy again with music blasted from the speakers every morning at 6am, as people got ready for work. At such times, there were always people in the communal space either family members or lodgers. Everyone would invite anyone who entered the room to sit, eat or smoke whilst listening and singing along to music. Although Bella and Camellia often refused offers of anyone else's food and cooked for themselves, they said they ate much better when they ate together with others. 'I used to eat so badly,' Camilla said, 'because I was alone. Now we eat '*rame-rame*', I'm eating lots and putting on weight!'. In Maubisse, houses that were seldom occupied or under construction built would blare out loud music to make them lively. Events like weddings and parties were

judged on how '*rame*' they were. This usually meant they had to be plenty of people, a lively atmosphere and good food. *Rame* can be associated with things being well or having a positive effect on people's individual and collective wellbeing. Having a lively household was thus also part of living well.

Here the process of being together and taking part in customary practices associated with ancestral houses show how members of different ancestral houses are not only bound by blood (through patrilineal descent), but also and through other substances such as food and participation at customary events. On another occasion, the deaths of some people in Maubisse provoked discussion about how often the deceased had visited their *uma lisan* and engaged in customary practices. Not following customs properly is widely believed to result in sickness and death. This shows how participating in such events, often referred to generally as '*kultura*' (culture)⁶ sustains the life of a person, socially and physically. Making events lively was part of showing appreciation to the ancestors and creating a good atmosphere. The reconstruction of *uma lisan* thus includes the physical creation of people and the social relations that sustain them. It is for this reasons that individuals and groups count, and their numbers matter, when it comes to fixing families.

⁶ 'Culture' is a crude translation of what people referred to as '*kultura*', which generally referred to traditional practices related to family, similar to *lisan*.

In the anthropological literature on Timor-Leste, descriptions of the land being spacious appear in creation cosmology. In an analysis of Mamabi creation myths Traube (1986, p.33) describes how the death of ‘mother earth’ gives fertility to the soil which makes the earth ‘wide and broad’ (*mlua*, *M*, *luan* Tetun). What struck me was how this description of the land being empty or spacious was often related to the size of Timor-Leste’s human population, such as ‘being few’, in a landscape that feels empty of people, and one that bears material traces of conflict. ‘Distributed reproduction’ (Murphy 2017) best describes the social engagements and negotiations that, in Maubisse, are part of recognising relationships and ‘fixing families’ across generations and in multiple environments. Thinking about reproduction as distributed refers to the way that reproductive processes are shaped within and beyond individual bodies, within structures, environments and across space and time. It is transformed by political and economic infrastructures that work in and beyond our bodies and landscapes.

The revival of customary practices including the rebuilding of many *uma lisan* has proliferated in Timor-Leste in the aftermath of independence. This revival of customary relationships can be seen as a way of reproducing social connections which manifest through relationships of obligation and entitlement which reproduce the ‘social fabric’ and enable people to deal with economic uncertainty through mutual support (McWilliam, 2011) (McWilliam 2011, p.746). They have also been shown to resolve obligatory

exchange relations to renegotiate hierarchical relationships between houses (Bovensiepen 2014). Adding to this, I emphasize that rebuilding house structures and reviving customary relationships are part of ‘fixing families’ in terms of relationships and hierarchies. Moreover, it is part of the process of repairing (reproducing) the human fabric of these, as members are added, reproduced and counted as a sum of their parts. In other words, tied to ancestral lineages, *uma lisan* represent reproduction in all forms, biological, social and cultural through the continuation of people, traditions and knowledge of a particular group. Furthermore, is that the rebuilding of these houses in Maubisse relates to replenishing and growing descendants, the human structure of the house, as well as the material building itself and the practices that continue traditions related to it. It is in this way that *uma lisan* are an integral part of distributed reproduction in Maubisse.

Experiences and practices which connect people to the socio-cultural landscape, the past and future through ancestral houses, gives value to reproduction. Sociality in itself is highly valued, and children are a large part of this. Sociality was sought out by my informants, and children were part of this affective sensorialisation of feeling many, plenty, together. In this context the commonality of babies does not negate their value as Haraway (2018, p. 91) seems to suggest they might when she asked for babies to be ‘rare and precious’. Babies in abundance are still precious.

Often critiques of quantitative practices focus on forms of top-level governance such as development, global health or state agencies. But as the

stories of Cristiano's and João's family have shown, these are not the only domains or arenas in which numbers carry importance for building prosperous lives. *Uma lisan* and relationships with the ancestors involve practices of counting in a customary numeracy of replenishing and continuing life. For example, in Laclubar, the killing of a house member was compensated for by the giving of a child from the perpetrators ancestral house to the victims ancestral house (Bovensiepen 2012). The notion of exchanging or replacing one life with another or compensating an *uma lisan* for the loss of a member is therefore not unheard of. Maria often told me how I looked like one of her daughters that had died as a child, and would be a similar age as I am now. She told me that when I first arrived, she thought I was 'her daughter coming back to her'. Here replacement does not aim for a 'replacement population growth rate' as favoured in development. Rather, replacement is the means by which life is replenished.

The descriptions of the landscape, abandoned houses, lost family members and feeling of 'being a few' by the local population in Maubisse are not represented in development reports that warn about 'demographic danger' which could be curbed by aiming for replacement rate fertility (approximately two children per couple). However demographic statistics paint a crude picture without describing the landscape people live in, and the histories which inform and shape their lifeworlds. That said, demographic numbers are not unimportant - more schools, hospitals and food production must be planned to accommodate a larger portion of young

people. Similarly, a sizable young population will make up the majority of voters in national elections. Arguably, it is the absence of what development has promised, in terms of a better quality of life, of economic prosperity to the country, and good healthy lives that requires people to ensure prosperity in other ways, such as in the number of kin.

5.5 Making Population *and* Kin: Counting in the absence of development and prosperity

In conclusion, the replacement of life lost to conflict is an important part of balancing life and death in Maubisse. The number of people contribute to a form of prosperity associated with an abundance of human life and ensuring its continued existence. However, this is at odds with development ideals which value quality of life, over quantity. Stories of replenishment emphasises continuation and survival, and this includes the counting and recounting of kin to make a landscape that is abundant in life.

However, replacement here takes on two meanings, as in Maubisse people talk about replacing family members, but family planning experts talk about achieving ‘replacement’ rate fertility, as the demographers in the introduction of this thesis explained to the students during their presentation (1.1). These different values of replacement, and different ways of counting, are part of different logics of balance and how they can contribute to prosperity. In this regard, ideologies about replacing life by

having children in Maubisse clash with development ideas of achieving replacement rate fertility. Replacement in this sense means both replacing loved ones lost in the war or signifies a form of 'sustainable development' in which replacement level fertility rates reduce population growth. In Maubisse however replacement pertains to the value of children, and the need to fix families and to fill 'the empty land' as a way of achieving balance in family relationships and prosperity in terms of continuity of life for the future. These two meanings of replacement show how local communities and proponents of reproductive developmentalities strive for a prosperity that exists in two forms: one in which more lives exist, and one in which fewer lives exist in a better 'quality'. To this end, life becomes valued differently in terms of both its quantity and its quality.

What *counts* as reproductive justice in a place where the loss of life has left people feeling diminished? In the wake of reproductive abandonment, local ways of counting are part of an insistence of survival, not only a way of ensuring continuity, but a way to 'remake' life in abundance as a form of prosperity. A populationist approach to reproduction considers lower fertility to be indicative of development, and/or social and environmental sustainability whilst a reproductive justice framework uses an intersectional approach that includes the wider social and political environment beyond the individual. As scholars of reproduction have shown, this requires us to think about how reproduction is distributed and relational, in ways that are both

biological, social, economic, political, and more-than-human. Rather than just thinking about what reproduction is and what it is not, it can be more helpful to think about what reproduction means to people, and how it is valued and imagined in particular contexts.

The ethnographic examples of the rebuilding of *uma lisan*, and counting kin, as part of 'fixing families', illustrate a cultural form of reproductive justice that is 'distributed' laterally? beyond individuals within the social environment, and in addition, historically across generations. It is a form of reproductive justice that favours a prosperous abundance of life, challenging development discourse around lowering fertility and slowing population growth.

The concept of distributed reproduction captures the way in which social reproduction and biological reproduction are inexplicably tied to unequal relationships. Whilst Haraway positions her argument of 'make kin not babies' within a reproductive justice framework, her position would be more firmly aligned with the demographers we saw at the UNTL public lecture, who favour lower fertility rates. But if reproductive justice is about sustaining the condition for collective thriving (Sasser 2019), how do we balance competing claims about what creates and sustains those conditions? As this chapter has shown, particular visions of future prosperity in Timor-Leste are linked to sustaining *more* life, because it is valued in its abundance in the post-conflict context. Cultural revisitation is also part of creating forging belonging and identity after the conflict, but

more than that it is tied to the process of reproduction that involves ensuring the next generation is replenished, both materially in terms of making children and socially in continuing tradition in the context of lives being lost and the land being 'empty'.

In Maubisse, reproduction has been distributed physically, socially, and culturally in colonial occupation and violence. Ideas relating to the spatial and temporal landscape, like *rai mamuk* or empty and spacious land, most often came up in explanations about the past loss of life, population, and having children. This suggests action to counter a situation, a form of reproductive agency in response to past conflict, as people talked about rebuilding families and collective life through having children *because of* those that died, and to replenish life for future collective survival and prosperity. Replenishing lives that have 'disappeared' is central to reproductive justice and freedom (Haraway 2018) but high fertility in Timor-Leste is often cast as a barrier to development. Furthermore, the examples from Maubisse also show that kinship relations can be flexible, multi-relational and multi-spiritual, but people are still precious in number, particularly in the absence of other forms of prosperity and development. Making life in the aftermath of conflict is part of building a 'lively' form of prosperity where quality of life and relationships *includes* quantity and abundance.

Here it is not my aim to debate or define kinship or personhood in Maubisse. Rather, I emphasize and analyse the way that numbers and local

ways of counting matter as part of reproduction. It is people in greater numbers, I argue, that create a lively form of prosperity for local people. This cultural logic clashes with economic ideals of 'sustainability' in capitalist thinking, which seek to govern reproduction for the sake of a better quality of life measured through health and development outcomes. These different logics have the same end goal, a more prosperous Timor-Leste, but they differ in their approaches of how to get there: through producing more people, or less people. What is clear, however, is that in the pursuit of reproductive justice, we must consider how reproduction is and has always been distributed, but also crucially, how people *count themselves*. As development professionals calculate fertility rates, families count descendants. Both look for a sense of balance through ideas of 'replacement' that will bring prosperity. But one values higher fertility and population growth, whilst the other seeks to limit it.

In this chapter, '*Rai mamuk*' (empty land), then as a description of the landscape, links the continuation of life with the making of a lively environment through cultivating human relationships with the landscape and within it. In the next chapter I further expand on the concept of distributed reproduction by drawing on another description of the environment and its connection to reproduction. I begin by examining a local joke that relates cold weather to sexual behaviour. I then interrogate the meaning of this joke to reveal the different ways that the environment

and sex are connected in Maubisse through customary practices that link human life and the natural and spiritual world.

6. The Cold Land: Distributed Reproduction, Potent Landscapes and Spirit Ecologies¹

In this chapter I return to the humours story that about the mountains that led me to Maubisse (see section 2.1.1). I recount the story again here as a reminder. Vera, her sister and I were sat on plastic chairs and tree stumps outside Vera's family's house in Same, on Timor-Leste's south coast. The warm damp air of the wet season formed clouds over the mountains to our backs.

'If you want to know about families and children.... you should go to the mountains (*foho*) they have lots of children there.' Vera's older sister suggested. *Foho* is synonymous with both the countryside and mountains in Tetun. 'Where in the mountains?' I asked, 'why do they have more children there?' 'They have more children there because it's cold,' Vera's sister said with a broad smirk. Leaning casually on the garden wall she rattled off in rapid Tetum, 'In the mountains, it's cold, people stay in bed, wrap themselves in blankets and have lots of children', she said rapidly, to more giggles from her siblings. Vera's sister did not expect me to catch her joke, but I laughed. Then Vera and her sister laughed embarrassedly as they

¹ Parts of this chapter were published as an in the article ' Planning Reproduction: Preparing for Life and the Future in Maubisse' (Burke, 2020)

realised I understood. The joke was that the cold weather in the mountains caused people to have more sex, and therefore more children.

As I outlined in Chapter 2, it was my first encounter with this joke that led me to consider undertaking fieldwork in Maubisse. However during my fieldwork I would come to frequently hear that people had more children ‘in the ‘mountains’ (*foho*). *Foho* can refer not only to the mountain areas but also to rural areas where people are often stereotyped as backward, traditional and uneducated. In relation to the joke Jenny’s sister told about cold land the ‘*foho*’ referred to the mountain areas where the climate is cold (as low as 0-10 degrees Celsius in the cold dry season depending on the altitude) compared to the warmer rural areas on the coast which reach 40+ degrees in the rainy season.

Located in the central mountains at between 1500–2000m above sea level, Maubisse is commonly referred to as ‘a cold place’. People shuddered when they described Maubisse as ‘’, ‘It’s cold!’ (*rai malirin ne’e*). The joke I describe above, about the climate leading to more sex and children, reappeared many times during in my fieldwork. According to some of my interlocutors, it was thus no surprise that the Maubisse administrative area also happens to have the highest fertility rate in the country, with women having on average six children (DHS 2016). The joke reflected reality—they really did have more children.

Using this joke about the cold land and fertility as a starting point, this chapter explores the relationship between reproduction and the

environment in Maubisse. Like the phrase *rai mamuk* (empty land, Chapter 5), the joke about *rai malirin* (cold land) is a description of the landscape which also evokes ideas about reproduction and population in Maubisse. I argue that this joke, amongst other examples, reflects how reproductive agency in Maubisse is located not only in individuals or people but in relation to the wider environment itself. This stands for a broader pattern in anthropological literature on Timor-Leste in which relationships to the land and the non-human agents that occupy it are crucial to shaping life (Trindade, 2012; Bovensiepen, 2014, 2021; Palmer, 2015; Palmer and McWilliam, 2019; Feijó and Kent, 2020). Drawing on this literature and bringing it into conversation with theoretical work on reproduction (Chapter 1.2), I show how reproduction is located and ‘distributed’ (Murphy 2011) in an animate and lively landscape in Maubisse. In the previous Chapter, (Chapter 3,) I emphasised the importance of counting kin and recounting ancestral stories to achieve reproductive justice. I argued that reproduction was, and always has been, distributed through social relations and the landscape. In Murphy’s concept of ‘distributed reproduction’ issues such as pollution and contamination are recognised as part of the wider social and political infrastructures that help or hinder life in unequal ways. Here I take the idea of distributed reproduction one step further, showing how in Maubisse the environment itself has reproductive agency

I start with an analysis of the joke about the cold land in Maubisse, describing how people spoke about the climate and related this to sex and

fertility (4.1). This is followed by an analysis of the literature on animism in Timor-Leste and the wider region of Southeast Asia in relation to the role of the landscape in reproduction (4.2). Using ethnographic case studies, I analyse three key terms to explore how reproduction and reproductive agency is distributed throughout the environment in Maubisse:

lulik, 'sacred/taboo/potent', *natureza* 'forces of nature' and *matak-malirin* 'the green and the cool'. In section 4.3 I argue that whilst some definitions of reproductive justice include the environment as a contextual space in which reproduction occurs (Ross and Solinger, 2017), in animist literature, and in Maubisse, the environment and forces in it, are reproductive agents in their own right. Furthermore, non-human kin relations, or multispecies relation are implied as an alternative to 'making babies' (Haraway 2019, p. 98). However, understanding how reproduction is distributed in the environment in Maubisse means taking seriously the non-human agents who have agency over reproduction in *both* creative and destructive ways.

6.1 Rai Malirin and Fertility

When I first arrived in Maubisse the temperature felt cool but pleasant, especially after the heat and humidity of the coastal capital, Dili. I arrived in the dry season, the coldest time of year, but the skies which framed the mountains were clear and the sun strong. Children's cheeks were chapped red by the cold breeze and the sun's powerful rays. I received lots of

warnings about the cold climate. I spent long mornings in Maria's kitchen chatting and eating around the fire, as everyone warmed up some got ready to for work and school. Before I set out for a day at the clinics, or visiting interlocutors, Maira often reminded me, 'it's cold here (*rai malirin nee*), the climate isn't the same as yours, the land isn't the same (*rai la hanesan*)'. I smiled back and assured her that where I lived in the UK was much colder, I was used to the cool weather. Before too long however I found myself getting sick and run down. Maria scolded me as if I was one of her daughters. 'See,' she would say, 'you said you were used to the cold, but the land is not the same!'

From a personal viewpoint, she was right. I am not sure when it happened exactly, but I started to *feel* the cold, in my body almost. And I realised, it was a different experience from feeling the cold in England. Most houses in Maubisse were made of concrete blocks or corrugated iron, had no insulation and plenty of gaps for drafts. The room I rented from Maria's concrete house was built with breeze blocks and a slate roof, the kitchen was part of the family's other house made of corrugated iron supported by wooden posts. The house structures stored and emanated the cold. Like other members of the household, I began to find excuses to dawdle around the hearth in the kitchen, enjoying the warmth of the fire, ignoring Maria's protests that the kitchen was too smoky and dirty for me to sit in. In the evenings, after cooking rice and cabbage over the flames, Maria and her daughters pulled the smallest children on to their laps to cuddle them,

sharing body heat. I soon found myself doing the same, warming my feet on the stones of the hearth before bed.

When we emerged from our rooms each morning my housemates and I greeted each other with shivering laughter and squeals of cold. Our shrieks were particularly audible from the bathroom as we tipped cold water over our heads to wash. On foggy cold days I joined my friends from the clinics and hospital watching Indonesian soap operas in their beds, drinking sweet hot drinks and eating rice porridge whilst tucked under their blankets. Whenever I drove down to the coast on visits to Dili, I enjoyed the warmth that flooded back into my bones. In the rainy season this trip became a requirement just to dry some clothes.

During the early months of my fieldwork each day I would walk into the centre of Maubisse to conduct some interviews, make observations and participate in activities at some key points of interest (the village office, the CCT clinic, and the market). In the dry season I'd wrap up in a fleece and woolly hat. My usual walk passed a government agricultural office which sometimes had horses, motorbikes or tractors parked up outside. On one day four men stood outside and we greeted each other as I passed. Two of the men I had met before—they quickly explained to their colleagues that I was in Maubisse to do research.

‘What is your research about *mana*²?’ one man called out as I was walking past.

‘Population growth,’ I replied, stopping briefly to chat. They nodded and suggested I check out the census data at the village office. We exchanged greetings and I continued on my way when one man called after me, ‘It's cold here! That's why the population is growing!’ The men he stood with all laughed.

For many people, ‘rai malirin’ was a silly, and slightly rude, joke. But others told me that it was true, with deadly seriousness and sincerity. The joke, however, was so pervasive that I often became bored of hearing it, particularly when I was trying to speak with someone about family size, population change, or contraception. That said, with time I learnt to lean into the joke, and even found myself bringing it up. As time went by, I even started conversations by asking about it, which helped get any giggles or embarrassment addressed at the beginning of the conversations. However, I quickly realised that it was more than an icebreaker.

‘*Rai malirin*’, I learned, showed solidarity between people who knew the struggles of living with cold weather in the mountains. Jokes require knowledge about values and assumptions and show a form of intimacy with one's audience (Sanchez 2016). Jokes can denote an insider status and excludes those who don't have the same understanding as you. At the same

² *Mana* (‘older sister’) is an address for women of a similar age.

time, jokes also help to avoid discussion which could be difficult or divisive (ibid.,). For example, this joke could defuse conversations when the sensitive topic of sex came up, vice versa, enable people to bring the topic of sex into a conversation. In addition to this, the joke was also a response to the judgements made about large families in the mountains. I heard the phrase '*rai malirin*' whispered at the back of launch events of NGO reports which that explained that high fertility had a negative effect on health and economy in rural areas. I heard '*rai malirin*' giggled by women during a presentation of census data, when graphs and data tables showed that the highest fertility rates were in rural mountain areas. This short phrase was an abbreviation of the joke, a quick reference to infer its full meaning without appearing rude. During a presentation of my research project to the Ministry of Health, the connection between the cold and its effect on high fertility was matter-of-factly declared 'true' by a health professional, showing that for some, the cold climate was not a joke, but a genuine influence on sexual behaviour. Where sex and reproduction is cast as something individually driven and determined, the idea that weather or climate might influence or behaviour seems somehow far-fetched or irrational. Among my interlocutors, this was clearly not the case., as I shall show later in this chapter.

During the early months of as my fieldwork however, I had not yet come to understanding the wider implications of the joke about *rai malirin*. At that point in time the joke and idea behind it troubled me: was the

influence of climate on fertility something people also took seriously, or was it *only* a joke? In describing ‘weather-words’, Ingold (Ingold, 2007, p. 20) draws on landscape phenomenology to describe how we are living in a landscape that is constantly in flux. He argues not that things have *life*, but that ‘things are within life, caught up in a current on continual generation’. (ibid., p. 31) Here Ingold’s is arguing is that life is happening all around us. A key example is the weather, a medium which exists between earth and sky might be seen as agents, things that affect change upon us through power within themselves. The idea that the world is split into ‘people’ and ‘materials’ creates problems, because it misses out how these substances merge and transform. These transformations are movement and being which are essential to life. Ingold argues that it is not that things *have* agency, but they *are* agency. In the same way, while hearing people's sharp intakes of breaths in the morning coldness, I not only felt the cold, but I saw and came to believe in its agency.

Being caught up in this ‘weather-world’ and its transformation as a part of the ‘lived-in openness between earth and sky’ (Ingold 2007), the cold, rain, and sun and heat in Maubisse led me to pay closer attention to ‘*rai malirin*’ and other descriptions of the landscape and consider the forces in the lived environment that drove life and gave life. During the dry season (June–October), the coldest months were July and August. Even during the wet season (November–May) the mist and rain made the air damp, bringing a different kind of cold. Whilst January and February were relatively warm,

the wind could pick up to very high speeds, bending roofs backwards like tin cans, or blowing them off completely. Sometimes the weather was just weather, but it was also related to the agency of ancestral spirits. During one windy night at a funeral party, Ama Olga, a neighbour of mine, explained that strong winds could mean the ancestors were hungry or angry, and so food should be offered to them to appease them. Breaking local customary rules (*tarabandu*) also caused storms or strong winds.

Part of the reason I wondered if the association between climate and fertility was taken seriously was due to several encounters where people appeared to do just that. For example, a few days after encountering the men outside the agricultural office I was invited to drink tea on Mina's veranda with Mina's brother-in-law and a friend. Her brother-in-law was a schoolteacher, and we chatted about schools and education. He asked about the topics of my research. I explained, in a little more detail this time, that I was interested in how the population had grown since independence, and what this meant for family life. 'I'm sorry Menina³, but...' he apologised, so as not to offend me with what he was about to say, '...it's cold here, so people drink and can't control themselves.' He spoke earnestly and without laughter.

In two of my interviews with social justice activists, I asked them about this joke. Both questioned my scepticism that it was a joke at all and

³ *Menina*, 'Miss' is the polite and formal way to address for an unmarried woman

asked me to look at the 'evidence'. 'If you look at the census reports, where is the highest fertility?', Jon, one of the activists said pointedly. '...In the cold places'. This happens to be largely true, with Maubisse and Emera, two areas, known for cold weather and coffee production, having the highest fertility rates in the country. Some found it rational that the cold weather had an effect on people's sexual behaviour. Others found it funny, perhaps because the story about sex reflected reality, or because sex was a taboo topic.

I had been quick to dismiss *rai malirin* as a joke about stereotypes, like the stereotype that people in hot countries have fiery tempers, or that the British are reserved because of the cold grey weather. Analytically, I also considered whether it is linked to a broader racist cultural stereotype, that labels people in the mountains as uncivilised, hypersexual, and uneducated, with nothing better to do but have sex. Stereotypes about 'mountain' people as uneducated and backwards are prevalent in Timor-Leste, as elsewhere in the world. A lot of humour in Maubisse is also self-deprecating; it wasn't unusual to hear people adopt an insult and play along, turning it into a joke about themselves. During Traube's (1986, p. 49) fieldwork in Alieu, which neighbours Maubisse, she found people's humour cheerfully self-deprecating. Local people spoke of themselves as 'stupid' or 'ignorant', berating themselves for only knowing about rituals (Traube 1986:49). Traube argues that this self-depreciation serves to criticise the educated, who know little of the rituals so important for sustaining life. Jokes can thus

also 'point towards a space of intimate local self-knowledge,' (Steinmuller 2011, p. 227). The joke of *rai malirin* similarly was sometimes played on by people from mountain areas to convey how they were being judged and pass off stereotypical traits they were judged for such as poverty and high fertility to other forces in the environment, beyond individual control. Jokes in this way become 'an everyday form of resistance' (Scott, 1987, p. xvi) as the meaning became subvert to resist dominant stereotypes.

Beyond stereotypes however, the joke about the cold land illuminated another aspect of life in Maubisse. Swancutt (2016), writing of the community where she conducted fieldwork in Southwest China, describes how animistic ideas are woven into hidden knowledge and jokes. Local people played on the state's idealisation of animistic beliefs as conserving the natural environment. This allowed them to benefit from a state project which paid them to plant trees. In this 'art of capture', as Swancutt (2016, p. 75) calls it people use hidden jokes or knowledge to creatively reinvent their own cosmologies, ways of life and engagements with others. These examples show how jokes, local knowledge and subversions of stereotypes can reveal a lot about local knowledge, power dynamics and cosmologies.

Anthropologists of the Ontological Turn have advocated that we are to take other people's life-worlds seriously, taking what people say at their word. Rather than thinking in terms of metaphors or different views of the world, they argue we should consider that people inhabit different worlds. Or as Holbraad and Pickering argue (2017), ontological revitalisation leads

us not to question how things are seen differently, but to question what there is to be seen. In a related vein, I argue, we must take seriously people's view of the environment and its interaction with reproduction. Attributing high fertility to environmental factors whether jokingly or seriously, points to the broader ways that reproductive agency is distributed beyond the individual, amongst social relations and in the wider environment. *Rai malirin* as a joke or understanding of this relationship is useful for illuminating how human reproduction is embedded in the landscape. In order to fully understand the interconnection between reproduction and environment we need to examine several concepts and situate them in the wider regional context. Below (6.2) I examine ideas about environment and agency from regional literature on Timor-Leste and other parts of Southeast Asia. Using ethnographic examples from Maubisse I then describe three concepts which attribute and distribute reproductive agency throughout the landscape, as part of what Palmer and McWilliam called 'spirit ecologies'.

6.2 The Potency of the land: spirit ecologies and reproduction

During the dry season João and Maria's started work on a new house they had long been saving for. One day, an Indonesian labourer they had hired was working on the foundations when he was attacked by a land spirit (*rai nain*). The land spirit appeared in an abandoned house behind their

main house where I and their daughter slept. Both the abandoned house and the current house had been burnt down during the violence of 1999, when Indonesian forces retreated following the referendum on Timorese independence. The spirit had grabbed the builder's leg and pulled it. The Indonesian builder was apparently very scared and explained that he was not there to harm the spirit, and wanted to leave it in peace. He explained all this to João after the attack.

People in the hamlet I stay in often warned me to be careful during my research activities. This often included me going beyond the hamlet and to the market. They were not only concerned about human dangers, but the non-human agents and powerful forces in the landscape. João and others often expressed their concern that visitors, in particular non-Timorese, walked around without knowing about the dangers of the land. Similarly, in 2016 I had been very ill during a stay in Same, in the neighbouring district of Manufahi. At that time I was told that my illness was caused by my 'wandering around' (*lao arbiru*) in unknown places.

At Maria's fireside in the evenings, João told me stories about the land whilst Kasmira heckled him with comments. Particular places in the landscape (*fatin lulik*) associated with ancestral spirits (*avo sira*) or nature (*natureza*) could cause illness, madness or death if you accidentally wandered across them, were disrespectful or unaware of them. On the many times I visited ancestral houses, a cross was made with dirt from the land on my forehead for protection. When I visited João and Maria's *uma lisan*

(Chapter 5), I had been allowed inside the *lulik* structure because I was ‘already considered family’ and so it wasn’t dangerous for me to enter like it would be for non-family members.

In addition, the landscape also harboured land spirits or guardians (*rai nain*) like the one who attacked the Indonesian builder or who might grab you to make you fall off your motorbike. They could appear in animal or ghost like form. There were also troll or sprite-like creatures (*dore fuik*) that lived in the forests, a female ghost with long dark hair, white skin and red lips (I, *pontianak*)⁴ who attacked pregnant or nursing women and ensnared men as well as witches (*buan*), were as humans who could place curses. Maria and João’s daughters, who were similar in age to me, told me stories of their own, debating amongst themselves if they had *really* seen *pontianak*. The grandchildren ran around on dark nights pretending to be witches trying to catch each other.

Whilst some treated stories about *rai nain* or *pontianak* sceptically, others fully embraced their telling. However, the potency of the land, its *lulik* attributes, were never questioned, but rather spoken about in hushed warning tones. When people became ill after visiting a certain place known to be *lulik* or where a force called *natureza* was strong, that was the explanation. This animate landscape in Maubisse has a wider regional

⁴ *Pontianak* or *Pontiana* is prevalent in Southeast Asian mythology

significance and it is useful at this point to draw upon examples from further afield.

The power of the landscape and agents within it are well documented in wider Southeast Asia. Anderson (1990:22) described a potency in the natural world on Java, Indonesia, as an energy that animates the universe, something central to the making and regeneration of life (Anderson 1990:22). On the Indonesian island of Flores, several islands west of Timor, Catherine Allerton (2013:97) describes how people in southern Manggarai people engage with a landscape that is profoundly animated (2013:97). The lived-in environment of fields, forests and water sources gain value and are 'enlivened' by everyday activities such as farming, fetching water, as well as through ritual and in particular ritual speech. Allerton argues that rituals acknowledge the existence of the spiritual landscape beyond what is visible to 'ensure the ongoing presence of beneficial forces and to protect human activities from amoral or malevolent energies (ibid., :98).

The following sections focus on three related terms I documented in Maubisse, *Lulik*, (6.2.1) *Natureza*, (6.2.2) and *Matak Malirin*. (6.2.3) They refer to the landscape and natural environment, and the reproduction of life, both human and otherwise. They are part of what Palmer and McWilliam (2019, p. 474) refer to as 'spirit ecologies' which are central to understanding how reproduction is distributed throughout the landscape in Maubisse.

6.2.1 *Lulik*, life giving and life taking

‘The people who committed crimes during Indonesian times ran away to West Timor. If they cross back to Timor-Leste they will get sick and die early.... because the land is *lulik*,’ João explained to me one evening by the fire in the family kitchen. Timor-Leste is sometimes referred to as ‘sacred’ or ‘potent’ land (*rai lulik*)⁵. This describes how the land can be dangerous to those that cause it harm, such as the perpetrators of violence during the Indonesian occupation. This power within the land can also be protective and productive, if treated correctly and with respect.

In Timor-Leste the animate landscape has been described with particular attention paid to ‘*lulik*’ places and objects. Often translated as ‘sacred’ or ‘taboo’, *lulik* encompasses much beyond these categorisations. Anthropologists have described that its ‘janus faced nature’ carries both protective blessing and retribution or punishment (McWilliam, Palmer and Shepard 2014).

Trindade describes *lulik* as being at the core of Timorese values which exists in all language groups in Timor-Leste (2011). It is ‘the spiritual cosmos that contains the divine creator, the spirits of the ancestors and the spiritual root of life including sacred rules and regulation that dictate relationships between people and nature’ (2011:1). The term puts people in a position of respect, fear, and obligation and Trindade argues that *lulik*

⁵ Also *rai luli* (M), *rai segradu*, *terra santa*, (P).

serves as a moral standard through regulating the relationships between people creating social contracts for example between generations (ibid.). *Lulik* also regulates how people interact with nature to support their life. It demands that nature must be protected and respected, through rituals, such as harvest ceremonies to show gratitude and value to the fertility of the land, and to hope for better results in the coming seasons (ibid.).

Bovensiepen (2014) argues that *lulik* can be considered the main source of agricultural productivity, health, and fertility. *Lulik* is inherently connected to the environment through its agency in the landscape, not only through trees or rocks but within the land itself (ibid.). *Lulik* has agency itself, and it can be hungry or angry, or even possess people. Bovensiepen translates *lulik* as 'potency', as in Laclubar subdistrict, where her research took place, it was considered to be 'an energy that can give life and that animates specific sites in the landscape, objects or houses - and is frequently associated with ancestral activities' (Bovensiepen 2015:29) Something that is *lulik*, be it a place, an object or a house can be a source of 'authority, reverence, well-being, and utopian hopes of prosperity', in other words they are life-giving and can also take life away (Bovensiepen and Delgado Rosa, 2016, p. 3) Something *lulik* is also a 'source of intense danger, disease, death, madness and thus feared and avoided' (ibid.).

The category of *lulik* has been transformed in Timor-Leste through interactions with outsiders, such as Catholic missionary, Portuguese colonialism and Indonesian occupation (Bovensiepen and Delgado Rosa

2016). Interventions of aggression, such as the destruction of sacred ancestral houses and objects, did not destroy *lulik*, but increased people's fear of it. At the same time when occupiers and aggressors have withdrawn from Timor, this has served to prove the potency of *lulik* as a protective force. Where the Catholic church has adopted *lulik* into its discourse to refer to 'sacredness', this also enforces the authority of *lulik*. Attempts to destroy *lulik* places, in particular sacred ancestral houses, have only reinforced its potency, strengthening *lulik* in its productive and destructive possibilities (ibid., p. 33).

Certainly, *lulik* was central to relationships in Maubisse in particular to the relationships in and between people and ancestral houses as described in Chapter 1. However, a related concept, *natureza* featured heavily in my fieldwork conversations in Maubisse. *Natureza* is concept that refers to a force of nature, to a power and agency within the environment. Often associated and entwined with *lulik* it too is shaped by encounters with colonial occupiers. Below I explore how *natureza* manifests as another agency in the landscape which affects life, death and reproduction.

6.2.2 *Natureza*: a force of nature

'*Natureza* is important too,' Cristiano said pointedly, '*Natureza* is all around,' he gestured to his family's vegetable gardens and the coffee trees, and the clear cyan blue sky with wisps of cloud on the light green hills. I sat

in Cristiano's garden and drank coffee as Cristiano and his father explained customs and traditions in Maubisse. We talked extensively about the ancestral houses and the importance of knowing your relatives and ancestors through visiting the house and taking part in customary celebrations and exchanges (see Chapter 5). I was always welcome to visit and hangout at Cristiano's family house and land, to pick coffee or attend some sort of family occasion or customary ceremony related to an ancestral house. Cristiano's mother always ensured I was well fed and wrapped up against the cold or the sun, and his father invited me to pick coffee from their coffee trees whilst he himself sported his favourite Santa Claus hat. 'The *uma lisan* comes first, then the government, then *kultura*', Cristiano recited to me. His father quickly corrected him.

'*Natureza* comes first,' he said, counting it on one finger, 'then the *uma lisan* second, then the Church and the government together ... because in Timor they are like the same thing.' He counted them on his third finger. *Natureza* can be simply translated from the Portuguese word for nature (P, *natureza*). The natural landscape in Maubisse can be referred to as *natureza*, particularly when talking about Maubisse's natural beauty (*natureza furak*)⁶. However, its wider meaning in Maubisse was as a force that drives life, an agency that is crucial to reproduction. *Natureza* did not only refer to nature as something to look at, or as a physical space. It is also a potent force,

⁶ Environmental programs often used the word *natureza*, alongside environment (*ambiente*) or climate (*klimatika*)

something that could act by itself. *Natureza*, entangled with other supernatural and invisible agents such as *lulik* and ancestral spirits, affected people's health, wellbeing, fertility and survival. *Natureza* was described as something that needed to be talked about sensitively and correctly so to show it respect, otherwise it could cause sickness and death. Even now, typing *natureza* on the page, a nervousness rises in me due to the way people talked about it fearfully and in hushed voices.

'*Natureza* came first because it was here first, *Maromak* (god, the creator)⁷ created it first, then the *uma lisan*, the ancestral house, which were made with nature. It respected nature, then came the government and the Church.' Cristiano's father explained that the Catholic Church in Maubisse has a special relationship with *kultura* now, but during the Portuguese colonial occupation this wasn't the case. Then the Church saw Timorese as 'gentile' (pagan/uncivilised) and discouraged people from practising local traditions. In the 1980's Maubisse's parish priest, now the Bishop of Maliana⁸ Dom Norberto do Amaral, pushed for 'interculturalisation', in which local belief systems were integrated with Catholic teachings. The argument was that the Catholic 'God' and Timorese concept of '*maromak*' were one and the same.

⁷ *Maromak* (T) refers to a creator, which people assert was part of local cosmology before missionaries arrived. *Maromak* also refers to a Catholic God and often statues of Jesus and The Virgin Mary.

⁸ One of Timor-Leste's three dioceses.

Noticing the sun was shining in my eyes, Cristiano's dad explained that the sun is like the father. The land, the ground, is the mother. The mother provides sustenance, food and drink, like giving a baby her breast.

'Once you die, you return to the ground, you return to your mother. The father sends sun and rain which help the food grow. They are in balance, the sun and the land, the mother and the father ... menstrual blood also returns to the ground as the body returns to the ground.'

'Where do spirits go?' I asked.

'To their ancestral house, then to Ramelau,' Cristiano told me in a slightly uncertain and hushed voice. Ramelau is Timor-Leste's highest mountain. It sits within Ainaro municipality and is about an hour's drive on rough mountain roads from Maubisse. Ramelau has also been called Tat Mai Lau (highest, oldest ancestor, M) or 'Ama Lau' (Great Father, M) (Traube 1986).

'On Ramelau, *natureza* is very strong' Cristiano told me. 'It is a *lulik* place that needs to be protected. If you disturb these places you can die or go crazy. Places like that you can't just go around as you please (*lao abiru*) or say whatever you like (*koalia abiru*). If you make a mistake, you can get lost and go to another world. You could run into a ghost or spirit (*mate kalamar*)', Cristiano told me in a hushed voice. 'There is a door there to another world, the centre of the world (P, *centro mundo*). The spirits enter through the door, only they know where it is, living people can't enter. On Ramelau people are scared of *natureza*. You must protect, respect, conserve it.'

The potency of the land on Ramelau was associated with the spirits of the dead, *lulik* and *natureza*. During the Indonesian occupation the Church built a statue of the Virgin Mary on top of Ramelau and built an open-air church on a flat piece of land near the peak. Every year on the eve of the feast day of Our Lady of the Rosary, (7th of October) thousands of Timorese ascend the mountain the night before, to camp out. They then visit the peak at sunrise before attending a 7am mass.

I had expressed strong interest in joining the pilgrimage to Ramelau during my time in Maubisse and in October 2018 I joined Maria's family on the pilgrimage. Their journey took difficult roads, which were full of whole families riding in convey on motorcycles. Maria and her family camped at the top of the mountain near a small church that had been constructed for morning mass. The top of the mountain was crowded and there was a large crowd on the windy peak with many praying and waiting to touch the statue of the Virgin Mary. Sadly in 2018, as in previous years, a number of people died during the two days people camped on the mountain. One was a girl from Maubisse. Most people I spoke to in Maubisse held it widely believed that these accidents were caused by *natureza* and people disrespecting it. In the case of the girl who died from Maubisse she was said to have fallen from a ledge because she 'thought wrongly' or the ancestral house 'said' something wrong (*uma lisan koaliala sala*). Although later Maria told me that she had heard a different theory, the girl had been assaulted and killed by a male relative. Despite there being alternative theories to what causes a

death or illness the power of *lulik* and *natureza* could be behind it and should regardless still be respected. For example, when a man in Maubisse was electrocuted whilst trying to connect his house to the electricity pylons, João's first comment was that this man hadn't visited his *uma lisan* in a long time.

Back in Cristiano's garden he continued to explain the importance of *natuerza* and *lulik* places it inhabited to me. 'For example, if you go up there with a girlfriend, you can't do *stuff (bo'ok malu)*, it's a sacred place.' The emphasis on appropriate sexual behaviour, specifically aimed at preventing young people being amorous or having sex during trips to Ramelau was particularly prominent in the Churches sermons around early October, the time of the annual pilgrimage to Ramelau. Sexual activity framed as a form of disrespect, was even blamed for the deaths of people on the mountain, which occurred every year, particularly during the pilgrimage when paths were crowded, and people camped out on the cold mountain top. 'Control yourself' (*kontrola ita nia aan*) and the virtues of abstinence were repeated at Maubisse masses by the priest and church leaders in the weeks running up to the pilgrimage. In September 2018 the Church and local authorities closed Ramelau to visitors whilst volunteers cleared the pathways, collected rubbish and put in litter bins, steps and signage ahead of that year's pilgrimage. After I left Timor in 2019, Cristiano told me that in September 2020 that Church had closed Ramelau again before the pilgrimage to 'make

it *lulik* again (*halulik*), like it had been in Portuguese times, because too many couples had been ‘messaging around’ up there.

In Cristiano’s garden, all the while we were been talking about *natureza*, Cristiano’s voice got quieter and softer, as people often did when they were talking about sensitive issues, even if there were no other people around. I was acutely aware that Cristiano’s father had wandered off to bathe, and of the pines of the ironwoods rusted around us in a light breeze. Cristiano became increasingly cautious in his answers as I asked more questions. He warned me to be careful asking questions because it was risky. He then told me several secrets about his ancestral house that he told me I could never write down and speaking about them might cause terrible things to happen to me or the family because they might anger *natureza*. I couldn’t talk about these things or know anything more because it was dangerous and it would make my life short and affect its condition (*vida ladún diak*). These issues were too dangerous to even talk about.

‘When you go against *Natureza* or you know too much you can die and go mad. It doesn’t forgive like God (*Maromak*) does, it doesn’t give salvation,’ he warned me. ‘It is *natureza* that chooses the ritual speakers (*lia nain*) of the ancestral houses, the men of the houses who are authorised to speak and conduct ceremonies. Some families have three or four ritual speakers, it depends on who *natureza* chooses. It appears in their dreams, maybe from a young age like primary school. Often ritual speakers are clever and know a lot, not from studying, but from *natureza*. They don’t need to read or write,

they can just speak and know and *natureza* assists them. They have dreams about the future, who might get sick or if an accident (*disastre*) will happen, like a landslide (*rai monu*) or being struck by lightning (*rai lakan*, T, lit. to light up the land). Then they can advise people what to do. They have a special connection with *natureza*. Some people say they are *lia nain* - when they are not, to show off, but *natureza* punishes them, this is *regla*, order.’

Natureza, as Cristiano and his father described it, was part of the animate landscape in Maubisse. It was both life giving and life taking in its protection and provision of life in the landscape. It is a potent force which acts in its own right, or in relation to humans. In its close relationship to *lulik*, *natureza* was part of the potency in the landscape. Like *lulik*, *natureza* also served as a form of governance on moral order, such as the Catholic Church to regulate the behaviour of young people who took camping trips to Mount Ramelau on weekends or pilgrimages on Catholic feast days.

‘*Natureza* must be respected, things like tsunami’s, earthquakes, this is *natureza*,’ Lydia, a health worker from the Maubisse hospital, told me. She recounted a story about a group of teenagers who had visited a waterfall, a place that was considered *lulik*. They had visited the waterfall to go swimming, then a few of them went into the bushes to relieve themselves. When they returned one of their group had drowned in the water. In the past, and less so now, people leave offerings to *natureza*, such as rice and food in *lulik* places. Mana Lydia explained that this was different, from giving food to the ancestors, a common practice at customary ceremonies.

Food offered to the ancestors was put on plates left on tables or sitting mats for them to eat. But for *natureza* you put food near *lulik* places, like rocks and trees. The power of *natureza* and ancestors is not the same people confirmed, but both must be respected. ‘you can go and talk to your ancestors in the graveyards’ she explained, ‘but it's different for *natureza*.’

Natureza not only took life away, but it also protected life. For example, one of Cristiano’s uncles in Same did not eat or drink anything at all. Instead, it was said that his power and strength came from *lulik* and *natureza*. During the occupation he had been beaten up very badly, and left with a huge wound, but when people tried to sow it up the needles just broke, because he was so strong with the power of *lulik* and *natureza*.

Winch (2020: 122) has described the spiritual landscape in Timor-Leste as ‘intersecting domains of relation space’ which includes geographic features as well as ‘coexistence’ of the living with invisible or unseen forces. Winch lists these as *Maromak* (referring here to the Christian God rather than an indigenous deity), spirits of the ancestors, spiritual custodians of the land, *rai-nain* and the life-giving forces residing within all elements of nature (*espiritu natureza*), alongside living people. She analyses these through a critique of the western vernacular of security studies, that overlooks everyday realities of safety and wellbeing. Her analysis is based on her fieldwork in Viqueque and proposes that the spiritual landscape can provide security. However, in Maubisse, *natureza*, as well as other spiritual forces, were not only protective, but also punishing and could bring

retribution. As mentioned above and as Bovensiepen writes (2009) there are dangerous and damaging part of the spiritual landscape which makes peoples relationship with the spiritual landscape one of cultivating good relations. But at the same time, obligation and reciprocal giving can cause anxiety and disrapture.

Described here *natureza* can be a force that is *both* life-giving and life-taking, it is described as different from the power of the ancestors. *Natureza* must be respected particularly in places that are considered *lulik*. Its relationship with *lulik* is ambiguous, like *lulik* it is a force which is an agent of life, death and reproduction. However as shown above, it was distinct from *lulik* in several ways even they sometimes were acting a forces at the same time. *Lulik* seemed to be associated with objects and places and was something more sedentary, whereas *natureza* was a force that appeared and acted through and on places or objects to make them *lulik*. *Natureza*, alongside other agents such as ancestors, *lulik* and God (Maromak) is part of the landscape in Maubisse which can help or hinder life. It is a potent force in its own right, but it can be worked with, through *lia nain* who are said to be able to control it or speak with it. Crucially it is important to know that relationships with forces of nature, as well as forces associated with ancestral spirits are not offered up as an alternative way of making kin instead of making life through human relations.

Paying analytical attention to the qualities of *natuerza* builds on the literature of spirit ecologies in Timor-Leste, particularly as *natureza* has

been less focused on than terms like *lulik*. It could be that *natureza* is something distinct in Mambai areas or around Maubisse, or that is similar to other forces like *lulik* that are discussed in different ways amongst different ancestral and language groups. Either way, it was clear that in Maubisse *natureza* was a strong potent force that influenced the reproduction of life in the landscape. Below I set out in more detail *natureza's* life-giving qualities and how they are transferred through a concept known as *matak-malirin*. To do so I use the example of the annual water festivals that take place in Maubisse. Lastly, I offer a final discussion on the importance of expanding terms such as distributed reproduction to include the life enabling and life harming qualities of spirit ecologies.

6.2.3 Matak-Malirin, the green and the cool

One afternoon I heard loud pumping music coming from a neighbour's house. When I went outside, I saw a small party gathering in the garden. The house was owned by João's relatives who lived nearby, and João and I went to join what was shaping up to be a lively garden party. New arrivals sat on a circular stone platform to the side of the house, chewing betelnut and smoking. Teenagers had set up a karaoke station reading lyrics from YouTube on their phones. A large speaker, the source of their booming music, sat underneath a bougainvillea tree which overlooked the terraces of water spinach separating João's hamlet from the main town. Adults were

cooking, women preparing rice over several outdoor fires, and young boys killed and defeathered chickens. I joined the guests at some tables who were snacking and drinking.

It turned out that this little celebration was in aid of the house itself. It had been built 13 years earlier in 2006, and each year the family celebrated the anniversary of the building. This followed the pattern of how groups celebrated the anniversary of the building and inauguration of their own ancestral houses with gathering the house members and consuming meat that had been blessed by the ancestors, offering a plate to them too. This house, which was rented out by its owners to staff from the hospital, was not an ancestral house, but it was important because it was built above a spring. The spring provided easy access to water for the residents nearby who showered and did their laundry in it. It fed the terraces of water spinach below and pumped channelled water up to João and his relatives' houses. This rich water source was much envied by those in other parts of town whose water sources ran dry during the dry season, and who had to store rainwater or walk some distance to a water tap.

José, João's cousin, a schoolteacher and *lia nain* of his ancestral house, told me that this day was a customary practice to show respect to *natureza*. 'This means the spring will never run dry', José added. If the celebration did not happen the family might be visited by bad dreams, José continued to explain. The celebration involved coming together and eating together in the customary way, by killing and cooking several chickens, sharing the

food with the ancestors and descendants and the spring itself (*bee matan*). When the food was prepared the chicken meat was shared out, firstly to the ancestors, on plates placed on the stone platform and by the spring. Then food was shared amongst the family members who were landowners, who ate first. The food that had been placed for the ancestors was then redistributed back amongst the landowners. The chicken meat was considered *lulik*, and *lulik* meat had to be eaten, as *lulik* meat cannot be thrown away. Eating together and chewing betel nut (*bua malus*,) José explained, ensured good relations with *natureza* and endowed the house members with ‘green and coolness’ (*matak-malirin*,T) so no one would become sick and die. At other ceremonies and when talking to people about their ancestral houses people described how participation bestowed them with something called ‘*matak-malirin*’. *Matak* (green, fresh) *malirin* (cold, cool) captures ‘the peaceful and health vital forces enabling all human and non-human (animal and plant) life’ (Tusinski, 2016, p. 20)⁹ The condition of *matak-malirin*, Tusinski (2016) writes, is the desired result of ritual practices and is bestowed by the ancestors. Health, fortune, and prosperity are received through chewing betel nut. Tusinski found that betel nut grown near one’s ancestral house was thought to be more potent because it may have come from plants cultivated by one’s ancestors. In Maubisse, betel nut was brought by guests often wife-givers during ceremonies or bought and

⁹ also see (Burke, 2020).

blessed by the house guardians. Even if one didn't chew betel nut holding the basket (*luhu*) it was passed round was enough to have received *matak-malirin*.

Celebrations of water sources are an important part of the cycle of rituals in Maubisse. A yearly celebration called 'du era' (M, *take water*) of key water sources takes place every year around April. There are 22 *lulik* springs in Maubisse, although there are more springs but not all are considered 'potent'. In April 2018, an area known as Balibo, in the village of Saralala boarding Aileu, the members of four ancestral houses associated with these water sources gathered. Over the next three days they celebrated the replenishment of water at three springs. People gathered to dance, sing and 'receive' the ancestors. The *lia nain* (guardians of the words) recited sacred words passed down by their ancestors and took water from each spring to hang by a large ancestral tree (*ai huun*). Members of the houses washed their faces in the springs and drank water collected from it in order to receive protection, good health and longevity (*matak-malirin*) from the ancestors and *natureza*. This water could be kept in the ancestral house or at home and drank when someone felt sick so they could regain their strength.

The celebration of *Du era* is about giving thanks to the water that sustains life. A young Xefe Suco (village leader) explained:

'The importance of the ceremony is to give thanks to *natureza* and what *maromak* gives us through nature, vegetables, corn, beans,

the harvest of these things throughout the year which is good because of good rains, the water ... So this ritual is about being grateful to *natureza*, for the food and water that nature bestows to us, that we eat in order to live, in order to continue our lives.



Figure 20. A photo of those gathered and dancing at the *du era* ceremonies in Maubisse. Credit: Author 2019

Ceremonies such as *du era*, and the corn harvest (*sau batar*) are orientated around continuing practices passed down from the ancestors and giving thanks for food crops and water, created and nourished by nature and god or the creator (*maromak*). These customary events are concerned not only with the cultural reproduction of traditional practices, but with the physical reproduction, of the next crop cycle and the food or water that sustains life now and in the future. As other participants told me, carrying out these

ceremonies ensured the water did not 'stop' and asked that harvests to be plentiful. The role of young people was described as '*kontinuadores*', the continuers of the community and culture. Joao, João's cousin explained:

The function of this ceremony is to enrich people (*buras ema*) ... It starts with the betel nut and leaf which is shared with the descendant of the ancestral houses, to pray for people to continue forever...when you receive the betel nut it means that you receive *matak-malirin* from the spring. Because water is life, so you can eat everyday, if you don't have water, you can't eat... you must have water so you can have life.

Matak-malirin came through both the spring water and the betel nut. As much as life was supported by the spring, as a *lulik* place, there were also dangers to be wary of place:

'If you walk near the spring without purpose your children will not be able to talk, if you speak 'wrongly' (*koalia sala*) or think 'wrongly' (*hanoin sala*) you can be lost (*lakon*)' José explained to me. Earlier that morning at relatives house nearby the springs, Joao had dressed for the ceremony. As a *lia nain* he had an important role during the ceremony, directing activities to make sure they followed tradition, representing his ancestral house and communicating with the ancestors through prayer. Whilst José got ready, I sat on the veranda drinking coffee whilst he straightened his anklets made

of chicken feathers. During the ceremony symbols of Mambai *kultura* had to be proudly worn. Men and women wore traditional clothes including *tais* (cloth, which during wedding ceremonies unites the couple by tying them together in *natureza*), and *belak*, large gold disks worn on a string around the neck. As Joao polished his *belak*, he explained it was ‘like the bones of the ground *natureza* gave (T *natureza foo rai nia ruin*),

During the *du era* ceremony food is offered on the ancestral altar (*ai to’os, M, mbleska*) to show respect to the ancestors, and to *natureza*. José explained that ‘*natureza* is not the same as the ancestors. Maromak made both *natureza* and the ancestors ... We do it [*du era*] to ensure the descendents (*jerasaun*) grow (*buras*), and we continue to the future like our ancestors did. You can’t forget this or the water will dry up/be depleted/reduced (*menus*) and the crops will be depleted and the descendants will be depleted’.

Du era is thus also part of a practice that ensures that people continue to grow and thrive (*buras*), and that generations to continue to appear. During my participation in customary ceremonies and practices in Maubisse local customary practices (*lisan*) and culture (*kultura*) people were often concerned with continuation of life itself, its ancestral origins, and ensuring that practices passed down from ‘generation to generation’ as was emphasized in the importance of rebuilding members of an ancestral house in Chapter 1. Through the central importance of ancestral houses, great significance is placed on knowing the origins and ensuring that knowledge

is passed down from ancestors (*bei'ala*) to descendants (*bei'oan*). Emphasis was also placed on resources never ending (*la bele para*). The ceremonies themselves brought people together to celebrate, to know the words of the ancestors, know one another, continue practices, and to receive good health and protection through *matak-malirin*.

Matak-malirin can be interpreted as a local understanding of 'the good life'' (Trindade and Barnes 2018, p.158). Trindade and Barnes (2018) explored the significance of *matak-malirin* in their consideration of Tetum idioms. They argue such idioms in Timor-Leste shape the future as 'cultural fact' and influence 'peoples capacity to aspire' (Appadurai, 2013, p. 290). In particular, the idiom *matak-malirin* conceives life as having generative potential which is continually received and renewed through a cycle of exchanges that take place between human and non-human actors. The pursuit of *matak-malirin* is a common aspiration embedded in customary participation (Trindade and Barnes, p.168) such as the *du era* ceremonies and it is within idioms like these that visions of the future are shaped. 'Look at the little ones dancing like this' José pointed out to me during a break from his duties. The young children were dancing in traditional style, moving in time to the beat of a drum and clangs of the gongs. 'This is the way they know, you can't write it or be taught it in school, they have to come and learn it here, they receive *matak-malirin - natureza* gives them strength'.

I argue that the regenerative potentiality of *matak-marlin* as well as its capacity to envision the future is part of why *matak-malarin* is a significant part of distributed reproduction in Maubisse. It is an enabler of life and a substance that allows people to thrive. Unlike *lulik* and *natureza*, I only ever heard about *matak-malirin* having positive qualities, however it's possible that as *matak-malirin* is closely tied to both these life-giving and life-taking forces that there also be room for ambiguity.

On the third and final day of the ceremony I stood by José's wife Anita. We looked on as everyone was danced energetically and jovially. Anita's youngest daughter came and dragged at her mother's wrist, begging her to dance. Eventually, as she saw Anita talking to me, she took her mother's *tais* scarf and ran off to join the crowd.

'You must do this every year,' Anita said, 'if you don't do it one year the next generation won't "come good" (*mai la diak*) ... they won't grow (*buras*). You must come, take it seriously, receive the betel nut, the *matak-malrin*. Then if your family go somewhere far away, like to school abroad, sickness won't catch them.' The veneration of the sacred wells and spring in Maubisse describe how *matak-malirin* is bestowed through *natureza*, through the thanks given to *natureza* and its substances that are essential to life and its continuation, such as water. Similarly, the practices and presence of the ancestors enable *matak-malirin* to be bestowed on descendants, so their lives can continue prosperously.

As much as this celebration brought joy and frivolity to the members of the ancestral houses, constant reminders in speech spoke of the need to follow culture correctly and show respect for the ancestors and *natureza*. The celebrations were peppered with incidents of misbehaviour such as drunkenness and fights which were mediated by elders and people in positions of authority. At the end of the three days of celebration I accompanied José and his family to their ancestral house a dark off-road motorcycle journey to a large ancestral house where each household provided a chicken. Each teenage boy was instructed to hold a chicken and strangle it whilst holding it upright. The legs of the chickens were watched closely to see if they fell straight or crooked. Crooked meant that something might be wrong. The chicken entrails were then extracted for reading through a process of divination. When a large nodule was found in one of the chicken's entrails the atmosphere went silent. The elder men discussed the possible interpretations of this. It likely meant that somebody (a person) was unhappy and 'talking'. To make amends another few chickens had to go and be sacrificed at another ancestral house nearby that was also connected to the lineage. The atmosphere was tense and sombre as we waited for news on the divination happening there. 'This is reality, we must accept that some things are not well,' one of the elders said sombrely.

José's house as well as João's and many others in the hamlet I lived in had experienced many untimely deaths that year. As a visitor I wasn't party to the details of all the conversations between the brothers of the ancestral

house, but there was stress and worry and it was clear more conversations were needed to be had to solve some family disputes, both amongst the living and the dead. Relationships between the living, dead and energy or life forces therefore are not always positive, in talking about multispecies reproductive justice we must acknowledge this. Forging positive relations with forces which have their own agency involves continual negotiation as well as acceptance of negative relations.

6.3 Distributing Reproduction

The notion of distributed reproduction is useful because it allows for both life-giving and live-taking relations distributed throughout a range of relations but human and otherwise. As outlined in the introduction, ‘distributed reproduction’ is ‘the sense of existing over time that stretches beyond bodies to include the uneven relations and infrastructure that shape what forms of life are supported to persist, thrive, and alter and what forms of life are destroyed, injured and constrained’ (Murphy 2017, pp. 141-142). Just as our bodies do not stop at our skin (Haraway 1990:20), the idea that reproduction is only an *embodied* experience neglects what goes on around us as part of the process. Murphy draws on the case of the petrochemical industry, in Sarnia, Canada, and how exposure to polluting chemicals has been associated with a dramatic reduction in the birth of boys (2011). Chemical injury caused not only cancers and poisoning but altered the

material substrates of reproduction by disrupting hormonal signals possibly affecting generations to come. Here Murphy uses the concept of 'distributed reproduction' to analyse how reproduction is stretched across infrastructures of political economy and technoscience, that produce life-altering pollutants. Rather than presenting a case of environmental pollution, in this chapter I adapt Murphy's conceptualisation of 'distributed reproduction as 'a process that manifests in and connects, but is not reducible to bodies' (ibid., p. 27) to connect reproduction to wider environmental ontologies. Reproduction is managed by technoscience processes and structural categories of sex, race and capital, but even the laws on women's reproductive rights, medical process around pregnancy and birth and even economic development programs that place responsibility on individuals all envision reproduction as something that happens within individual bodies, and furthermore imagines those bodies are free and autonomous (Murphy 2011).

Murphy (2016) takes the meaning of reproduction back to its original usage when the word was applied to biology in the 18th century. This occurred alongside revolutionary liberal politics that enshrined individuality and property during the growth of industrial capitalism. The original use of the term reproduction referred to a process of replacement, sameness and consistency that linked individuals to a greater common population. Reproduction thus worked through bodies, but it also exceeded them. This conceptualisation of reproduction, Murphy argues (2017)

ushered in the idea that individual reproduction needed to be governed for the sake of the wider population. The 'retreat' to struggles for bodily autonomy is thus understandable and, re-imagining reproduction as 'distributed' should not re-enable projects of top-down governance of the body. Rather, thinking about reproduction as distributed requires us to question the process that happens 'beyond bodies within uneven spatial and temporal infrastructures' (Murphy 2013). Murphy provides the example of pollutants in the environment, endocrine disruptors that appear in toxins like plastics and alter bodies and cells. However rather than only consider these materialities of industrial waste I argue that distributed reproduction needs to consider the spiritual ecologies that are very much part of shaping reproduction in Maubisse.

I showed in Chapter 5 that reproduction in Maubisse is tied to the environment and concept of collective life or population through the telling of ancestral stories and places. In this chapter, I have explored how reproduction is distributed in the landscape, beyond individual bodies and human agency. This leads to a conundrum when we are faced with the language of rights and individual choice in western concepts of biomedicine. As Chapter 3 showed, choice is a discourse that faces many challenges when reproductive agency is distributed through social relations and lively landscapes. In expanding the idea of distributed reproduction, we must consider the non-human agencies in the environment, spirit agents, ancestors and natural forces, and their capacities to both enable life *and*

disrupt it. In their chapters in *Making Kin* (Clarke and Haraway 2018), TallBear and Benjamin focus on the importance of making and kindling spiritual relations in a positive sense. However, I do not wish to romanticise relations with spiritual ecology relations in 317Maubisse. They can be both generative and destructive, and as such they cannot be considered an alternative to 'making population'. As this chapter has shown, non-human agents are both life giving and life taking, not an alternative to life itself. Relationships with them can be kindled, but they cause fear, anxiety and control as much as they do reassurance and wellbeing (Bovensiepen 2015). As this ethnography and the regional literature shows, reproductive relations in Timor-Leste are, and have always been, distributed. Reproductive Justice should thus be about acknowledgement and working with local ontologies to understand how reproductive wellbeing and relationships with the environment can be worked with, but not appropriated or co-opted as Romantic alternatives. Animism in Southeast Asia tends to be hierarchical (Arhem and Sprenger, 2015), and therefore cultivating kin with non-human relations is not necessarily equal or free from power. It does not equal justice, as Haraway (2018) suggests, if we create these relationships as alternative to creating more genetic human kin. They are simply a different type of relationship, one that is imbued with possibilities of danger, power, wellbeing, and prosperity, death and reproduction. For reproductive justice we need to value these relationships, but we should also not romanticise them and see them as 'alternative'.

Rather they are part of the ecologies of reproduction which are distributed amongst and through the environment.

7. Youth, Employment and Environment: Reproducing and redistributing resources

In the middle of a muddy field dotted with tarpaulin tents, Antonia stood surrounded by a small crowd. She wore an apron over her t-shirt and jeans. On the front of the apron was a medical illustration of the female reproductive system, uterus, vagina, ovaries, and fallopian tubes. The illustrations were enlarged but the reproductive anatomy was roughly positioned on the fabric as they would be in her body. The apron, a teaching aid, could be easily turned round and used to explain the male anatomy as well. Testes, glans, and penis, the male reproductive system, were depicted on the apron's reverse.

Antonia was leading a seminar on sexual and reproductive health. She explained to the on lookers that 'reproductive health', was about the health of the reproductive organs. She gestured to her apron and began pointing to female reproductive organs. She began with the ovaries and took her time to explain the menstrual cycle. In a short time, a larger crowd started to gather. More and more young people and young men in particular were interested in menstruation. The environmental youth camp they were attending was largely focused young people's participation in agricultural work and environmental sustainability. The workshop that Antonia was running here however was off a different topic altogether, sex and

reproduction. At this youth camp, reproductive developmentality and distributed reproduction coincided. These approaches to reproduction both include discussion about reproduction, population, and environment as I have outlined in the thesis so far. As they came together at the youth camp, they revealed underlying tensions between the balance of human and natural resources and the link to knowledge and education.

The intersections between a reproductive justice framework and an environmental justice framework have been brought together and explored through the concept of ‘environmental reproductive justice’ (Cook 2007; Hoover 2017). The concept aims to bring a deeper focus on the environment to reproductive justice, and include the reproduction of language and as concerns, rather than only human beings (Hoover 2017). At the same time, environmental reproductive justice aims to expand the existing framework of environmental justice to consider environmental contaminants on physical and cultural reproduction (ibid). As I showed in Chapter 5 and 6, the relationship between reproduction and environment in Maubisse is heavily animated by desires for liveliness and relationships with spirit ecologies.

In this chapter I explore the concept of environmental reproductive justice and how the concept may allow for parts of reproductive developmentality and distributed reproduction to be assembled as a way of moving beyond oppositions and tensions that I have shown in this thesis. To do this I show how environmental and reproductive issues intersect at the environmental youth camp. Below I start by describing how the sexual and

reproductive knowledge Antonia provided was received at the youth camp, followed by other activities and conversations I had with young people about education, employment, customary practice, and environmental sustainability. I conclude by drawing together the notions of abundance and *possibility*.



Figure 21. Young People play football in Kamalal during the Youth Tournament 2019. Credit: Author 2019

7.1 Floods of Youth: Young people and the struggles of the land

‘70% of Timor-Leste’s total population are 35 years of age or younger...a benefit of this is the wonderful energy and creativity of youth who will build our future’...’many of them have lost interest in the agricultural sector and moved from rural areas to the city to look for

work, much of which will not guarantee a sustainable future, leaving their elders in the rural areas to continue to produce food for the population' (PERMATIL 2019)

These were the words of PERMATIL (Timor-Leste Permaculture, *Permakultura Timor-Lorosa'e*), a permaculture organisation founded and run by well-known Timorese musician, environmentalist and permaculture expert, Ego Lemos. In November 2018, PERMATIL organised a youth camp in Maubisse, called 'Perma-Youth'. Permaculture is a holistic approach to life and the environment; it focuses on sustainable land management practices and ecologically friendly agriculture. PERMATIL follows a set of permaculture ethics 'Care for the Land, Care for the People, Care for the Future'. Part of their work includes organising a biannual Perma-Youth camp.

In 2018 Maubisse was chosen to host the 5th Perma-Youth camp, with the theme '*Natural resources and local knowledge as the foundation of life*'. The main objective of the camp was to attract young people's interest in learning practical permaculture skills so they could use them in their own gardens and farms. For several days before the camp, a team worked to construct several large tents with bamboo and tarpaulins, and a couple from an Australian events company directed the construction of a large stage and sound system. Here, different approaches to reproduction, population and environment collided. Aspirations of reproductive developmentality and distributed reproduction were brought together in what was a practical

attempt to save the future from environmental degradation and depletion of customary values, the resources that sustained the population.

At the opening event, a PERMATIL representative was explained that the theme of 'natural resources and local knowledge' was chosen because of Timor-Leste's diverse micro-climates, beautiful landscapes and rich natural resources that are linked to biological diversity and 'a wealth' of local knowledge. Despite the country being small, and a population of 1.3 million people, the majority of people live in rural areas and depend on agriculture for their economic base. The camp organisers also acknowledged the decline in agricultural production and loss of traditional ecological knowledge. They also addressed rising malnutrition, the effect of imported produce on local plant varieties and the economy. Other issues they highlighter were trash and litter which turned the 'beautiful landscapes ugly', as well as deforestation and depletion of water sources. They connected these ecological and economic issues to the young people attending the camp.

'Natural resources and local knowledge are the key to national development and sustaining most of our people's daily lives, the problem is that the population has lost consciousness and understanding about how to protect our beautiful landscape, natural resources and local knowledge which is linked to our culture of cooking and eating, protecting the land, water sources, seeds, forests.'

The aims of the camp were actionable: ‘to make firm these natural resources for a sustainable life’, and ‘to value and promote local knowledge and social and cultural diversity’. Its audience were young people who frequently appeared in the media as the ‘resources’ or ‘wealth’ of the nation. Youth (*juventude*) or young people (*joven sira, foinsae sira*) in Timor-Leste often referred to anyone below the age of 30. However, people over the age of 35 and up to 40 frequently spoke about themselves as ‘we young people’ and counted themselves amongst the young generation.

The ‘new generation’ (*jerasaun foun*) was something that both referred to the younger generation who had grown up after independence, but it was also a maxim for political parties aimed to represent the needs of the post-war generation. PLP (*Partidu Libertasaun Popular, Popular Liberation Party*), for example, which had stood for election that summer in 2017, differentiated itself from the older generation (*jerasaun tuan*) and the two main political parties, Fretilin and CNRT, which have their origins in the struggle for independence¹.

In Maubisse and Dili, filial piety was strong – and people often distinguished the different responsibilities the older and the younger generations had in regard to the nation. The older generation with its experience in preparing for and achieving independence should be

¹ For a detail history on the political parties of Timor-Leste see (Kingsbury and Leach, 2007; Kammen, 2015, 2019; McWilliam and Leach, 2019)

respected and listened to. The younger generation were given responsibility to prepare themselves and work hard for national development, whilst at the same time expecting to follow their older leaders. This put the young generation in a paradoxical place of both following and leading simultaneously (ten Brinke, 2018). They were both expected to bring about change, without being given the authority to do so. As a result, generational politics was politically fraught. Young people felt constricted by a generational hierarchy whilst being told they were crucial to national development (Martins, 2021) by their elder brothers (*maun boot sira*) in the political elite. This led to people of the younger generation feeling as if they were in a position of 'waiting' (Brinke 2018). The maxim that 'nothing will change until the older leaders die' was repeated to me on several occasions, particularly as young people voiced their frustrations about national politics and local customary obligations. Recognising the significance of a large youthful population, many community and national development projects were directed at the young generation. The environmental youth camp was one of many festivals and events organised with the aim of empowering young people.

The timing of the camp in 2018, 25th November - 1 December, coincided with school holidays. The first weekend would mark the 28th of November Proclamation of Independence Day celebrations. This day would be celebrated with a huge concert. Although a little late, the camp also celebrated the National Day of Youth which takes place 12th of November.

National Day of Youth commemorates the Santa Cruz massacre of 1991 in which 271 young people were shot and 250 more went missing, when the Indonesian forces opened fire on the funeral procession of a man who had been shot in the street by the Indonesian army. The procession turned into a protest march as the man's coffin was carried through Dili to the Santa Cruz cemetery. There, people were trapped inside the cemetery when Indonesian forces surrounded them and shot indiscriminately at the crowd. Max Stahl, an undercover journalist, smuggled footage he recorded of the massacre to Australia, where it was shared in the media, causing international outcry.

November thus commemorates the 'young heroes' (*juventude loriku asuwa'in*) whose deaths brought word to the outside world about the suffering in Timor-Leste. Celebrations or youth activities can take place over the whole month of November. In addition to these commemorations and celebrations, in 2018 the youth camp was also partnering with 'FinFest' (*Finadu Festival*) Day of the Dead Festival, a new event run by artists, musicians and chefs. Now in its second year, FinFest promoted a return to cultural values such as traditional ceremonies, performances, and food. Fin-fest takes its name from *Finadu*, a ceremony celebrating the ancestors' spirits that coincides with the Catholic All Souls Day on 1st November. The camp thus drew on the themes of struggle, independence, youth, ancestors, and indigenous culture by bringing together people around the idea of local knowledge and natural resources.

At the youth camp, the main activity was mostly centred around the large stage, the large field which was lined with tents for expositions of youth and environment organisations, and a truck providing Timorese food. Alexandra (Sandra) Tilman, a Timorese writer and poet, originally from Maubisse, acted as the master of ceremonies, opening the camp, and performing poetry occasionally in her trademark deep and booming voice. She announced the name of the camp: Francesco Xavier do Amaral, after the first president of Timor-Leste². Sandra introduced the program and invited a representative from PERMATIL to open the Camp.

‘Natural resources are the key to national development, especially sustainable development. We hope that this camp can help you solve your problems about human resources, a reduced labour market because these issues really affect the young people. This year the camp has 550 people participating from 12 municipalities ... including those from abroad, Indonesia, Australia and Japan.’

This holistic approach to youth and education was organised by Timorese art and youth leaders as a form of education and solidarity, but a key theme of environmental conservation and continuation of cultural practices was at its centre. Reproductive justice addresses the inequalities of opportunities

² Amaral had been president in Timor-Leste's 10 days of Independence in 1975 before Indonesia invaded.

that we have to control our 'reproductive destiny' (Ross, 2006, p. 2) including the social conditions in which some are able to reproduce, and others are not. It intersects with other social movements, which fight against discrimination, labour issues, poverty, and equities. It intersects particularly with environmental justice at the point in which the environment needs to be maintained, 'since efforts to protect the integrity of natural systems are struggles to maintain the ecosystems that make all life possible' (Hoover 2017:11). Moreover, eco-feminists consider 'all environmental issues as reproductive issues' (Di Chiro 2008,278) as reproduction is intrinsically dependent on the wider environment in which we live.

Examining the relationship between reproduction and environment, I describe specifically how these issues intersected at the environmental youth camp in Maubisse through the programme of events and activities. I show how the coming together of elements of reproductive developmentality and distributed reproduction, as I have developed these concepts in relation to Timor-Leste, could serve as an example of environmental reproductive justice. To illustrate this, I return to the muddy field at the youth camp where Antonia stood delivering her sexual and reproductive health workshop.

7.2 Sex and Knowledge: reproductive developmentality at a sex education seminar

As Antonia continued to talk about the female reproductive system and point at her apron, more and more people, especially young men, edged forwards. As they got closer they asked more complex questions.

‘So if you have sex with a woman during her period she can’t get pregnant right?’

‘Why can’t some women get pregnant?’

‘Why can’t women wash their hair when they have their periods?’.

‘It’s a myth,’ Antonia explained, ‘it’s safe for women to wash their hair during their period’. A common belief about menstruation was that if you washed your hair, particularly using cold water, white blood (*raan mutin*, T), would go to your head and make you act abnormally or ‘crazy’. Antonia assured the crowd that washing your hair whilst menstruating didn’t make you ‘crazy’. She also reiterated that people needed to be careful when having sex at any time and explained that women who wished to get pregnant could talk to a doctor.

For the next couple of hours Antonia continued dutifully debunking common ‘myths and patiently shared information with the crowd. She had not been scheduled to give this. According to the programme, a representative of the Secretariat for Youth and Sport (SEDJ) had been due to give a presentation on reproductive health, but they didn’t show up. The

organiser had asked Antonia, a reproductive health advocate and Marie Stopes representative, to step in at the very last minute. In many ways this was a win for Antonia and her organisation. Earlier in the day, Antonia voiced her concern that the SEDJ representative might err on the Catholic and conservative side of sex education, and not support giving young people information about contraceptives.

Young men made up the majority of the crowd and were particularly intrigued by the menstrual calendar. Whilst some of them joked and laughed at first, things got more serious as it was clear that Antonia was willing to answer all questions, no matter how unusual, *and* go into great detail. Some men hissed at others for wasting time and shouted down other asking ever more complex questions. When a young girl asked a question, she was initially talked over by the crowd, but then respectfully given the space to talk by men on either side. However, the urgency of the men's questions took over, some asking as many as four questions at once, and Antonia barely had time to get to answer. Originally born in the local area, Antonia was naturally assertive, but rather than dismissing questions she was committed to addressing any misconceptions and answering queries no matter how much time they took. However, it was soon clear that even she found the curiosity of the crowd to be a novel experience, maybe even a bit daunting. People were crowding in close to hear what was being said. Eventually, she had to ask people to widen the circle and give her space to breath, as the crowd pressed tighter and tighter about her.

Biomedical sex education often aims to improve anatomical understanding and health by offering knowledge that educators deem is lacking. However, Pigg points out that there still ‘blinding gaps’ between biomedical messages and ‘local knowledge (2005: 41). Concerns about biomedicines, such as contraceptives, often stem from local understandings of reproductive health and, as such, biomedical answers do not always adequately address local concerns (ibid:42). In this case, Antonia’s dismissal of local conceptions of reproduction as ‘myths’ might not have provided reassuring answers. But given the urgency of the crowd and their thirst for knowledge she had little room for further explanation.

‘What are wet dreams? How often do they happen?’ came another question. Antonia tactfully pointed out that she was a female and did not have personal experience of wet dreams, which gave her a chance to ask for a male volunteer to answer the question. A male teacher in the crowd voluntarily stepped forward to bravely explain wet dreams to the younger members of the crowd. Despite sex education being part of the school curriculum, reproductive health advocates often complained that most teachers would skip those lessons or ‘turn over that page’ of the textbook. This was to avoid the embarrassment of talking about topics that were often regarded as ‘taboo’, forbidden or sacred, or considered *lulik*, (T) in a similar way as sacred knowledge about ancestral names, sites and objects.

Antonia went on to try and talk about sexual orientations, healthy relationships, family planning and contraception, but it was clear the crowd

were more interested in having their questions answered than being lectured to. Before Antonia could get to these topics, the questions from the crowd became more and more impossible.

‘Why do some babies have whiter skin than their parents?’

‘How do you get twins or triplets?’

‘Does the withdrawal method work?’

‘How do you catch STI’s?’

Pushed over to the edge of the circle around her, I watched Antonia as she suffocated under the barrage of questions.

‘I’m going to die!’ she cried to me jokingly when she caught my eye. The conversation continued for well over its allowed time slot of two hours under the tent, stood on the muddy ground. It started to get dark but still the conversation wasn’t over. Sex was usually a taboo subject and having the opportunity to ask questions about it informally in an educational setting such as the youth camp was a novelty. People were excited and desperate to ask questions, they might not get this chance again.

Pigg and Adams (2005) argue that there is often a dominant frame through which sex education is delivered in development programs. They argue that development practitioners often underestimate the way that sex is entangled with local issues and overestimate the degree to which the information they deliver about it is taken as *de facto* truth and scientific fact. Through development practices which are delivered under the category of education, biomedical ‘sexology’ or sexual science, becomes a globalised

'fact' which operates as a standardising device that claims universality (Pigg and Adams, 2005). Conversations about sexual and reproductive health often rest upon a division between facts and beliefs Pigg (2005) points out that whilst development organisations may acknowledge different cultural approaches to sex, biological facts are not deemed as culturally contingent. Biological facts are categorised as science, which is considered to be morally neutral However the categories of fact and belief enable information to be categorised with different legitimacy in a hierarchy of knowledge and power (Pigg 2005, p.58).

Reproductive developmentality in sex education, often draws on a biomedical frame and neglects to understand local conceptions of sex and reproduction. Factual claims about sexual and reproductive health are authorised under the auspices of sex education, disease prevention and reproductive technologies. However, such facts and activities are quickly linked debates about the social good (Pigg 2005:55). As was shown in Chapter 3, and her through Antonia's education seminar at the youth camp, local and cultural understandings of reproduction and health get dismissed as myths, corrected, and replaced with scientific truths, information that is deemed as morally good to share. What becomes problematic is when this universalised facts, become manipulated for other agendas. For example, as we saw in the family planning training session in Chapter 3, the claim that contraceptives don't have side effects, or on the opposite side of the coin,

that they cause cancer. What must be questions is how such claims to truths are related to and invested with particular moralities.

It is also important to pay attention to historical forms of sexual and reproductive health education. By contrast to the taboo on sex education in schools during independence, Dili based activists told me that during Indonesian times, they were frequently taught about reproductive health and family planning in school, as part of the Indonesian state family planning program (*Keluarga Berencana, KB, I*). The KB program was part of a number of government development programs that were housed under the slogan 'The Prosperous Family' which conflated women's reproductive health with the prosperity of the family, and the health of the state's economy (Newland, 2001) Family planning then became something that was good, for health, good for the family and good for the nation, and it was part of reproductive developmentality of the Indonesian ear.

The KB programme also routinely included community socialisation and recruitment drives known as 'safari' run by health workers and volunteers who were accompanied by the military (Sissons, 1997, p. 12). In these drives women were pressured into accepting contraceptives. Structural coercion by the Indonesian military and government officials fed into beliefs that family planning was being used to undermine the existence and overtly inhibiting people's ability to reproduce (Sissons 1997, p.13). As a result the acronym for KB which stood to family planning (*keluarga berencana, I*) was appropriated by those in opposition to Indonesian rule to instead stand for

'big family' (*keluarga besar*, I). The implication being that rather than using family planning, Timorese should make big families instead. Reproductive developmentality is thus not a new occurrence in Timor-Leste.

In present day Timor-Leste, the desire for knowledge shown by the crowd and Antonia's dedication to education reflected how local knowledge about reproduction interacted with programs of development in the independence era. Antonia's intentions were by no means malign. They were tied to a drive for change and improve. Antonia represented an international reproductive and sexual health organisation, she was talking to her peer group, in her local area, sharing the knowledge she had learnt from a reproductive rights approach. The organisation she worked for operates in the international and health development domain, within a discourse of 'choice', and aims to promote increased use of contraceptives. Elements of reproductive A 'will to improve' (Li 2009) was at the heart of development interventions in to reproductive and sexual health. As the aims of the youth camp show, this drive for change is forms part of young people's role and national identity. They are characterised as responsible for building a nation that continues local traditions whilst improving quality of life in the country. For example, an interview with Antonia revealed her concern for the local community. The equality of girls was part of her motivation for promoting sexual health education. As the sex education seminar at the youth camp showed, she said, there was significant lack of access to information in the rural areas.

Often when advocates argue for better sexual and reproductive education, they are invoking the worldview of western biomedical discourse. But what counts as appropriate education is viewed differently depending on the actors advocating for it, as was shown in Section I of this thesis (chapters 3 and 4). Education around sexual and reproductive health can be conservative, biomedical, neoliberal, or feminist in its perspective.

This also signals how we should be vigilant with feminist terminology. Over the last several decades feminist terms have been used to reframe population interventions by state, international organisation and corporations (Wilson, 2017) The narrative of reproductive justice has been coopted by reproductive rights advocates in the global north, it is used to further sexualize and racialize women in the global south as 'sexual stewards', who were responsible for controlling their reproduction, by using modern contraceptives, and thus protecting and maintaining the global environment (Sasser, 2017). What would reproductive sex education look like from a distributed reproduction perspective? Given that Antonia's seminar was part of a permaculture youth camp, what other ways were reproduction being engaged with? Could these serve an example environmental reproductive justice? In the section below I examine how a workshop on seed banking incorporated elements of distributed reproduction and reproductive developmentality. I analyse how both these concepts coexist at the youth camp and how negotiating between them might be possible. As I have alluded to earlier in this thesis, reproductive

developmentality and distributed reproduction are not in direct opposition to one another, and both approach to reproduction have a similar goal in that they are concerned with prosperity.

7.3 Seed banks, reproduction, and abundance

That afternoon I joined the workshop on seed banking (*banku fini, rai fini* T). Sat under one of the tents, around 20 participants emphasised the importance of local knowledge and seed being stored for future generations, passing on knowledge and protecting food for the future. ‘We can’t depend on seeds from abroad’ the facilitator explained. ‘The Chinese shops sell Chinese seeds that we are now using, but we need to use our own varieties, so they are not lost.’ In the first half of the session, we were sent on an ethnobotanical hunt, and told to bring back wild plants we found and could identify traditional uses for. In the second half of the session, we were asked to find good soil from the area around the camp and plant seedlings. The idea was to look after the seedlings during the camp, then take them home. We fed soil into a planting tray with 10 x 10 divots, 100 holes in total. We had been given a bag of mung beans and we pushed one seed into each hole. It would make 100 seedlings over the next few days and take them home after the camp. Eventually these seedlings would eventually aggregate to make ‘enough beans to feed a person.

‘Look after these seeds as if they were your own children,’ the facilitator said. ‘The ancestors knew that it was important to conserve the seeds, so

now they exist for generations to come, we must do the same, for the future generations, so in case of natural disasters, crop failures, we have some seeds for the future. All you need to do is put some seeds in bags, keep them all in a basket, and you have a seedbank. You don't need to rely on a shop to buy your seeds from, you don't need to waste money - the ancestors didn't have shops, they had to conserve them for themselves and use their knowledge. The seed banks meant that 'seed varieties will not be lost, they will never end, they will continue forever (*lao nafatin*). You don't need to depend on anyone else, you have food sovereignty'

'As young people you can conserve these seeds, like your identity, and move forwards (*lao ba oin*), don't make the future generations sad, you don't want them to say that you destroyed the world. Now is not the time to sleep, you need to conserve the wealth (*rikusoin*) that your ancestors conserved for you.'

As the facilitators wrapped up, some participants went to find safe places outside their tents to keep the seedling trays. I turned to Iza, a girl who had walked from Hatubilico that morning, 5-6 hours walk away.

'Did you know about seed conservation before the workshop?' I asked

'Yes, my parents kept the seeds each year for planting. Seed banking was not a novel practice for those from the rural areas, and I found it odd that the conservation of seeds was a point that needed to be driven home in areas that were largely agriculturally self-sufficient, and where seeds were expensive.'

‘Lots of produce is now entering from abroad,’ the lady from Permatil was still lecturing, ‘you need to speak up and stop this, we need to make a law against it, but the law is not easy.’ The rhetoric used in the seed-banking workshop not only characterised young people as stewards of environmental and human reproduction, but it presented traditional knowledge as better, indigenous seeds, those which the ancestors cultivated through their own knowledge are more sustainable and a source of wealth. This is what Fujikane calls ‘ancestral abundance’ (2021). Ancestral abundance, that which the ancestors have given which feeds for generations. It aims to create resources, rather than depleting resources as capitalist practices do. Ancestral abundance manifests the ‘*du era*’ ceremonies at sacred springs discussed in Chapter 4, in which water, a key source of life is renewed through relationships with the ancestors. This customary language was being relayed at the seed banking workshop albeit through an NGO with aims of environmental and social change.

Here reproductive developmentality and distributed reproduction meet.

Recalling João’s comment that the purpose of the veneration of sacred springs is to to ‘*buras ema*’, T. ‘*Buras*’ (to grow) or ‘*haburas*’ (to make grow) has different contextual meanings including grow, develop, enrich or make thrive. ‘*Buras*’ sometimes refers to agriculture: if a crop ‘*buras*’, it means it grows, but it also means that it improves and increases in size, making more of something, increasing something, making it better and reproducing it

regularly. n Portuguese translations include *improvement* and *advancing*. Commonly in translations *haburas* is used also as 'to develop'.

Knowledge about local resources had a been a major theme? of the youth camp, as alongside? the development of young people's skills and abilities in order to 'move forward' 'towards the future'. When I participated in the Bee Matan/Due era water ceremonies almost six months later, it became clear that knowledge about recreating life, both human and otherwise, was closely connected to environmental forces. Similar to the taboo's talking about sex, the privilege about knowledge of reproduction was withheld. Opportunities to access this knowledge from people deemed to be 'know the truth' was seized upon. Opening up knowledge 'nakloke', acquiring skills and putting them to use both ancestral and biomedical was not part of resisting capitalism, but seizing every opportunity for work abundance and a better life. Whilst people foresaw problems with capitalist values on the one hand, rejecting it for ancestral values would have been unwise. Instead, ideas about human resources (more people) and development complement ideas about continuation, abundance and passing on 'the right' knowledge for a better existence. Economic and ecological pluralism is a strategy of making the most of every opportunity. 'Take advantage' (*approveita*) my friends in Maubisse would often say when an opportunity came up that could have a positive outcome. 'Take advantage' became a bit of a mantra among the younger people I knew who were keen to gain knowledge experience for later in life. Taking advantage of opportunities also referred

to being strategic and making the most of scarce resources like money, food or electricity.

The knowledge and power of how to make and reproduce life comes in different forms, both through that of reproduction through ancestral assistance, and through access to knowledge about sex and reproduction. Both of these are often held close, considered taboo to talk about, and are only revealed at certain moments by those deemed to have the ‘correct’ knowledge. If spiritual ecologies are part of producing life, understood as a generative potential which is continually given and renewed through exchange and transmission (Traube 1986, Trindade and Barnes 2018), then unlocking the conditions of possibility, which can create abundant life and resources, is a key of reproduction governance in local and biomedical forms.

Clarke and Haraway call on us to make *kin not population*, so that all might thrive (2018). As Chapter 5 and 6 showed however, abundance and thriving means not making kin *over* population, but making that kin *is* also population, and that kin in abundance is prosperity in its multispecies multi-spiritual form. In Maubisse, population and kin are entangled in multispecies, multi-spiritual environments, where life is valued in terms of abundance, both of which is environmental, human and non-human.

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The afternoon after the seed banking workshop, I attended a seminar

a seminar on climate change. Fifty or more people tried to cram into tents and listen to representatives of the EU Commission talk about changing weather patterns. But then the rain hammered down on us. It became impossible to hear anyone over the rain on the tarpaulin and we were soon standing in a giant puddle. Workshops were called off. The camp was flooding, and thunder and lightning crashed in.

A UNDP tent on natural disasters had a poster explaining the dangers of flooding, but the whole bottom of the tent was itself inundated by water. The representatives took the opportunity to blare their emergency siren.

I found dry land with a group of women displaying handicrafts from Atauro, and two activist groups *Lao Hamutuk* (Walk Together) and *Kdadalak Sulimutuk* (water that meets and flows together). The Minister of Education shouted through a microphone from the stage, but her messages were lost to the din. Eventually an announcement said that the afternoon's events would be rescheduled. This was nature, this was a challenge to overcome. As the rain continued, I met up with friends from Maubisse, we ran around more and more frequently to push water off the top of the expo tents to save them from collapsing. Someone built a wider water channel next to the tent to divert water. We were cold and tired, so we joined one of the expo tents, singing and dancing. Groups across the field were doing the same. We drank tea brought to us by someone who was manning the expo tent on fuel efficient stoves, ate dried coconut from the Atauro women's cooperative tent, and mixed it with dried cassava provided from the display of an

agricultural NGO. Local families had set up food stalls at the edge of the camp and someone brought us a huge pot of corn stew (*batar daan*). Music was blasted over the rain by the stage speakers, and the UNDP Natural Disaster tent left its emergency siren blaring, adding to the atmosphere of unity in the face of adversity of nature's challenges. Tent owners checked the trenches and gullies they had built the night before, depending on them to drain more water away from the tent. This was 'local knowledge in action', someone said over the microphone. 'Look at what we have built here, the challenges we have overcome, by bringing knowledge together.' Resources came together as did people, to push through the weather.

The following morning, I got up out of my tent and went in search of coffee. I came across Jay, a 19-year-old from a Catholic youth group. We had chatted the day before when he asked me for advice about his studies. He had been awarded a three-month scholarship funded by an Australian NGO. He was concerned about what would be more sustainable for his future, English or Law? English would be very useful if tourism were to boom. Law might be helpful in Timor's oil economy. Though this economy needed to be diversified, as some day the oil would run out. Which sector would provide more opportunities? He was concerned. We looked across the youth camp getting set up for another day and I asked Jay how he felt about the being here.

'Happy' he said, 'there are a lot of people'.

The sense of unity and togetherness has been a key theme of the camp, the very fact that people had come together in such numbers provided Jay, and others like him, with some hope that with pooled energy and resources things could thrive. But at the same time, Jay still needed to plan his career development to position himself well in the national job market, which was dependant natural resources, their commodification and extraction.

Fujikane (Fujikane, 2021) argues that indigenous ideas of *ancestral abundance* in Hawai'i, are a way of refusing capitalism. Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) cartography observes the forms of the landscape, passing them through generations to map places that are abundant and continuous. This contradicts capitalist cartography which involves of enclosing spaces and claiming underdeveloped wastelands and wilderness. The practices of 'ea' or life, breath, political sovereignty, and the rising of the people' are at the forefront of Kanaka Maoli ways of observing and mapping the land (ibid., p. 4). Such observations, she observes, teach an 'abiding love' for the environment (lands seas and skies), through which flows a 'radical resurgence', a vision of abundance in the face of capitalist climate change (ibid.). She argues that capitalist modes of production need to produce scarcity, whereas indigenous ways of being in the world, such as ancestral abundance practiced by Kanaka Maoli, *aims to create abundance not scarcity*.

Romanticizing indigenous ways of being as anti-capitalist, non-extractive and creative rather than destructive is problematic. However, Fujikane boldly expands the concept of abundance to illustrate how capital's

‘empty promise’ of plenitude differs from ancestral abundance which ‘feeds for generations’ (2021:5). Abundance is not a romanticisation of indigenous knowledge systems, she proposes, rather it is a refusal of capitalist economies through an urgent insistence on life. ‘Envisioning and practicing abundance is a necessity in the face of the deadly consequences of occupation, settler colonial genocidal tactics, and corporate-induced climate change’ (Fujikane 2021:5).

Contrasting to Fujikane’s proposal, I suggest that in Timor-Leste, ancestral connections to abundance are not so much a *refusal* of capitalism, as a *negotiation* with it as another possibility of prosperity, and contingency in the absence of its success. With those comments in mind I now turn to discuss how reproduction and resources are tied together through marriage exchange (*barlake*) and how this customary practice emerged at the youth camp.

7.3 Looking for Daughters: marriage exchange and resources

I had been assured by the head of the village and others involved there would be a boys’ ‘village’ and a girls’ ‘village’ at the campsite, to prevent any sexual activity or ‘naughtiness’ (*nakar*). However, it was quickly clear that the young people had flouted this rule and clearly preferred to stay within their own mixed tents with friends. ‘We prefer to stay with people who aren’t strangers’, a Delia told me.

Delia and her younger cousin Tina lived in the centre of Maubisse. At the youth camp, Delia was accompanying her classmates from the national university as part of the Ainaro Municipality Student group (ASREMA), which supports and hosts activities for university students from Ainaro studying in Dili. Delia was giving a poetry performance later that evening, to celebrate local *kultura*. She was mentored by a famous female poet who was acting as Master of Ceremonies for the camp. Delia's performance was intended to champion the symbolism and power of women's traditional clothing.

A student of political science and a former leader of a local agricultural cooperative, Delia was expressive, kind, and considerate. She also looked after her younger cousin and siblings diligently. She and Ina often invited me to go on long walks to various family members houses around Maubisse. In Dili we would hang out at her student quarters and chat over coffee. Usually, Delia wore military fatigues and Che Guevara t-shirts, and her style was described as '*contra*', meaning 'alternative'. However, for poetry performances and special occasions she wore red and black traditional cloth (*tais*), a gold crown (*kabuak*) and gold metal discs (*belak*).

At the youth camp I visited Delia's group's tent which was large enough to stand up in and had a fire smoking in the stone hearth. One of the students was playing guitar. The heavy rain had led to a lot of tents being flooded. One school group even left. But the ASREMA students were

‘children’ of Maubisse and Ainaro, and they were not bothered by the rain. A pot of beans was cooking over the fire, and spirits were high.

Ina and Delia and I spent some time together looking out at the rain from underneath a tent. We snacked on satsumas and sugar crackers, and periodically got up to drain rainwater weighing down the tarpaulins. As we chatted, Delia shared her views on *barlake*, an exchange of gifts between a man and women’s family when they marry. This was a part of *kultura* she affirmed, and in her view it should always continue. However, *barlake* was a very gendered issue, as in patriarchal lineages women married out and moved away to live with their husband’s family, joining their husbands ancestral house.

Despite *barlarke* being considered an exchange, the gifts required by the man’s family (from several hundreds to thousands of dollars, horses, buffalo etc) were often much more expensive than that required from women’s family (pigs, *tais* and alcohol). *Barlake* was therefore a significant financial burden for family members. It also defined relationships between in-laws (*fetosaan-umane*) and their respective ancestral houses. This is particularly the case because entering in toa marriage alliance means that an exchange of gifts would take place at family members funerals and future customary events.

Delia was adamant that the cost or value (*folin*) asked for by the bride's families (*umane*) from the groom's families (*fetosaan*) needed to be reduced. She explained how sometimes *barlake* was called ‘bride price’ (*feto folin*),

but it wasn't about *selling* women, it was about a woman's dignity (*dignidade*) and her value or worth (*valor*). This for Delia was part of the identity of a Timorese woman and she didn't agree with people who said it was simply 'selling' women. If a woman was married into another *uman lisan* without any negotiation it implied that she had no value to her family or her culture.

Clarke and Haraway argue that a key element of reproductive justice is thinking about ways that kinship is crafted through the exchange of things and sharing activities and practices (2018, p. 33). In other words, how kin is formed socially and culturally through practices such as marriage alliances, exchange, ancestral worship and resource sharing and other non-biogenetic practices. Tallbear's (2018) contribution to this discussion shows how indigenous people's social lives have been cast as dysfunctional and subjected to settler colonial ideas of monogamy, heteronormative and marriage focused ideals. Furthermore, the centrality of heteronormative marriage and the family in anthropology must also be examined (Blackwood, 2005). Despite major advances in feminist anthropology over recent decades, the legacies within anthropology itself can still lead the discipline to 'misrecognise' other forms of relatedness that are deemed 'less' important than heteronormative marriage. It is important to look at wider webs of relationality as well as the historical roots of characterisations of marriage (*ibid*). As Silva has written, in Timor-Leste debates for and against the practice of *barlake* show how marriage

transactions are associated with different forms of exchange. Delia's position on marriage could be characterised as fitting into 'gift' exchange, in that a woman's family were compensated for her leaving the family. The argument against *barlake* however suggests that this exchange turns the women in to a commodity. Silva argues that this distinction, between gift exchange and commodity produces a social distinction between people in the rural areas (deemed uncivilised and likely to 'sell' their daughters) and those in the urban areas who consider themselves 'modern' who will not commodify their daughters. However this lack of consensus about what *barlake* actually is, enables people to fulfil commitments to both local and global expectations of modernity.

Delia's position on *barlake*, as a traditional to be upheld, but not commodification of women, was similar to that of Sabina, another friend at the youth camp, who was from the neighbouring area of Hatubilico. Sabina also thought that marriage exchange was *not* something that should be stopped, but that the payments needed to be controlled. For example, in Hatubilico, another area of Ainaro, Sabina told me that people have lots of children because they 'are looking for daughters' (*buka oan fetu*). Girls might leave the household, but they bring could you wealth if the family received a large *barlake*. Receiving? *Barlake* in this way, Sabina explained was no good, and the amounts of gifts and, in particular, money, needed to be reduced. It should be used as cultural practice, not to get rich, otherwise people keep having children to try and have daughters. An elder nurse whom

I worked with at one of the clinics had told me that it was only in more recent times *barlake* started to get more and more expensive, in her opinion this was due to people making more money from the coffee plantations in her home area of Emera, and people feeling able to request more in return for their daughter's hand in marriage and alliance between the families.

Barlake was a much-discussed subject, it was revered as traditional but complained about as a tool people used for making money. It was blamed for family debt, the poor treatment of women by their husbands and in laws a pressure to have lots of children to please them. Yet both men and women that I talked to in Maubisse affirmed it as part of *kultura*, part of identity, which should be followed and continued. *Kultura* or *barlake*, was not the problem, as it is sometimes described, but rather the economisation of it, as well as the lack of knowledge around reproduction. Tellingly, few people outside of the Church talked about abstinence, and instead saw sex education and de-economization of *barlake* as important solutions to social issues like adolescent pregnancy and community development.

Anthropological literature on *barlake* describes the politics of marriage exchange and how its meaning has changed over time (Silva 2010, 2013, 2018, 2019; Niner 2012). Silva describes how colonial media in the 1970's characterised *barlake* a transaction which served to commodify women (2019). Timorese intellectuals, however, challenged this viewpoint, arguing that *barlake* was a complex social process that couldn't be reduced to commodification (ibid). Timorese leaders have also argued that *barlake* is a

form of gift giving. This is a debate that continues to characterise social life today, especially in constructing ideas about modernity and gender. Those who see *barlake* as a 'bride price' are characterised as uncivilised, materialistic, and patriarchal and associated with 'tradition' in the rural areas. By contrast, those whose see *barlake* as gift exchange are associated with modernity and respect (Silva, 2019) and equality.

Niner argues that despite traditional symbolism of the power of women in Timorese customary practices, this doesn't equate or stand in for gender equality (Niner 2012). Yet in Timor-Leste, practices of developmentality which focus on female empowerment or 'gender mainstreaming' which focuses on women and girls, men and boys (and other genders) get left out of the equation (Niner 2012), such approaches risk further embedding gender divisions. Furthermore, Wilson (Wilson, 2015) shows how neoliberal development frameworks not only instrumentalise gender inequality but in fact rely upon it and deepen it to extend and sustain capitalist accumulation. This can be seen in programs often targeted at women and adolescent girls in the global south in the form of self-help groups, microfinance groups and contemporary population policies. Wilson call approach as 'Gender Equality as Smart Economics (2015, p.2). This approach is evident in the theory of the demographic dividend which proposes education and family planning as intervention to create more productive citizens with fewer dependents to increase GDP. Reproductive developmentality uses feminist ideals for economic gain. It also places the

responsibility on women to do the work to empower themselves in these situations, be it struggling against marriage practices or being at the centre of discussions around teenage pregnancy.

Sometime after the youth camp, in 2019, I went to Delia's engagement ceremony (*konyese malu*), where the conditions of her marriage were discussed in the traditional way between her family and her fiancé's relatives. Her family, with Delia's input, did not ask for any *barlake* to be paid. Her father explained that 'it was modern times now', and Ina clarified that no one wanted Delia to suffer at the hands of her in-laws due to any *barlake* they felt they had given up for her. Furthermore, her fiancé's family had very little money and Delia had been worried it might upset things and prevent the marriage. Delia's fiancé had a much-coveted job as an overseas worker on the Australian seasonal workers employment program and would be able to support them in the future through this means. Delia's father explained to me the meaning of the traditionally woven fabric and clay bead necklaces that had been exchanged during the ceremony. Coming from natural resources of cotton and clay, these were symbols of *natureza*. Through these gifts, the couple were bound together through *natureza* and watched over and protected. Delia would go and live with her fiancé's family in Ainaro where they were already building a house, but she would always be welcome at her family's house, which was still considered her 'land of origin'. The environment too was thus closely related to marriage ceremonies and fertility, through the power of *natureza*, as I outlined in

Chapter 6. At the same time Delia's family could be deemed as being modern by not asking for any money. Delia's family thus showed themselves to be respectful of *kultura*, but 'modern'.

As Murphy (2018, p.6) theorizes, reproduction and economy became tied together in the mid-20th century as part of a range of scientific processes aimed at governing both individual and collective life. This form of biopolitical governance transformed the way reproduction and done and managed as life on individual and large scales became managed for the sake of capitalism, often in ways that were racialised and violent. The stories told here by my interlocutors in Maubisse pinpoint *barlake* has having been co-opted for financial benefit in a local sense, but also influenced by external forces of capitalism, such as the coffee trade, and by Catholicism as well. The Church, for example, does not recognise traditional marriage ceremonies and requires, and in the case of Maubisse, puts pressure on couples to marry at a church ceremony. In seeing reproduction as 'distributed', however, we can understand the ways that reproduction, through marriage exchange is cast through a wider set of relations, both influenced by infrastructures of power such as capitalism and colonial relations. Furthermore, such exchanges are connected to spiritual ecologies and they important role they play making kin through exchanges of resources (animal and material) and the power of spiritual agents.

At the same time, they acknowledge the attack on 'culture' as unfounded, for it is not the practice itself, but the motives for doing it that are

problematic. Bridewealth in Timor-Leste has been debated at length, and either defended as a misunderstood cultural exchange (rather than an economic one), or condemned as patriarchal dominance, and theorised as precursor to violence against women (Simião, 2007; Simião and Silva, 2016). Done differently, as Boldoni explores, *barlake* could become part of the solution to resolving domestic violence, but only *if* Timorese women are included in the conversation (Boldoni, 2020). In the case of Delia's marriage, it was clear is that she was involved in the conversations around the arrangements of her marriage to her fiancé.

7.4. Barlake at the Youth Camp: reproduction, negotiation and resources

Barlake has arguably become commodified by capitalist economy and cast as a 'uncivilised' indigenous practice, despite its roots being embedded in exchange. Life, particularly that in the sense of the 'commodified' bride, has become commodified by the series of infrastructural changes, including through academic research and the focus on anthropologists of the rituals surrounding marriage.

At the youth camp, *barlake* was presented in a different way. FinFest was celebrated on the camp's final day. As a celebration of culture and tradition, it brought together artists, musicians, and young people to organise a large enactment of a *barlake* marriage exchange. Actors and participants donned

traditional clothing such as black or colourful woven cloth (*tais*), gold-coloured metal disc pendants (*belak*), and the 'bride' and prospective 'grooms' wore crescent-shaped crown (*kaebuak*). Young people without traditional clothes borrowed props of made like cloth *and* baskets from the camp's stalls selling local goods.

It was unclear what was going to happen as we, the spectators, watched and waited. Groups of actors ran up the nearby hills. A pony and a goat appeared from somewhere. Ceaser, one of the Finfest leaders, lined up a group of young people as his 'family' with one of them posing as the bride to be. They acted as the wife-givers (*umane*). A camera drone filming the event and hovered incongruously over them. Another group went up a nearby hill side. They posed as wife-takers (*fetosaan*). A third group, a competing group of wife-takers marched in the other direction to the opposite hill. As the wife-givers set off on a walk around the large camp with the bride to be, ne group of wife-takers approached them, drumming and banging gongs. They called across to the wife-givers for the prospective bride to marry their prospective groom.

'Not enough, not enough, bring a cow!' the wife-givers yelled back, jokingly implying they needed to bring more *barlake*.. The first group of wife-takers walked away, the young people laughing as the older actors like tried keep a straight facing. Next the second group of wife-takers approached, running down the hill. They had a small goat in tow and a much bigger gathering than the first group. After some shouts back and forth

between the two groups, jovial and teasing, it was agreed that the marriage of the prospective bride and groom from these two groups would take place. The wife-takers started dancing and both groups erupted in excitement. The bride and groom were put upon a horse, and everyone piled into the middle of the field to dance around then, singing songs that had been played at the concert the night before. Everyone had their phones out, photographers ran around taking photos, and the drone buzzed around the heads of the married couple.

Often, I found that at events bringing together wife-giving and wife-taking groups, people were conscious of their roles and responsibilities and nervous about costs. Were their gifts acceptable? Would there be trouble later if they hadn't given enough? Married-in women and daughters of hosts were conscious of looking and keeping busy, helping with food, children and welcoming guests. Older men were concerned with specific practices of *kultura*, the order of events and presentations. Most people were wary within these alliances of fuelling tensions around paying proper respect including bring adequate gifts. Had people brought enough, should people have brought more? Did they owe more? Should more be asked for? These were all part of negotiations that went on during wedding or funerary practices and they were always a cause of stress and tension.

As I described in Chapter 4, much of the stress about teenage pregnancy and marriage hinged on the economic demands of starting a family. However, the jovial re-enactment of a *barlake* exchange had none of these

concerns or pressures. The 'wedding party' buzzed with a sense of play and freedom. This celebration was quite unlike the very serious events I had witnessed where wife givers and wife takers meet to discuss *barlake*, which are called 'meeting one another' (*konyese malu*). In Mambai this meeting of the families was also called 'hot water and firewood' (*bee manas ai tukan*) as traditionally the discussion would centre around how the families would provide care for the bride and children the couple had. It is referred to as 'hot water and firewood' because after giving birth a wife's husband is supposed to make her a fire to sit beside to keep warm and use to boil hot water for her to drink and bring enough wood to keep the fire going throughout her recovery. Sometimes this fire is considered *lulik* and should not be allowed to go out until the mother is rested and recovered. The 'meeting one another' or 'hot water and firewood' event is a discussion about human and natural resources for sustaining life

This practice of staying by the first side after labour sometimes get characterised as a form of gendered oppression, misunderstood as women being forced to stay inside a smoke-filled room. However, in the mountains, where it is often cold, the fire is a coveted source of heat and the fires' heat and the hot water help the woman's recovering through helping the blood to clot and perinium heal. The women I spoke to, particularly Mira and her daughters describe this period as being one of comfort rest as they nursed their new-born, rather than one of forced isolation or oppression

After around forty days, or until the time is decided, a ceremony of 'cleaning the eyes' takes place (*fase matan*). At this gathering family members gather to welcome to the new member of the family and ancestral house. The child's eyes are washed using a coin or a ring to scoop up some warm water boiled over the sacred fire. Gifts of food, soap, clothes, and books are bought for the child and the mother. The washing of the eyes symbolising the child awaking and ask the ancestors for good sight and intelligence. A log is also taken from the sacred fire and someone from the family strategically places the log in a position to indicate to the ancestors how and when the couple would like to have the next child. Close to the house if they would like to have a child again soon, and far away if they would like to have the next child later. Uphill for a boy, downhill for a girl or dropping it over the right should for a boy, the left should for a girl. The practices around the meeting of the two families as well as *barlake* are in essence about an exchange of resources for life, human and non-human.

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At the *barlake* enactment at the youth camp, there hadn't been any real discussion of *barlake* and as a result, the atmosphere was playful. Despite two youth leaders directing, the young people were free to act out which ever positions they liked, old man, old woman, in-laws on either the brides of groom's side, but yet they were not in a real familial hierarchy. This was not their family, responsibilities were absent, future of further social relations were not at stake and reproduction was not implied. In this re-

enactment of marriage at the youth camp, there was only celebration, because social tensions did not exist. It was also a celebration in which *kultura* was the focus, its practice was the centre of attention for everyone, and participation was not conditional on being part of a particular family or hierarchy of social relations. It was also important enough for people to want to watch, celebrate and film.

The conviviality reflected what a community liaison and activist had once suggested to me the first time I had arrived in Timor-Leste, that in the past *barlake* was never about money, but an exchange of skills that were needed for the community. If a woman could make clay pots, or weave *tais*, raise children, all these things were part of an exchange for making a stronger community. Skills, resources, human and otherwise were needed. The youth camp Finfest celebration appeared to resist the commodification of *barlake*, and the social tensions that came with it. At its centre was an exchange of resources, conviviality and freedom from hierarchies and economic concerns. That said eradicating economic relations from customary practices would be idealistic, if not romantic. *Barlake* is after all about an exchange of human and natural resources. As above I argued that ideas about ancestral abundance in Timor-Leste are not necessarily a form of resistance of capitalism but rather modes of possibility contingency in other practices that bring prosperity in other forms. In the final part of this chapter I turn to describe how people saw human and natural resources at a national scale, and their inclusion in it.

7.5 Natural resources and human resources

‘Timor-Leste is rich in natural resources, but doesn’t yet have a lot of human resources’, Cristiano told me. It was six months after the youth camp and I was visiting Cristiano in his village, a short drive from Maubisse Villa. At his request I brought my laptop with me and we sat in the main room of his house next to the front door. It opened onto the sunny garden where his sister and mother were planting red beans. I balanced laptop balanced on my knees and we were writing Cristiano’s CV.

Carolino’s statement echoed a key narrative of the youth camp, the idea that human resources needed to be developed to maintain the country’s natural resources.

The Australian Department for Foreign Affairs and trade (DFAT) had just announced the opening for the yearly round of applications for seasonal workers. The Seasonal Workers Programme, through the Pacific Labour Scheme, invites pacific island nations to send labourers for six months each year to pick fruit and vegetables on Australian farms. Delia’s husband had a position on this program. Young people were particularly keen to apply, working overseas meant a good wage, experience overseas, and the possibility of guaranteed work for six months each year. Like many of my friends in Maubisse, Cristiano was applying. Cristiano had been looking for work opportunities since I met him almost a year ago. As we typed out

Cristiano's CV, we mulled over the economic situation and the problem of large-scale unemployment in Timor-Leste, a conversation we had had many times before.

The narrative of having lots of natural resources, but not enough human resources, was one I had heard from other young people, and from some politicians too. Cristiano elaborated that Timor-Leste was rich in natural resources, like oil, gas and gold, but it didn't have enough human resources to extract them. He gestured over the mountains towards the south coast. The plans for the development of a huge petroleum project on the south coast included a petroleum refinery and petrochemical complex in Betano, only two hours from Maubisse on a newly finished section of road (see Bovensiepen ref). Cristiano was sure that in the future the petroleum sector would create jobs for people in Timor-Leste, as the government had promised.

'The new generation must wait,' he said. 'There aren't enough people with the skills to fulfil those jobs. Some people have gone overseas to study the petroleum industry, but only a very small number. Timor's human resources are lacking, we need more people to work on the oil pipeline.' Cristiano was adamant people will bring more experience from abroad. 'At the moment the population is 1.3 million, it's not big because the land is small. But there are lots of natural resources.'

The 'Tasi Mane' petroleum development on the South Coast is a huge point of political contention in Timor-Leste. Some are adamant that it is the

way forward for the country, despite requiring huge amounts of withdrawals from the country's current petroleum fund. Others see it as unsustainable, unprofitable to downright impossible. There did not seem to be one particular viewpoint amongst people in Maubisse, rather people had their own takes on what might be possible.

Bovensiepen and Nygaard-Christensen have argued that simply the planning of the development itself works to 'project and establish political authority and sovereignty in the context of purported state fragility' (2018, p. 413). Whether the project is a success or failure, the planning itself has created hopes and expectations securing statehood in a country that has been critiqued as failing (ibid., p. 414). In the context of the political debates around the Tasi Mane project, natural resources and human resources has become terms people were familiar with, although as Cristiano implied, one is no good without the other.

In *The Promise of Prosperity*, the authors show how different visions of prosperity are simultaneously at work in Timor-Leste (Bovensiepen 2018a). In her introduction to the edited volume, Bovensiepen asks how people's aspirations for the future shape how people govern their local and national resources (2018, p. 4). Bovensiepen (2018b) and Metzlin Yoder (2018) show that there are nationalist and hyper modernist visions of prosperity in Timor-Leste, connected to recent oil wealth. At the same time Palmer (2018) identifies customary renewal and a cultural connection, whilst a Catholic 'light' shapes other visions of the future (Antonia 2018).

‘Reproductive development’ as I introduced in the previous chapter, encapsulates the ways multiple actors seek to shape reproductive and sexual behaviour for future progress and prosperity. What do these aspirations for the future mean for governing *reproduction* of resources, in particular when life itself, through the population and individual bodies, are seen as a resource? Reproduction features in Timorese visions of the future.

At the youth camp managing natural resources and human resources were we considered ways to sustain the environment, culture and life itself. The language of *abundance*, *thriving* and *survival* are often used by proponents of reproductive justice, as well as international development leaders to evoke positive and lively human environments (Clarke and Haraway 2018, Hoover, 2018, Solinger and Ross 2019, WHO 2008). These visions of survival and plentitude sit in contrast to that of suffering, destruction and extinction.

In many of the conversations I had with people about population was that even if they thought Timor-Leste needed a bigger population, they believed that once this was achieved, then people could have fewer children. One day in the CCT clinic in Maubisse, a male midwife joked that ‘China was full’ and Timor was not yet, so his colleague better hurry up and get married. Ensuring existence, survival, and a good abundance was key first. ‘

Timor-Leste is rich in natural resources, but lacking in human resources’. I encountered this adage in Maubisse, as noted above, but also elsewhere in Timor-Leste: the notion that although the country was rich in oil and

minerals, it lacked the capacity to extract them because of the country's small and untrained population. This idea of a small untrained population was both connected to the loss of population, and the Indonesian occupation, but also to failures in development.

In the previous chapter (Chapter 6) the purpose of water ceremonies was described as to 'grow people', was particularly poignant. It refers to enriching and growing people in relation to the celebration of natural resources relates to the relation between nature and reproduction, particularly the fertility and agency *natureza* holds (Chapter 6), but it also relates to the idea of strength in numbers, that the quality of life can be improved through increasing the quantity of people in Maubisse (Chapter 5). *Haburas* is about improving something by making more of it, and strength in numbers. Strength in numbers is something that has been described to me when people talk about the size of *uma lisan*, they are stronger with more people. It also relates to ideas of continuation, that things must not only continue but improve, thrive. It relates temporally to the imagining of life in the future and aspirations of betterment. Rather than *kultura* being something associated with the past, and traditions, often the purview of development, rather it is future-thinking and making.

Ontological debates about the divisions and continuities between the categories of nature and culture (Descola 2016) could easily be discussed in relation to the categories of human resources and natural resources. Descola proposes that the binary division of humans and nature is not found in

indigenous ontologies. However, this is not my argument in the case of Timor-Leste. As Bovensiepen has suggested, indigenous ontologies become reinforced by resource conflicts. In this respect human resources become something that is 'naturally' valuable, in the sense of there being more abundance of life, human and non-human, in the land, rather than meaning that only educated humans or humans trained in resource extraction are valuable. It is not that people in Maubisse didn't recognise the need to have knowledge and acquire specialist knowledge, but that first and foremost, people are needed for that before anything else.

Cristiano wasn't the only person I spent time with who believed that Timor-Leste's human resources were 'lacking' (*rekursus umanus menus*). In October 2018 a group of university students came to do community service in Maubisse. One month's community service was part of their undergraduate course, and many degree programmes also required a community placement before students took a professional work experience placement. The group who came to Maubisse in October 2018 fundraised money to build a water storage tank in one of Maubisse's hamlets. They slept in colourful rows of cheap tents in the back of the village administration office (*Sede Suku*). In the day they sourced building materials or went on community trips. In the afternoons they hung out, played guitar, sang or tried to charge their phones. Many of them didn't have family in Maubisse and saw it as a new experience to visit another part of their country.

In one of our conversations, Gusti, a leader of the group, talked about the process of applying for jobs. Often it was difficult to apply for jobs in Timor-Leste, he told me. This was partly because of nepotism (*sistema familia*). and because young people often ended up in a job unrelated to their training. Nepotism was reported as a big problem by most people I talked to about employment. You needed to have family, or know someone to get a job in a particular company or organisation.

‘You have to be really diligent and active to find a job, go to the SEFOPE office, the centre for professional training and employment, every day, and look for opportunities ... then race around and get your documents in order’, Gusti said. ‘Then. Applicants also needed a long list of different identity and registration cards’. Gusti pulled them out of his wallet and talked me through them. ‘The best you can do is develop yourself and work hard,’ Gusti said matter-of-factly, ‘develop yourself, develop your skills, develop your nation ... The country needs human resources for development.’

‘And by human resources, you mean ... ?’ I asked.

‘People’ he replied.

In February 2019, four Timorese community liaison workers moved into Jamie and Amira’s main house. I shared the main concrete house with one of their daughters and a nurse, both of whom worked at the Maubisse hospital. Jamie and Amira, their older daughter and four young children lived next door in a house of corrugated sheet iron so they could keep the concrete houses free for potential renters. Our four new housemates shared two

rooms and made the house full and lively., cooking, working at laptops, and playing music. The community liaison team, community health workers and I shared many morning coffees and long days traveling, including to the remoter villages.

‘People can choose to have more children...,’ Xavier, one of the liaison team, said one morning. The topic of children was popular and people often raised it and used it as a point of comparison between Timorese and foreigners from the UK.

‘... Many people want seven or eight kids because they feel like they are few, because of the war. Timor-Leste has more resources than it does people, so we need more people, the population is small, we need it to grow. In the future the people from Dili also need to return to the districts.’ Like Cristiano, Xavier also thought more human numbers were important for development and reiterated it to his colleagues on several occasions.

By ‘human resources’, Xavier told me, he meant ‘educated people’ (*ema matenek*). ‘Timor-Leste does have educated people, human resources,’ Xavier reflected, thinking about it for a second. ‘The government plans to open 60,000 jobs each year so that people don’t have to go and look for work abroad’.

In a development sense, human resources refer to the people who make up a workforce within a company, organisation or economy, and the structures used to manage them. For the Timorese government, human resources often referred to people and their capacity to work skilled jobs to

further national development. The creation of human resources for the nation became a big topic of conversation in the media, social media and conversations I had with people in 2018. In particular, between April and July 2019, when the government came under widespread criticism for failing to adequately address unemployment, debate on human resources was widespread.

The 8th Constitutional government, formed by the collation AMP (Alliance for Change and Progress), promised job creation as part of its promise to develop the countries 'social capital'. The government's macro-economic policy promised to create 60,000 new jobs to manage unemployment rates and reduce poverty rates to 10% in five years' time (*Programa VIII Governu Konstitusional: 93*). In the media it was reported that President Taur Matan Ruak had promised even more ambitiously that it would create 60,000 jobs *each year*.

In this regard, human resources were something that were drastically and suddenly reduced after the violence of 1999. The vote in favour of independence led to the violent withdrawal of the Indonesian military and militia, whose scorched earth campaign led to the evacuation of as Indonesian's working in the government and public sector. 80% of public sector staff returned to Indonesia (refs). The health sector for example was rumoured to have just one qualified surgeon for the estimated 900,000 population at the time (Tulloch *et al.*, 2003). Since independence then development goals have been orientated towards developing 'human

capital', and a human capital development fund was set up to fund the overseas education and qualification of Timorese to work in the public sector. In the national Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030 (SDP), human resources fall under the strategy of social capital and human 'capital'. According to this document, Timor-Leste's economic potential is embedded in natural resources, which can be harnessed to develop health, education and improve agricultural productivity. In short, investing the wealth of natural resources in its human resources to build and sustain the nation. The SDP's three point investment plan thus requires investment in 'core infrastructure, human resources and the strength of our society, and private sector jobs (in agriculture, tourism and oil and gas - the natural resources) (Timor-Leste, 2011) The political discourse around human resources was a key part of conversations related to national development. Human resources also were a concern of individuals, as people searched for employment and better income opportunities, the drew on this discourse in their analysis of the current job market (*kampu trabalho*) and the country's economic future.

At the youth camp the knowledge for sustaining the environment was identified not only as environmental, but also customary or 'traditional'. Moreover, the camp included an expo tent run by Marie Stopes, a sexual and reproductive health NGO, a seminar on youth sexual and reproductive education and the grand finale, a re-enactment of a traditional marriage alliance ceremony. I argue that the approach to reproduction, as both

developmental and distributed offers unique ways to think about how reproduction, environment and population are tied together in discussions about resources and knowledge. They are not totally opposed but are two approaches to reproduction that, when contextualised in the local environment can be a way to highlight reproductive injustices as well as pathways towards reproductive justice.



Figure 22. People gathered near the top of Mount Ramuelau on the October pilgrimage. Credit: Author 2018

8. Conclusion

Distributing Reproduction not Reproductive Development

‘We are a small country, with an equally small population! We have already lost many people during our national liberation struggle. We cannot lose any more. People are our country’s most precious asset. The greatest wealth of Timor-Leste is our people!’ (Media of the President of the Republic of Timor-Leste, 2020b)

The words of President of Timor-Leste, Francisco Guterres ‘Lù Olo’ above come from his speech announcing a state of national emergency. In March 2020, at the beginning of the global Covid-19 pandemic, Timor-Leste identified its first case of Covid-19. The citizens were asked to take measures to protect themselves and reduce movement to stop any spread of the virus. The country’s borders were closed, and many international workers were called home and put on evacuation flights. At this time the President of Timor-Leste gave a speech to the nation that emphasised the need to protect people's lives. The President reminded people that the struggles for independence against an oppressive Indonesian occupation had already taken the lives of many people, and the country could not afford to lose any more.

The threat of Covid-19 heightened population discourse in Timor-Leste. The government's messages about saving lives and human resources resonated strongly with the themes of reproduction, population development, and prosperity that emerged from my research, as evidenced in the chapters of this thesis.

As the pandemic unfurled, I feared for friends in Timor-Leste. Later in 2021 I spoke to friends in flooded houses as a deadly flood severely damaged Dili and caused landslides in Maubisse. The flooding caused a surge in Covid-19 cases and both these threats, whilst different in nature, were a threat to human security that compounded on an already struggling economy with few stable jobs (da Cruz Cardoso, 2020). When the state of national emergency was extended a month later the president reiterated his earlier comments about saving the population:

We need to be brave to initiate a state of emergency because we want to save people, our greatest resource. Other wealth we can recover, people's lives cannot be recovered (Media of the President of the Republic of Timor-Leste, 2020a)

The Prime Minister, Taur Matan Ruak, repeated a similar message. He expressed his concern referencing some of Timor's darkest days of the Indonesian occupation:

I acknowledge that in 1976 and 1978 many people died from starvation caused by war... [If it's] between saving lives or the economy, which one will we choose? I will choose lives first and then the economy (Colo, 2020).

The quotes above solidify the main insights of this thesis: the vital importance of 'population' in a young country that lost many lives to the violent occupation by the Indonesian military. They also show how the idea of population is linked to wealth and resources through a developmentalist discourse, and how these two approaches are sometimes in opposition but also coexist and merge in new and interesting ways. In what follows I summarise the main arguments and contributions of this thesis. This is followed by an overview of how these arguments are built throughout each chapter. I then look at the wider implications of this work for the disciplinary fields I have engaged with and draw out some themes for further investigation.

In summary, this thesis has developed and adapted two theoretical concepts which help to illuminate the contradictions and convergences in reproductive politics in Timor-Leste. The first, a demographic approach involving global health and family planning, envisioned a young population that could bring economic benefit to the country, providing they had fewer children, better jobs and income. The other approach asserts that due to the loss of life people experienced during the past, particularly during the

Indonesian occupation, Timor-Leste 's population is small, with a lot of empty land, and there is a need for more people. I explained how these different approaches characterise what I term 'reproductive developmentality', the idea that reproduction can be shaped for national development. They also are part of reproduction as it is distributed across social relations, temporalities, and spaces, adding that in Timor-Leste part of this distribution of reproduction includes spiritual ecologies which are part of making and sustaining life. I argue that these approaches are not always in opposition with one another, they share similar goals in that both pursue forms of prosperity, they coexist and cause tensions, adding charge to reproductive politics. Reproductive developmentality is part of the wider concept of distributed reproduction, in that it is comprised of a set of relations and infrastructures which in the case of Timor-Leste discourages high fertility for economic and social good. Fertility rates and population growth is key point on which these two approaches to reproduction clash in Timor-Leste. Reproductive developmentalities here envision fewer new lives being born in the future to improve national prosperity. On the other hand, local communities in Maubisse which take a distributed approach to reproduction, value the potentiality of life and envision life, human and non-human, in abundance for a prosperous future.

By developing these terms thesis engages with debates about reproductive justice and its concerns with the categories of reproduction, population, and environment. In particular, it challenges populationist

discourses that harbour assumptions about the way these categories interact with one another. Malthusian approaches often assume that there is a destructive relationship between ‘over’-reproductive behaviour, which, if left unmanaged, leads to growing populations that deplete environmental resources. Even where the population is falling, other discourses of population presume that managing reproduction in other ways, for example by encouraging fertility, can help stabilise economies and manage human resources to produce goods and processing of natural resources. In of both these scenarios reproduction is the point of intervention through which the population is shaped and managed for the greater good, and over population (or sometimes under), is blamed for societal ills and environmental destruction.

However, as I have shown, the significance of reproduction, population and environment can be challenged by investigating the multiple meanings and approaches to these categories in the local context. This enables us to question and reconfigure the assumptions about the relationship between them that underlies populationist thinking around sustainability and survival. It is therefore not about ‘solving’ the population problem through interventions into reproductive lives but reconceiving the categories and the relationships between them to untangle the perceived problem itself. This thesis has unsettled the problematic relationship between reproduction, environment and population by examining what

these terms mean and how their dynamic relationship with one another has developed in Timor-Leste's post-conflict setting.

By bringing the historical and political literature on Timor-Leste in to conversation with feminist work on reproductive politics I have developed the concept of 'reproductive developmentality' I name a more specific approach to reproduction in development context that names a specific sub concept of reproductive governance, which has a much broader frame.

This study contributes the first ethnography on reproduction to the rich anthropological literature on Timor-Leste. In doing so it brings together the anthropological literature on Timor-Leste, Southeast Asia and the wider Asia Pacific into conversation with interdisciplinary scholarly work on reproduction and population. This has enabled me to draw on and expand Murphy's concept of distributed reproduction to include and provide an example of how reproduction is distributed through the environment, not only in material ecologies such as pollution and contaminants, but also through spiritual ecologies.

I now turn to a summary of the thesis main ethnographic contributions to outline the specific arguments I make in each chapter which help to build the arguments I have outlined above. The methodological approach to this research was described in Chapter 2 'Resisting Numbers'. This chapter sets the ethnographic scene by describing how I came to my main fieldsite in Maubisse and the challenges around taboo topics, language, and ethics processes. It argued that researching reproduction and population

ethnographically requires resisting urges to count in ways that we are expected to, particularly when it comes to the topics of reproduction and population where people, and in particular state and development officials, request evidence through quantification. Using assemblage ethnography and acknowledging a 'patchwork' approach, I outline that reproduction and approaches to population can be explored ethnographically after conflict. Methodologically, this thesis questioned how we research taboo topics such as sex and reproduction after conflict and violence, and the challenge of investigating a topic like population ethnographically which has largely been dealt with in demographic figures. In Chapter 2, I outlined the expectations and assumptions I faced and the virtues and struggles of my positionality as a young unmarried woman working in this field. I argue for a more narrative approach to understanding discourses about population through following paths linked to reproduction,

The two chapters which make up Section I explored how reproductive developmentality manifests in Timor-Leste. First, in Chapter 3, I examined how family planning training became a site where the discourse of 'choice' in reproductive rights was challenged and showed itself to be an illusion in an environment where structural issues and moralising approaches were used by different actors as part of a reproductive developmentalist approach. It also illustrated that recognising the influence of past violence on interpretations of reproduction is of significant importance to prevent the recurrence of reproductive violence. Through following local health

workers engagement with a family planning training course. Chapter 3 detailed the way people recognised the discourse of individual choice in reproduction as unattainable given the structural inequalities in healthcare. Here I also showed the assemblage of relationships and power dynamics in and political social structures in the reproductive health landscape. This chapter addresses the issue of choice in reproductive justice debates, agreeing that the discourse is problematic as choice at an individual level in reproduction is unattainable, particularly in places of stark inequalities in healthcare. At the same time, however, if we want to pursue autonomy of individual bodies, we can't do away with choice altogether, rather we need to be honest about where individual choice exists and where it does not exist, in order to avoid the manifestation of distrust in particular global health narratives. This is particularly important if we are to eliminate practices of coercion that may be created, resembling forms of colonial violence that are still within living memory. Reproduction then must be recognised as both something that affects individuals and is distributed, and this should be acknowledged in health discourses.

The second chapter of Section I, Chapter 4, examined how debates and public discussion around child abandonment revealed the ways that reproduction is seen as a vehicle for development, and how assumptions about gender lead to women being held responsible for reproduction and with that, development. This chapter explored the multiple moral discourses of early pregnancy, child abandonment and infanticide, or soe

bebe. The events surrounding two National Youth debates on the issue showed the magnitude of concern this issue caused to multiple actors and elicited a response from different parts of society including the Catholic Church, Development organisations, civil society groups and the state. These responses, although very divided in their approaches to prevent the issue, showed how the concerns for individual future, collective cultural continuation and national prosperity manifested through a gendered politics of survival. This politics placed young women as the 'sexual stewards' of the state, responsible for future prosperity through their reproductive behaviours, both perpetrators of crimes and in need of education and protection. Whilst this gendered ascribing of responsibility was recognised by some in these debates, the gendered politics revealed the pressure on young people, and young women in particular to protect the future of the nation in moral, cultural, economic terms through their reproductive capacity. This form of reproductive developmentality, along with the problematic discourse of choice showed the harm and further violence that reproductive developmentality can cause through its narrow conceptualisation of reproduction as something individual, gendered and intervenable in for national prosperity.

The first two chapters of Section II explored how reproduction in Maubisse is distributed. First it showed how reproduction is distributed through the landscape and ancestral relationships. It argued that these local ways of counting and recounting can be as a form of reproductive justice for

those who feel that their number has been diminished. Second, it expanded Murphy's description of distributed reproduction to show how customary practices that form relationships between ancestral spirits and the land, or spirit ecologies, are part of reproduction being distributed across temporal and spatial elements. Together these two chapters argue that reproduction in Timor-Leste is, and has been, distributed through social processes such as ancestral houses which count people in number and significance as part of pursuits of kin in the face of threats to group survival. In addition to this, the natural forces and spiritual ecologies (*lulik*, *natureza*, *matak-malirin*) that people engage with through ancestral houses and the landscape show how the reproductive agency does not lie only with individuals or humans, rather it is distributed through the land, ancestral relationships and natural environment. It is through the pursuit of a lively environment, in relationship with these forces that people seek prosperous futures in which people pursue abundance and prosperity. Here, the number of people and the relationships they forge with one another matter precisely because survival has been threatened, both in terms of human life and cultural continuity through multiple forms of past violence.

These two chapters also address recent debates in discussions about reproductive justice and how it might be achieved. First it addresses the notion that reproductive justice might mean repopulation, particularly for people who feel that their survival has been threatened. Secondly, it addresses how we need new ways of counting, that don't measure

population and kin against each other, and refuse to recreate colonial and racist categories by which population has been organised, rather by paying attention to how people count themselves and how reproduction is distributed throughout the environment. This doesn't necessarily mean that kindling no human kin relations replaces human reproduction in indigenous contexts, however.

The final chapter of this section, Chapter 7, explores how reproductive developmentalities and distributed reproduction converge around ideas concerning employment, environment, and resources for prosperity. Showing the assemblage of actors that came together at the environmental youth camp, along with ideas of tradition and development this chapter considered how sex education, environmental sustainability and marriage exchange were centred around exchanges of knowledge and resources. As the quotes from Timor-Leste leaders at the start of this conclusion attest, seeing people as resources can tie them to the economy. However, seeing people as natural resources worthy of the same care and protection as the environment is a way to ensure environmental reproductive justice.

What reproductive developmentalities has the tendency to do however can be harmful without a reproductive justice approach. Thinking of the politics of population is a politics of reproduction, Murphy traces the economization of life through phantasmagrams: 'a quantitative practice enriched with affect, propagate imaginaries, lure feeling, and hence have supernatural effects in surplus of their rational precepts.' (2017:24).

Phantasmagrams are in other words, numbers, measurements, and calculations that have affect, beyond their logical limits. GDP, the Human Development Index and the calculation of demographic transition are a few of these phantasmagrams which can become a 'ruling tyrant' (ibid.,). They serve as an index for which lives and worlds are rearranged as aggregate life and economy is measured in relation to one another. Murphy asks 'how does capitalism know and dream its own conditions through numbers and data?' (2017: 1). The current optimism placed in the 'demographic dividend' in Timor-Leste demonstrates the effective quality of such measurements and calculations. The calculation enables us to imagine that by investing in youth wellbeing, reducing fertility rates, and restructuring the population, social and economic stability can be averted and transformed into social prosperity.

For reproductive studies and anthropological work on reproduction, my thesis implies that a broader conception of reproduction can be used to investigate topics and themes that were previously set apart from reproductive politics. In particular health and development research can broaden the spectrum of reproduction to consider how local meanings of reproduction can be in contention or align with dominant models and help expand them.

A reproduction that is distributed compels us to acknowledge reproductive developmentalities as part of a larger set of uneven and shared relations as described by Murphy (2017, p.144) and their generative and

degenerative, and even violent, qualities. However, as I have argued in this thesis, this does not mean discounting the way that numbers and population matter in terms of life and collective kin, but it does mean that we can find new ways of counting, as well as new ways of conceptualizing what life and reproduction are through what they mean to people locally.

In response to the debates in *Making Kin Not Population*, my maxim would be 'Making Kin *and* Population'. I am for distributed reproduction not reproductive developmentalities. Although I acknowledge that aspects of these developmentalities are done with good intentions and have positive side-effects that can be preserved in a reproductive justice framework. For example, open and transparent discussions about biomedical knowledge, how it is constructed, and by who, and bringing this into conversation with local knowledge, political contexts, and live experiences. I am also for reproduction for prosperity, but a prosperity that isn't centred on capitalist growth, colonial categories, racist science, and Malthusian assumptions. Reproductive health policies, and practices, must consider noneconomic value of reproduction, understand that choice doesn't work in all environments and consider where well-meaning goals can be contradictory and sew further distrust, or in the worst cases, further coercion. Trust and truth are important in the wake of violence and oppression and when actors seek to control reproduction, they risk recreating old tensions and forging

new ones. For example, tensions around religious morality, cultural suppression, discriminatory forms of nationalism and gendered oppression. This thesis highlights several topics for further research and discussion. In particular the connection between health, environment and social inequalities in the wake of Covid-19. The discourses around saving lives and human resources as shown by the quotes from Timorese leaders above could be examined considering vaccine hesitancy and distrust of global health policies that emerged during the pandemic.

Similarly, given the power shifts and changes in attitudes to population in Europe, America, and China, understanding reactions to population change (growth and decline) and impact on reproductive politics in places influenced by globalised reproductive politics, will be an important topic to pay attention to. For example, in the context of fears surrounding aging populations, population decline, overturning of *Roe v Wade* in the United-States, the illegalisation of abortion in Poland, pollution, climate change and declining fertility rates. In this era population politics, that is, reproductive politics, will demand further attention. Reproductive justice and the concepts I developed in this thesis, reproductive developmentality and my expanded understanding distributed reproduction, might be useful in understanding and weighing in on these debates.

Finally, if there is one insight, I would like to share from Maubisse, it is the notions that *natureza*, is unruly - it cannot be controlled. Similarly,

reproduction is not something that can be controlled without interventions that have many harmful side effects. When actors and institutions attempt to govern reproduction, like they attempt to govern other resources it has negative consequences. If reproduction is distributed, it cannot be governed. If it is dispersed throughout the wider social and natural environment, governing it through targeting individuals and the wider human population is not going to work. Rather than trying to control and change reproduction it should be other social constructions, such as population, environment, resources, and economy, that we question and remake.

The population 'problem' can be solved by rethinking the categories of reproduction, environment and population and the relationship between them. We learn from Timor-Leste that there are local ways of counting kin and valuing population. It teaches us something about what happens with population growth and decline, how narratives come together, how people use negotiate contingent things for the possibility of survival and prosperity. We need to avoid being prescriptive about reproduction so as not to reinforce colonial forms of violence and stereotypes. For reproduction, population *and* kin.



Figure 23. 'You mustn't play with peoples lives', Graffiti on a wall in Dili. Credit: Author 2019

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