

Gift economy and the acknowledgement of debt: (On) Living and eating with ‘mystical’ actors in Timorese houses

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Abstract

This essay is based on ethnographic research in a Same community (Manufahi) and it seeks to grasp the ways by which the cohabitation of persons and ‘mystical’ actors acquires meaning through daily practices of commensality. This essay thus delves into the idea that the stages of making and consuming food are, among other things, moments of communion—with god (*maro-mak*), with the ancestors (*bei’ala*), and with the sacred house. In light of this idea, the relationship between humans and non-humans is constituted by a constant giving and receiving of food, of which debt and the expectation of reciprocation are a deliberate part.

Keywords: Commensality; cohabitation; sacred house; humans; non-humans; Timor-Leste



Figure 7.1: The preparation of the sacred food offered to *bosok*.¹ *Uma Lulik*, Mau Asu, Sau Batar, 2017. Credit: Renata Nogueira da Silva.

The intention of this essay, which is based on ethnographic research conducted in an East Timorese community (Same, Manufahi) during 2017, is to reflect upon the relationship between food, gift, and debt.² The object of this study is the eating practices of my interlocutors (the sons and daughters and also the friends of the Mau Asu Sacred House) and their relationship with different ontological agents, both humans and non-humans (mystical agents).

Before proceeding, some terminology clarification is needed. In this essay, I employ *house*, with a lowercase *h*, to refer to a house, a place where people live. When I am dealing with the ceremonial houses, I employ *sacred house*, a *lulik* and also *House*, with a capital *H*. In this case, I am referring to a House as an entity (even when I do not specify which particular House). I make such distinctions based on Friedberg's (1972, 1989) and Sousa's (2008) suggestions.

I employ the expression mystical actors/entities within this essay to refer to the gathering of non-human entities (which nonetheless have agency in the lives of humans), such as god (*maromak*), ancestors (*bei'ala*) and the sacred house. Throughout the text, the terms ancestors and forefathers are used as synonyms and the expressions non-human entities and mystical actors are related. I have been using the latter since a conversation I had with Professor Kelly Silva, who warned me back then about the risks of not taking into consideration the heterogeneity of the non-human actors (which act upon human lives) in my research field.

For the purposes of this essay, I employ *maromak* as a synonym for god, that is, as another entity amongst the several mystical agents with whom humans interact by means of eating and food.

Moving on now to food, I approach food ingestion as productive consumption (Marx [1859] 1982; Gregory 1982), a phenomenon by means of which life is reproduced (materially and immaterially), in its multiple meanings.

According to Marx ([1859] 1982, 8), "They [the economists] call productive consumption both production that is simultaneously identical with consumption, and consumption which is directly concurrent with production".³ Such production, analogous to consumption, becomes a second production, for it arises out of the annihilation (consumption) of the product of the first production. That being so, the very act of consuming food and offering it to non-humans allows for the satisfaction of a set of both material and immaterial demands of the productive process (such demands are aimed at the reproduction of life). The material conditions for social reproduction (of existence) are related in a number of ways to certain cosmological representations (which include the mystical realm). The material conditions themselves feed such representations.

Offering food and sacrificing animals to non-human actors is a practice that has long been discussed in the literature on rituals (in Timor-Leste and elsewhere). Tylor (1871) considers sacrifice to be a gift which the 'savage' offers to the gods

with whom he or she seeks to have a relationship. Mauss and Hubert ([1899] 2005), in their turn, understand as religious sacrifices everything that includes certain rituals—which are not necessarily actions that cause pain or suffering. Most sacrifices studied by Mauss and Hubert took place by means of rituals which ended with the death or consumption of a victim or an offer (an animal, some food or a human being), which was then taken by the god to whom it had been offered. “Every sacrifice takes place under certain circumstances and for certain ends” (Mauss and Hubert [1899] 2005, 101).

Mauss and Hubert divide rituals into two kinds: occasional sacrifices and constant sacrifices. The former are those which may take place at any given day, whereas the latter always take place on a set day, following a routine. Mauss and Hubert suggest that sacrifice establishes a sort of contract between humans and gods, for if the latter ensure the existence of the former, the reverse is certainly true, also. Gods acquire their food from humans. The flow of gifts remains by means of a deliberate maintenance/nourishment of the debt and it allows for an articulation between the freedom to and the obligation to give and to reciprocate.

At the Urufu *aldeia* or community (in the Same municipality and the Holarua *suku*), offering food—daily—to the mystical actors at home and having meals—periodically—at the sacred house are essential acts that ensure the harmony between different social groups, the reproduction of life and the balance of the house as a moral entity (Lévi-Strauss 1986).

The non-humans or mystical actors I refer to throughout this essay include: ancestors, the sacred house and *maromak*. Ancestors are not the dead in general but rather those who accumulated several sources of value (be it cultural, emotional, social, religious, economic or political) when alive and had the ability to activate or to access them in different social contexts. Employing an idiom from botany (McWilliam 2009), we could describe an ancestor as a trunk of an origin group (Fox 1996) and its descendants are the branches. Such representation (a trunk and its branches) is the expression of an archetype of precedence (McWilliam 2009, 112) in which the trunk comes before and is superior to the branch, in a temporal sense. The moral authority of the trunk (over its tips, its descendants) is acknowledged, regardless of this particular ancestor being dead or alive.

Authors such as David Hicks ([1976] 2004), Elizabeth G. Traube (1980), Shepard Forman (1980), James Fox (1996), Andrew McWilliam (2009), and Susana Viegas (2016), based on research conducted in different East Timorese contexts, point out the centrality of funerary rites and ancestors’ rites in the lives of Timorese men and women. Social life itself depends on the ways by which the connections (between the living and the dead) are nourished during ceremonial occasions (such as funerals). The social life also depends on the ways by which such connections are nourished in daily life. People pay their deference to the dead in ceremonies,

such as during the Day of the Dead; tombs are visited by relatives who offer them candles and flowers and the ancestors are fed during those ceremonies. Life is to a large extent ordered by the exchange of gifts and by the acknowledgement of the communications and negotiations with spiritual entities. Certain development programs and projects associate what is considered the country's low economic development to their population engagement with practices and local values. However, when we observe the ways through which the local economic relations are materialised in daily life, we see a different arrangement between different regimes and production, exchange, distribution and consumption relations, amongst which the market and the gift are activated due to life reproduction (i.e., see Introduction, Chapters 5, 8, and 13, this volume).

The aforementioned literature, however, does not explore differences between the scale and the types of ritual practices and specific eating practices. There is also a lack of analysis regarding the daily offering of food within domestic unities (such offerings can be described as a constant sacrifice, as Mauss and Hubert would call it). Hick's ([1976] 2004) work, though, does describe the interior of houses and the events that take place there. Among other things, he suggests that the innermost part of the house, called *labis laran*, is the place of women where food is prepared and where the altar is placed (in which offerings are given to the spirits of the house). The innermost room is used exclusively by women during the daytime.

I highlight here the importance of women in a chain of transformation: food into nutrition, raw food into cooked and nutrition into offer. The raw food may be considered everything out of control from the house and the cooked food as something social, thus allowing the relation and the mixing of things from the world that were eventually separated. Women are fundamental to the physical process of cooking things and also to operating the changes of relation status (see Lévi-Strauss 2004; DaMatta 2004).

Nutrition takes us to family interactions, alliance nets and commitments, to the mystic agents, the house and the sacred houses. On sharing food, we celebrate relations allowing the production and life at its most diverse expression.

Most of the food consumed in the homes I visited in Timor-Leste comes from the commodity regime (the market). When such foods are offered to mystical beings, they change their status and thus begin to circulate in the gift exchange regime. Such regimes are not mutually exclusive but rather coexist in social life and they may be activated (or not) depending on the context. In the case of a gift exchange regime, maintaining the relationship is as important as acknowledging the debt (Silva 2016).

In this essay, I explore how relationships between persons and non-human entities are nourished by, among other things, a constant giving and receiving of foods, in which debt and the expectation of reciprocation are both deliberate. I deal

with the distinctions between rituals concerning gifts/sacrifices of foods (conducted inside the sacred houses) and, on the other hand, rituals conducted within the domestic unit. I also propose analogies between the liminality of the food offered to the non-human and the liminality of these very actors, whose actions take place between two worlds—the world of the living and the world of the dead.

Throughout the text, I make it explicit that the foods offered to non-human actors have unique features: they are prepared without seasoning and salt and they are offered half-raw (or half-cooked). Thus, these foods, like their recipients, appear to be in a liminal state (between a natural state and a cultured one, through their cooking).⁴

This essay proceeds in three parts. In the first one, I return to some of the ways by which anthropology has approached the question of food. In the second one, I deal with some of the traits that characterise *fó han* (to feed) in intra-sacred house rituals. These are privileged moments to feed (in the broadest sense of the term) the House, its members, and the very bonds that constitute it. In the third part, in its turn, I analyse the ways in which mystical actors are handled during daily practices of commensality within the home where I was welcomed and stayed for research purposes. Finally, in the fourth section, I explore the nature of the kind of foods offered to non-human actors and I try to derive the analytical implications of it.

Food in anthropology and in East Timorese ritual contexts

Some currents of thought have taken the problem of nourishment as the founding phenomenon of the economy. The capacity of the productive forces to produce more food, beyond the demand for immediate consumption, constitutes in fact the first social surplus; food is thus the fundamental element for the reproduction of a society, at the level which Marx defined as the infrastructure (Carneiro 2003, 22). “Every production, then, immediately becomes consumption, and consumption also immediately becomes production” (Marx [1859] 1982, 218-219). Uniting the realms of consumption and production allows us to highlight some of the subtleties involved in the relationship between human beings and commodities, and thus to reconcile, in some measure, the subject and the object, interiority and exteriority.

In another front of research, Lévi-Strauss ([1962] 1980, 2004) understands food as an analytical unit which allows one to access human thought; as a way to elaborate relationships between groups by means of analogies and metaphors regarding marriages, sexual acts, and alliances. In the wake of this perspective, Leach (1983) and Sahlins (2004) both indicate that food is a symbol which communicates specific messages in social interactions. There is an ongoing discussion on the distinctions between mere nourishment (Portuguese *alimento*) and food. Such

discussion sharpens our interpretative horizons. DaMatta (2004), in his study on Brazilian food, states that any nutritious substance is a nourishment (*alimento*), however not every nourishment constitutes *food*. According to him, a nourishment is anything someone ingests to remain alive; food, in its turn, concerns the very constitution of identity. “There are ‘nourishments’ and there is food. Food is not merely a nourishing substance: it is also a way, a style and a manner of eating” (DaMatta 2004, 56). In a similar perspective, Woortmann (1986) contrasts “food” with nourishment (even though the former derives from the latter), for food is the transformation of provision by means of cooking. For Carneiro (2003, 8), “what one eats is as important as when one eats, where one eats, how one does it and with whom.”

Another important contribution to the discussion on commensality and anthropology is Viegas’ work (2006) on the historical elaboration of identity among the Tupinambá people of Olivença (state of Bahia, Brazil)—based on the relationship between food and pleasure. In her study, Viegas highlights the importance of “feeding” as a dimension of sociality and of the construction of what it means to be a relative. Throughout this text, I speak of food, nourishment, and food products to approach the different ways of feeding, nourishing and sustaining human beings, non-human entities and the bonds between them.

Persons organised in groups of origin, such as several East Timorese communities, live in mutual dependence—dependence not only on the living but also on those who dwell in another realm of existence. Balancing the most important phenomena that make up the life of the living is conceived as a gift from the non-human entities; such gifts must be reciprocated, so as to ensure the very reproduction of life (Silva 2016).

The vegetable garden, the animals, health, employment and anything which allows the reproduction of human existence are considered to be a gift from the mystical actors. Therefore, people feel in debt to them. Offering food is a way to give thanks for the gifts received and, in a way, to acknowledge a debt which, in fact, can never be paid. Commitment to others, humans or not, ensures the ongoing and permanent nature of the debt. According to Palmer, in this region, sociability is sustained by more than human relationships, involving conscious cooperation and intersubjectivity manifesting and transforming itself through different bodies and things in space and time. This the author calls “inclusive sociality” (Palmer 2015, 42).

Acknowledging the agency of the mystical actors is part of daily life and can be seen in the amount of trouble humans take to feed and take care of such entities. Feeding those non-human entities establishes a system of prestations and counter-prestations, in which food is a vehicle for communication. Feeding the mystical agents is essential to maintain the bonds with those who dwell in different realms of existence.

Intra-sacred house ceremonies

I attended several ceremonies at East Timorese sacred houses, in different municipalities.⁵ In each and every one of them, giving food to the non-human entities was a part of the ceremony. Each ceremony has its own scope and dynamics, which involves a certain number of families being together in the vicinity of the sacred house for a certain time, and also involves exchanging respects and goods. The nature and the amount of goods exchanged depend on the position of each family in the context of the ceremony in which persons and goods circulate. Some goods are consumed during the period in which people are staying in the House, while others become relics for the sacred house. And some are distributed according to the rules of precedence among the members of a group of origin called for the ceremony.

In these ceremonies, *bua-malus* is essential: it serves the purpose of enhancing communication between the realm of the living and other realms.⁶ It consists in the first offering that is given to the non-human entities. This offering can be placed in different locations, depending on the ceremony. It could be left within the sacred house, at the *bosok*, or on a stone, as the activity taking place prescribes.⁷ According to my interlocutors, *bua-malus* opens the *kultura* ceremonies and may also be used to welcome visitors. In other words, *bua-malus* opens paths for both horizontal and vertical relationships, promoting communication between people within the human realm (horizontal) and also communication between human beings and non-human beings (vertical).

Offering, accepting and sharing *bua-malus* is indispensable in communication, exchange and in opening new dialogues. The action of chewing *bua-malus*, on any social occasion, has been described as fundamental to begin and/or to strengthen relationships. This applies equally to isolated encounters as well as to greeting family, friends or newcomers (Sousa 2010). Here we are facing material support of cultural translation (Sousa 2010),⁸ capable of ordering the flux of life, by creating a path which connects persons and makes social life possible in the presence of others (Seixas 2009; Sousa 2010; Fidalgo-Castro 2012).

Food prepared for non-human entities in ritual contexts (and here I draw on my experience with the Mau Asu Sacred House as well as other houses in different municipalities) usually is prepared within the sacred house at the *dapkur lulik* (sacred kitchen).⁹ It is prepared on stones arranged for this purpose. No salt or other condiments are used. In the Mau Asu sacred house, sacred food is served to the mystical beings in straw baskets (*luhu*). Men who can claim descent from the founders of the house are responsible for conducting the *hamulak* (which could be described as a prayer, if we compare it to the Western classificatory system) and also for sacrificing animals and cooking their meat. Women, in turn, prepare the fire (for cooking rice and also the meat that the men will prepare).

Small baskets with a little rice and some pieces of meat are prepared for offerings to the non-human entities. These baskets are placed on the holiest part of the sacred house (the place where the sacred objects are) and they stay there for some hours. In a separate dish, a mixture of rice and meat is prepared. The meat is shredded or chopped into very small pieces and then mixed with rice. Each corner of the inner part of the house receives a little bit from this mixture. The stones which were used for preparing the meals, the exterior columns that support the house and the *bosok* (also called *fatuk lulik* or *fatim lulik* in other places) also receive it. The ancestors get their food and so does the house—and the human beings. Taking care of the mystical actors ensures the fertility of life in its several manifestations.

Feeding and offering food to the entities implies not only transfers and circulation, but also expenditure and losses. Therefore, it is a kind of productive consumption. For Marx ([1859] 1982), productive consumption is directly associated with capital-labour relations. From this perspective, production is also consumption; firstly, because when an individual produces something, thus developing his or her capabilities, he or she also spends it—consuming it in the very act of production.

Feeding the ancestors within the home

To follow the ritual dynamics of a sacred house implies also getting to know (in a way) the daily life of the people who are a part of the sacred house. It also involves understanding that persons themselves are “produced” through the relationships *between* the homes and the sacred houses. My research took place within such intertwined zones.

In order to research the reproduction and transformation of social life within the sacred houses in post-colonial Timor-Leste, I visited several sacred houses in different municipalities.¹⁰ To get to know the dynamics of a particular sacred house, I focused on the Mau Asu sacred house, located in Same. I was welcomed at Filomena’s home. Filomena is the sister of Celeste, who, in turn, is one of my interlocutors, and she is a daughter of the Mau Asu sacred house. Celeste, at that time, was living in Dili. The family who welcomed me had a large home, with several rooms and two kitchens—one of them indoors and the other outdoors. There was also two bathrooms outdoors. In the indoor kitchen there was an electric cooktop, a fridge, a large table and two kitchen cabinets. On the table, one could find household items for daily use. There was a cooktop placed on a chair next to the fridge, which was used mostly to cool water. The fridge was not used to store food such as meat, vegetables, milk or to store cooked food. Rice was the only food which they stored; all other foods (such as sugar, bread, milk, oil, eggs, leaf vegetables, and

tuna) were bought daily at kiosks nearby or at the local market, depending on the demand and on the amount of money available at different times.

Meals were prepared in a manner that depended on who was home at the time. When the mother and the father were both home, there was coffee in the morning. When only the children were home, the youngest one had some milk and the others had sweet potato, rice, macaroni, biscuits or bread; *konforme*.¹¹ Using products stored at home to prepare a meal was rare: going out to buy some ingredients before cooking was part of the house dynamics and its routine.

Filomena (who hosted me) was born in Same. She has a master's degree in Natural Science and she is a political activist, married to Marsal (who comes from a Lospalos family). She has seven children (between 2 and 18 years old) and she spends part of the week away from the family to teach at Betano, which is quite far.¹² When the mother is not home, the father manages the house, with some help from the older daughters and the neighbouring aunts (biological sisters of the mother). Thus, what was cooked (and how and where it was cooked) depended on the presence (or absence) of the mother at home.

Filomena's daughters handled the kitchen utensils, especially the electric pan used to make rice and the electric cooktop. Their chores consisted of boiling water to make coffee, cooking rice, sautéing leaf vegetables from the vegetable garden or from the shop (mustard, watercress, and cassava leaves) and, sometimes, cooking some eggs or tuna. The girls rarely cooked chicken or beef. The siblings took care of each other, so that at lunch time the food was ready, they got everyone bathed and set to go to school.

When Filomena was at home it was common to use the outdoor kitchen. Daughters, female cousins, nieces and daughters of *mana* Mena all gathered to cook their food on the wood stove in the outdoors kitchen. It was quite a feast! The women sang around the fire, laughed, played, listened to music. Cooking food thus became a lengthy process, permeated with affection. By both observing and taking part in the preparation of several kinds of food, sometimes squatting (often almost juggling!) sometimes sitting on a stone with the other women, I slowly learned that the food they cooked was permeated with the affections of those who prepared it. These emotions were passed on to those who would partake of that meal. The food made in that outdoors kitchen assembles values such as sorority and affectivity.

For several months I accompanied my friend Filomena and her daughters in the kitchen (outdoors or indoors) for the preparation of rice, leaf vegetables (*modo*), eggs, meat or tuna for the family meals. In any case, rice was always cooked first. Before it was fully cooked, those who were cooking started preparing plates of food and placing them on the main table.¹³ The same procedure applied to the *modo*, eggs or tuna.

When everything was set, there were around five plates of food on a table. Here, for the sake of clarity, I must point out that in the living room, there was always a separate table which was used, among other things, to serve coffee, cookies and other food (to visitors). On this table were also placed the dishes offered to non-human entities. This is the table I am referring to here. Those plates were placed there before the meal for the living is served and remained there afterwards. They were sometimes partially consumed throughout the day by anyone who wanted them, especially the children. Such plates were always served before the two main meals, that is, the non-human entities were always fed first—before the living humans.

Every time we went to eat, the scene described above called my attention, especially because I saw similar things in other homes I visited. We would often eat in front of the table where such plates were laid and that made me slightly uncomfortable. I did not want to ask directly to whom that food was meant, so I kept watching. During the rainy season, however, I spent a lot of time indoors at Filomena's home, not just at night but during daytime also. While helping the girls and Filomena herself cook, I finally started asking about those plates left on the table. Then, Filomena told me something more or less along these lines:¹⁴

At my home I offer a plate of food to the spirit of my sacred house (*Uma Malae*), another plate for the spirit of my husband's sacred house (*Uma Yanamli*), yet another plate for *Maromak*, a plate for my husband's family ancestors and also a plate for my family ancestors. I prepare them neat and separately... just like we do in the Sau Batar ceremonies, on the Day of the Dead, when inaugurating something etc—all things within the sacred house. Anything related to *Maromak*, the Sacred House and the ancestors is called *fussu nin* in the Mambae language and *lulik na'in* in the Tetum language. It is part of the East Timorese tradition to leave food for the ancestors—*matebian*—every day before our meals. People usually place it all on a single plate but here I place it separately. (Filomena Nunes, Same, 2017)

Thus, placing plates of food on tables and altars was not just a practice of that particular domestic unit alone. People connect with these mystical actors by means of daily gifts and debts. Everyday food is offered to the mystical actors to thank them for life. Such an offering in a way allows existence to be and at the same time asks for the continuity of this flux of life. It is all about giving and receiving, asking and offering—a constant flux of gifts and debts between the living and the ancestors. It is an extended family (consisting of the living and the dead). Such a family, through food, nourishes and maintains bonds which are thus not interrupted by death (see Chapter 8, this volume).

According to Filomena, in the times of the Biblical Old Testament, the trees, stones, water and everything had a custodian. And people knew that everything had a custodian. Therefore, one needs to give satisfaction to the masters of things.

With the New Testament, there came the time when the ancestors (*bei'ala sira*) started to understand that everything was created by God. To Filomena, one needs to offer food to God (*Maromak*) because he is the creator. One needs to pay respects to the *Matebian* (ancestors) to show them that the living still remember them. Offering food to the sacred house is important because it is the place where people gather to worship the ancestors. At Filomena's home, offering food to the mystical agents happens on a daily basis, no matter who is preparing the meal.

Filomena also told me that the sacred house matters because it is a place where relatives meet each other. The sacred house allows people to locate themselves, to meet and to recognise other people. If there were no sacred house where people gather, then how would the people know where they came from, who is related to whom and thus who they can marry and who they cannot marry?

The quality of nourishments offered to mystical actors

For DaMatta (2004), as mentioned before, food is not just a nourishing substance, but also “a way, a style and a manner of eating”. The way one eats something defines not only what was eaten but also defines the very person who eats. Hence, the food on a plate nourishes the body, but it also signals a belonging, and serves the role of a social recognition code (Sobreira, Garavelllo, and Nardoto 2018).

The transformation of raw food into cooked food is interpreted by Lévi-Strauss (2004) (based on his analysis of a set of myths) as the human transition from the biological condition to the social one. The *raw* appears as a metaphor of nature: animals eat raw flesh. Fire, in its turn, is associated with culture; human beings eat cooked meat. It can be said that the kitchen, through women, articulates the categories of nature and culture and interconnects systems of opposition (such as raw/cooked, nature/culture, the dead/the living and so on). For Lévi-Strauss (2004), the invention of the kitchen not only modified and differentiated human eating behaviours, but it also added social functions to meals. The kitchen thus articulates the categories of nature and culture and also expresses a language, for it interconnects systems of opposition. Besides strengthening friendship between equals, eating and drinking together also served to reinforce the relations between unequal (such as a lord and vassals, for instance). Food is made in the kitchen—within this social space, we can observe the sexual division of labour and the organisation of family relations. The elective relations between family, house and home remind us of the concept of fire as both a builder and a driver of the relations of commensality. At the sacred house (in ceremonial contexts) food offered to mystical actors possesses a certain texture. It is only slightly cooked and unseasoned. At home, food offered to non-human entities is the same food humans eat, but not seasoned and not fully cooked.

On the question of spices and condiments, there was something I experienced (outside of any ritual context) which can enrich the interpretative horizon regarding such matters. On one occasion, I was having tea without any sugar and such a choice generated quite a few remarks. The elderly asked me whether I was sick, and the children, in their turn, just laughed a lot. It turns out unseasoned tea was a medicine—a drink for humans who were not at their best human condition. The absence of seasoning on food and beverages is related to certain conditions—the condition of non-human actors who dwell in another realm of existence and also not fully healthy humans. The absence of seasoning, it appears, leads us to a liminal situation.

The liminal condition of these foods offered to mystical actors might indicate the liminal position of these very actors: neither raw nor cooked, neither alive nor dead. They are in another dimension of existence and yet they possess agency in the world of the living humans. Perhaps it is precisely their liminal condition that allows them to act in both worlds.

Some substances have the power to connect two kinds of beings. They can gather wishes and desires from humans. Food is a vehicle for mystical power and it works as the unifying force in exchanges between participants in the ceremony. The relationship between human beings and mystical beings at home involves the persons who dwell together there, the ancestors who had an important role in the constitution of that particular family, the spirits from the sacred houses of both the father and the mother, and *maromak*.

The economic participation of women at managing daily life is fundamental. According to what was demonstrated, nutrition is mostly prepared by women; being so, we may say that the mystic aggregating power of relations and people is dominated by women and by them it is agencied. In a context like the East Timorese one in which the accurate development of life is related to the cultivation of relations with the mystic agents, feeding them means guaranteeing life. Women, in turn, feed human beings and mystic agents, allowing life to move on (see also Introduction and Chapter 8, this volume).

Gift and debt: humans, non-human entities, and food

By observing and taking part in acts of commensality (both in ritual and daily moments and both at the sacred house and at home), I learned about the power food possesses to bring people closer and to establish bonds with non-human entities. Based on what I saw, heard and *tried* (especially in the gustative sense) during fieldwork, I suggest we think of food as a vehicle that communicates the recognition of debt between humans and mystical actors. Attending ceremonies at the sacred houses is not enough; one must also feed on everything that is offered—including

food offered as sacrifices. In any case, food is a vehicle for mystical forces and it works as a unifier among the different participants of the ceremony (non-human entities included).

The relationship between human beings and mystical actors at home involves, as we have seen, the persons who dwell there, the ancestors who were important in the constitution of that particular family, the sacred houses of both father and mother, and also *maromak*. I have been arguing that the relationship between human beings and non-human entities at the sacred house embraces a greater number of participants and involves a greater quantity and quality of goods offered, and objects as well as relics. In both cases (at home and at the sacred house), however, the mystical actors eat first and the recognition that humans are in a state of debt with non-human entities guides the provision of offerings. To sum up, the sacred house, just like home, allows people to activate their bonds with non-human entities through food, but it happens, in each case, at different scales in terms of groups of persons.

I suggest that there is an elective relation between sacred house, home and the quality of food offered. Unseasoned and not fully cooked food is associated with the sacred house. Seasoned and not fully cooked food, in turn, is associated with home. In short, the type of cooking and the use (or not) of seasoning are associated with the ontology with those who consume it. Finally, I indicate that the transformations which occur in the physical state of food are operated by women and such transformations help us to think over the modalities of relations and actions which allow more-than-human collectives to reproduce themselves in material and immaterial ways.

Notes

- ¹ Also known as *fatín lulik* (sacred stones), a sacred place where offerings to the mystical actors are left.
- ² I thank Professor Kelly Silva for her careful reading and comments which much contributed to the development of this essay. I am also grateful to Ana Carolina Oliveira and Alberto Fidalgo-Castro for our fruitful exchanges and their careful listening.
- ³ For quotations, I used Marxists.org translation (Marx [1857] 1971), available at: <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/appx1.htm>>.
- ⁴ Here I work with the premise that, to some degree, the nature-society dichotomy is operative in the context I am studying. I am aware of the fact that such dichotomy has been problematised by a number of authors—see, for instance, Descola (2014) and, of course, MacCormack and Strathern (1980). However, for reasons of space and scope, I shall not delve into this discussion here. For a more in-depth discussion of this, see, for instance, Machado (2006).
- ⁵ *Municípios* are the name given to a territorial administrative division that comes from the Portuguese administrative culture (in the “original” Portuguese case, it usually corresponds to a

- town). In Timor, a *município* can be a town or a village—it is the administrative headquarters of local (official) authority.
- ⁶ *Malus* is a heart-shaped leaf, and *bua* is a nut. Together, they act as material support for the relationships described and they are called, together, *Bua-malus*. In the literature, we recurrently find *betel* (leaves) and *areca* (nuts). Some of my interlocutors defined *bua-malus* as something similar to the catholic host (sacramental bread). For an in-depth look at the relationship between Catholic religion and local practices in Timor-Leste, see Fidalgo-Castro (2012).
 - ⁷ Such was the term employed by my interlocutors which considered it to be a Tetum word.
 - ⁸ That is, material elements and items that convey and communicate aspects related to certain cosmological worldviews.
 - ⁹ Such as my experiences at sacred houses in Baucau, Cova-Lima, and Ermera, for instance.
 - ¹⁰ In historiographic terms, I understand 'post-colonial' Timor-Leste here as beginning with the post-Indonesian occupation period and Timor's restoration of independence (post-1999). I feel it is important to explain my definition of 'post-colonial' (here in this context), given the complexity of colonial encounters and mismatches.
 - ¹¹ *Konforme* (similar to Portuguese *conforme*) can mean "accordingly" or "depending on" or even "yes", "precisely" etc. It is one of those catch-all expressions.
 - ¹² Betano is 25 kilometers from Holarua. The trip by motorcycle takes around one hour, due to the road's conditions.
 - ¹³ In this case, the rice must be removed before the water dries out completely so as to ensure it is not fully cooked.
 - ¹⁴ This quotation is not a literal transcription of an interview. It is from a conversation which started in 2017 and was transcribed and (in 2018) submitted (for her appreciation) to my interlocutor, who, in her turn, made some corrections and added some information. I am also grateful for my supervisor's insistence on the need to understand the heterogeneity of the mystical actors which appeared on the horizon of my research. This call, during the writing of my PhD dissertation, took me out of my comfort zone, which made me de-naturalise certain statements.

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