

ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATIONS

Land and diet under pressure: The impacts of Suai Supply Base in Kamanasa kingdom

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Abstract

This chapter discusses impacts of the building of the Suai Supply Base on the economic dynamics of Kamanasa kingdom. It focuses on issues related to land appropriation by the State by exploring phenomena related to diet and increased monetisation. Accelerated by this project, a certain modernity has induced unprecedented changes within the territory and social fabric. To study these changes, I will present a case study of Kamanasa, a Tetum and Bunaq village located on the east coast of Suai.

Keywords: Development; oil project; monetarisation; tradition; Suai

Despite Timor-Leste being considered an independent country since 2002, its territorial integrity was, until recently, under international pressure. In fact, until the middle of March 2018, the maritime borders of this new State were uncertain, given that the neighbouring States, Indonesia and Australia, had long refused to establish a permanent agreement to set the borders between the countries. This conflict has its origin in the fact that the marine subsoil of the zone is rich in oil and gas.

For a long time, the existing off-shore oilfields in the sea of the Timor were explored by an Australian oil company based in Darwin. Timor-Leste expects finally to end this external dependence, with the creation of its own oil company and associated industrial bases, that, according to the government, “will makes possible the consolidation of an independence of the Timor-Leste based on the economic sovereignty” (Program of the VI Constitutional Government Legislature 2015-2017). This affirmation let us glimpse that oil development is an essential condition to reach political sovereignty (Bovensiepen and Nygaard-Christensen 2018), despite the possible impacts of this project on the environment, and the risks of an ecological disaster (Cryan 2015a; La’o Hamutuk 2013a, 2013b, 2014b; Fundasaun Mahein 2013).

It is from the troubled context of a post-conflict country intent on accelerated development that there emerged the idea of a national oil company, Timor Gap, and its oil development project Tasi Mane. This project occupies a large part of the

Timorese south coast and includes terrestrial infrastructure such as a refinery, a petrochemical complex, a gas pipeline, a supply base, a port and an airport.

But this project is a vehicle for change for local society. While modern economic challenges are created by oil, Suai's traditional economy is still based on subsistence farming, with 41% of the Timorese population still living below the poverty line and suffering with a high rate of malnutrition (World Bank 2014). This fragile situation, associated with a strong dependence on oil, creates a sense of insecurity for the local inhabitants. Much of this process is taking place very rapidly and takes little account of the demands and needs of local society (Crespi and Guillaud 2018).

This chapter discusses the impacts of the building of the Suai Supply Base on the economic dynamics of Kamanasa kingdom. It focuses on issues related to land appropriation by the State by exploring phenomena related to diet and increased monetisation, on the basis of information produced during 11 months of fieldwork, divided into several stays between 2015 and 2016, and two other visits in May 2014 and November 2018.¹ The Tasi Mane infrastructure project, implemented by the national oil company Timor Gap, occupies three areas: Beaçó (gas processing), Betano (oil refinery) and Suai-Covalima (oil industries and storage). My study focused on the Suai-Covalima, where the project includes a supply base, a new administrative city, an international airport and a highway. More specifically, I observed the transformations brought by the project in two localities: Holbelis, a hamlet affected by the airport extension; and Fatisin, where the Suai Supply Base is to be built. These two localities are part of the kingdom of Kamanasa, the political entity most affected by the mega-project. The kingdom of Kamanasa is an ancient trading kingdom that once controlled the southern coast of Timor-Leste. It corresponds today to a customary territory inhabited by two main ethno-linguistic groups: the Tetum and the Bunaq, the two main communities affected by the project.

Broadly speaking, my article argues that this project is a vehicle for the commodification of important aspects of the economy as feeding and land access, leading to structural changes that affect social systems in place, especially the territoriality, trade and diet. This article is organised in four sections. The first explores local practices and notions of land ownership and use and how the transfer of the land to the project challenged these practices. The second explains the State's plans for the base and the ways in which they have dealt with the expectations and local knowledge related to the land. It also addresses the way in which the State has implemented its compensation practices for land appropriation. The third analyses the tensions emerging among local populations arising from State practices in the region and explores the community's fears and expectations about these matters. Finally, I discuss the economic changes derived from compensation policies and how they have been a major disturbance on the way of life, transforming the local agriculture and diet.

Local practices and notions of land ownership and use

The Tasi Mane project's infrastructure is located over large areas that are essential to the people of the region: it covers land currently used for livelihood purposes, such as farmland (rice fields, maize and other crops of high economic value as teak and tobacco), pasture land, forest areas used for plant and timber collection, and parts of the coast used for fishing and salt harvesting. In addition, many of the sites that will be affected by construction are invested with sacred value, and local people believe that the destruction of these sites could lead to disease, conflict and natural disasters (see Rose 2017; Crespi 2018). This process of land expropriation was financially compensated (starting from 2013 until now, 2019) by the government, affecting people's relationship with their land and existing customary practices.²

Most of the inhabitants of the kingdom of Kamanasa have remained food farmers, despite the efforts of the Portuguese government to increase production and the Indonesian regime to develop transmigration as a model of modern, surplus agriculture aimed at developing a market and service economy (Shepherd 2009). Their mode of livelihood is linked to the importance of symbolic relationships with the complex and omnipresent universe of non-humans, spirits and ancestors, which condition the outcome of any human action (Guillaud 2015).

Prior to the arrival of the Tasi Mane project, most of the local lands of Kamanasa, with rare exceptions, were only delimited by customary agreements between the two ethnolinguistic groups in the area, Tetum and Bunaq. It is assumed by this local community that these frontiers had once been delimited by the ancestors and are thus subject to prohibitions and symbolic representations.

In Kamanasa, most of the land has been used collectively: this is obviously the case for forests and springs, grazing lands, and generally sacred sites and cemeteries. On the other hand, the level of the community or the social group concerned with this collective exploitation can vary: lineage, clan, hamlet, village, etc. Community lands are in principle accessible to all members of the community concerned, and there are only a few resources in these areas that are individually appropriate: they concern commercial trees such as sandalwood and teak, the ones present in plantations such as coconut trees, as well as trees bearing hives, domestic animals, etc. Thus, the members of a village have the right to use equitably the lands of the village, but a tree belongs to the one who planted it, even if the land where it is, is cultivated by another (see Chapter 10, this volume). Similarly, when a field is abandoned, other inhabitants of the same hamlet can freely take it back, unless there are perennial trees that indicate the appropriation of the land, such as coconut trees, areca, candlenut, etc. In this system, a field is not necessarily reused by the one who cultivated it previously, which does not mean that users do not take care of these lands.

In this context of a land with multiples users, for the proposed land compensation system, Timor Gap opted for a land registry that followed the national land registry model. This national cadastre is based on the user rights, and does not have the capacity or the purpose to register the various interlocking land rights that form the customary system. However, this register process by Timor Gap was revealing and, moreover, “a catalyst” for the tensions between users, since it exposed the intersection and overlapping of several types of rights that coexist in the customary system (Crespi 2018; Rose 2017; Cryan 2015b; McWilliam 2008), as well as the contradictions in the rules management of resources and spaces between the State and local communities (customary management). More precisely, the transition from an oral system to a written, individual and property title system, was equivalent to moving from a “commons” possession to a private property.³

The functioning of the commons is very complex in itself, which is not a problem in a customary system that is regulated on a case-by-case basis, but which returns to its full complexity once we reduce it to a right of individual appropriation, as is the case in the Timor-Leste national land registry. The land belongs in fact to the few original houses which settled the area first, and whose legitimate right to the land is rarely questioned.⁴ This initial right to land is branched out into multiple subordinate rights, allotted to allied houses, especially those belonging to the system of matrimonial alliances. These multiple rights of land use are anchored in the memory of “word masters”, who in the event of land conflicts are responsible for reconstructing the historical transactions between the different groups in long “sessions” of speech (see more in Crespi 2018).

The symbolic territory

In Suai, the territory is associated with the spiritual control of the place, which is held by the clan having the function of *rai nain*.⁵ It is the oldest clan of the place, assimilated to the first arrivals, the only one able to appease and control the evil spirits who protect the land and who also bear the name of *rai nain*; these “land-master” clans, first-comers, therefore have a pre-eminent right over the land and its resources.⁶

According to Friedberg (1982), the oldest clans would be responsible for the integrity of the territory both militarily and in terms of productivity. In Kamanasa, military protection is provided by a clan specialised in war (*kakaluk*) and not by the *rai nain*, the political and military being separated from the spiritual. For Bovensiepen and Rosa (2016), the categories “indigenous” and “sacred” are diametrically opposed to “foreign” and “political”. Thus, any new clan arriving in a place must establish a relationship of alliance and precedence with this “land-master” clan, which will then determine the relationship that the new arrivals will establish with the land.

To this first register under customary land law is superimposed another related register, but within the political sphere and guaranteeing the previous rights. In this register, two types of power combine without opposing each other—the first is spiritual power, concentrated in the invisible power exercised by the beings of the afterlife *rai nain*, and controlled by the *rai nain* clan. This is a symbolic mastery since the *rai nain* beings are considered as non-humans, spirits of the earth, present in the forests and owners of the wilderness, as their name implies. They are only present in places considered as *fuik* (= wild) and, considered as evil, are sometimes called “devils”, sometimes referred to as *ular* (= giant snakes). The local inhabitants represent them as rather feminine beings. Other researchers (Francillon 1967, 151) consider them to be the spirits of the former occupants of the earth, but this does not seem to be the case in the kingdom of Kamanasa.

The second power is the political power, held by the *liurai*.⁷ The *liurai* are responsible for making decisions concerning the territory, such as the management and use of all the lands of the kingdom, and are also involved in legal and important matters, such as those relating to the delimitation of borders between kingdoms. This *liurai* manages land at the *suku* or kingdom level and is responsible for the final decision on the allocation of land.⁸ At the time of Portuguese colonisation, the occupants of any land had to pay them a tax, called *rai teen*; this tax went directly to the *liurai* when the clan owned the land, and went to the owning clan when the group only had a right of use.⁹

We can see that these two powers combine and recognise each other, even if at first sight it is the *liurai* that controls the land. Since it is the *liurai* that controls the political decisions related to the territory, the clan of the first arrivals has the power to control the *rai nain* beings and consequently the fertile and productive land as such. These first-comers have no political power over the place, but they continue to have spiritual power. Their rights to the land are inalienable, except in the case of prolonged abandonment.

Concerning the different levels of land ownership (see Figure 9.1), the first one corresponds to the right of ownership over the land and is passed down through generations. The movements of houses observed in this highly mobile society generate rights of appropriation subordinate to the theoretical “initial right” of the first occupant. This is the second level of land control, which includes usage rights, held by the clans who use the land and exploit its resources, but who do not have with it the privileged spiritual relationship of the newcomers. This right is granted by the clans that control the land and is validated by the king (*liurai*) to allies, on the condition that the latter respect the rules put in place by the clan of the first occupants. This category of right itself has several degrees, since a clan that has a right of use on a territory can delegate this right to other allied clans, taking responsibility for them. For example, the forest of Mane Lima belongs to the royal clan of Kamanasa,

but rights of use have been granted to clans of Fatisin, who in turn granted the use of the plots to clans of Maneikin, who planted teak stands there.

In the past, before the arrival of the Portuguese according to my informants, when a clan granted the use of its land to another clan it was common practice to exchange it for a service, such as taking part of the harvest of each family cultivating on it, or watching over the land so that others would not come to occupy it. At that time, unoccupied and uncultivated land was the subject of stakes and conflicts, especially when commercially valuable trees such as sandalwood were growing on it.

The multiple rights over the land

In brief, while the *rai nain* clan has an inalienable right of appropriation over its territory, its allied houses as well as those of other clans can also take hold of the territory and even become autonomous after a certain period of land use. This original territorial map and the resources that it may contain thus evolves from a theoretical use of the land of the first-comers clan by its members to a scheme where multiple “borrowers” cultivate the land of another clan over the long term (Figure 9.1). In this complex territory, in which precedence and alliances play an

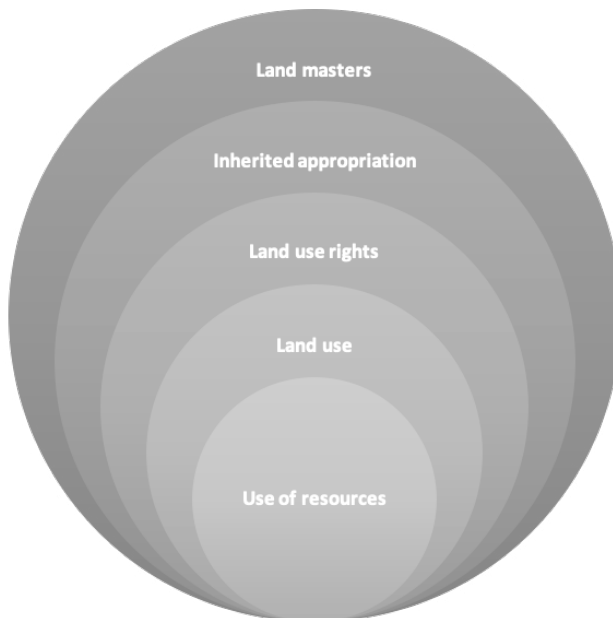


Figure 9.1: The different levels of appropriation of territory in Kamanasa. Credit: Bruna Crespi.

important role, the underlying use rights overlap and may conflict with the original property rights.

But while these multiple use rights may be inextricable, and sometimes contentious, so far, the customary system has demonstrated its ability to resolve land conflicts, relying as a last resort on the ancestors' arbitration. In addition to the customary assemblies established to resolve boundary issues, house renovation ceremonies are crucial moments of sociability and social cohesion during which knowledge about history and territory is expressed and transmitted (Crespi 2018).

Communication between State and local populations

The project schedules and implementation

The government began the preliminary assessments as well as the first discussions with local populations in September 2011, when it made its final investment decision on the Suai Supply Base project. The exchanges officially ended on April 8th 2013, with the official statement from Timor Gap that "land identification, consultations and negotiations with the community have been completed". According to several statements, however, the government did not present to the communities the reality of the project, nor did it specify the potential social and environmental impacts.

These negotiations on the land led in April 2013 to an agreement between the government and the local communities on land transfers and their compensation (Timor Gap 2014; Cryan 2015a; La'o Hamutuk 2016). In this agreement, the entire population of the Kamanasa kingdom agreed to cede a total of 1,113 hectares of land for a duration of 150 years, in return for 10% of the profits of the Suai Supply Base, once the base is active. However, the NGO that accompanied the process, La'o Hamutuk (2014a, 1), denounced the lack of consensus in the community at that moment, the document being signed only by 15 of the 267 families concerned: the opponents to the project as well as women had been excluded from this meeting of agreement between the government and local chiefs. It is necessary here to point out that the society of Kamanasa is matrilineal, and that, consequently, the lands are transmitted to the women; and yet, it was their husbands or brothers who traded in their places. Moreover, the details of the negotiation, as well as the final document, remain secret and are not available, either to the public or to the community itself.

In July 2015, during a government-sponsored "socialisation" meeting with Kamanasa, several villagers revolted against state agents, accusing the project of misleading advertising and neglect of local populations.¹⁰ The local community also accused Timor Gap of unequal treatment among the villages affected by the project,

which increases the tension between the different actors in this process: residents complained that other, less affected villages (for example, those with just a few displaced homes and no fields) received the same hiring promises from the government—that is to say, the government promised to hire them on the same basis as those who had completely lost their land and no longer had a way to live from their livelihood—or received money for land belonging to others (for example, villages displaced by the Indonesian government).

Timor Gap mapped and identified the land to be affected by the project, and by 2017, a large proportion of residents of that land had received financial compensation. The compensations proposed by the government for the local inhabitants cover two modalities: the monetary compensation for the monopolised lands, as well as the crops that grow on them; and material compensation for the rituals necessary for the displacement of houses and other sacred elements.

Monetary compensation and property

The land registry proposed by Timor Gap differs, however, from the government's proposals in the *Ita Nia Rai* (Our Land) program regarding land ownership levels: in the national program, individuals are invited to declare only the possession of their lands, and the right of use is not taken into account (Cryan 2015c). The compensation system proposed by the Timor Gap has attempted to approximate local realities and, more specifically, the customary system of land appropriation. Nevertheless, the most visible land use is that which is linked to the present user, who cultivates the land, which leads government officials to register them as “owners” of the land, causing conflicts between the users.”

The compensation was determined by the government according to a pay scale that distinguished two types of property: on the one hand the fields (the land itself), and on the other the useful trees and plants that grew on these lands at the time of negotiation. This distinction was made in an attempt to include the local property regime that dissociates the land itself from the crops and trees that are cultivated on it.

Land clearances were planned in two phases, depending on when they would be recovered by the State: land on the immediate perimeter of the highway and the airport were the first to be compensated, while those that would serve the supply base would be compensated only later, during the second construction phase. The first offsets occurred in 2013 with construction commencing at the end of 2014, while compensations for the second phase of the project, which was originally planned for 2015/2016, started at the end of 2016.

The residents of the traditional Kamanasa kingdom transferred a total of 1,113 hectares of land to the Suai Supply Base project. They used the word *fo* (“to give” in Tetum Terik) to describe this transaction, which is different from *faan* (“to sell”).

This transaction was seen as a donation to the government, made by signing a register, but none of the research participants were issued documents for such a transaction. Money was transferred to bank accounts that beneficiaries were required to set up for the transaction; most immediately emptied these accounts, preferring the security of cash. Indeed, the Timorese people have low trust in the government and all its structures because of several years of human rights' violations during the Indonesian occupation.

According to information provided by the head of one of the villages affected by the project, Norberto Amaral of the village of Holbelis, the fields were paid at the rate of \$3 USD per m², i.e. \$30,000 USD per hectare. Additionally, productive fruit trees (coconuts, mangoes, jackfruit, etc.) and cultivated plants were compensated. Each fruit tree was estimated at \$60 USD per tree, \$25 for marungui (*Moringa oleifera*), and \$25 for betel palm (*Areca catechu*). Moringa leaves and fruits are common vegetables. Betel nut, along with betel leaf and lime, make up the betel quid; it has high customary value due to its use in all ceremonies. Crops like corn, rice and beans were compensated at the rate of 15 cents per plant. Electric poles installed in fields encroaching upon settlements were also compensated at the rate of 50 kg of rice and \$250 USD for each pole. The akar palms (*Corypha utan*) which belong to the semi-spontaneous domain were not compensated, nor were the banyan (*Ficus* sp.). Although the Timor Gap paid for the rituals for the displacement of altars, clan houses and sacred places, the displacement of simple family houses was not compensated, either in the form of a payment, of a replacement of materials or in the form of new land. According to the local inhabitants, the government considers that with the land being State-owned in this area, the only exceptions being a private title to the land—and no sacredness being linked to the family houses, compensations are not necessary.

Consulting and participation of the local population

The details of the negotiations conducted by the Timor Gap were never exposed to the public. The local residents indicated that the decisions had been taken by the government and then communicated to the communities, who did not contest the decisions. The NGO La'o Hamutuk (2011) argues that these communities, long lived under the Indonesian dictatorial regime, were legally abandoned (due to a lack of legal assistance) and were not aware of their rights. Moreover, they had no point of reference regarding the market value of their lands and crops, since subsistence farming is predominant in the area.

Consultation meetings with the community revealed in themselves the key problem surrounding land-policy-making methods throughout Timor-Leste: the lack of democracy and of spaces dedicated to discussions during the meetings, or

an entire lack of consideration of the opinions of the participants from the local communities by the decision-makers.¹² Moreover, these “consultation” meetings, whose reports and minutes are rare, did not clarify the make-up of communities, nor did they provide protection of community land rights, as they were supposed to do. On the contrary, they even contributed at times to sowing confusion and misinformation among the participants.

I verified that several families who had already received compensation were unable to tell the exact size of their land, which Cryan (2015a) suggests was the result of a lack of information and access to a legal compensation process. The only document made available to the public is the Worley Parsons’ Environmental Impact Statement in 2012. Project maps, negotiations and project milestones are not accessible anywhere and Timor Gap officials are not inclined to share them.¹³

The role of popular participation in the process was questioned by Cryan (2015b), as it is unclear to what extent local concerns and recommendations have been taken into account, with state agents using local influence, social pressure and formatting of public opinion—using newsletters and government interlocutors—to allow the implementation of the project (see below).

Indeed, the Timorese government has a very limited tradition of dialogue and engagement with civil society, which for its part is poorly equipped to articulate and communicate the essential messages about public opinion and community aspirations. The government is thus cut off from constructive public feedback and has a weak capacity to understand and respond to public concerns. And as a result, Timorese communities express a low degree of reliability towards the government, accusing it of not establishing a place of effective collaboration between the various sectors of society and of explaining very little about its policies and programs to the citizens (Brady and Timberman 2006; Devant 2008).

State practices leading to local tensions

All aspects of social life, in this period of change, are affected by tensions between groups, but it is especially the land that catalyses most conflicts. We saw that in the context of overlapping rights, which make the question of land inextricable. State-based cartography materialises the borders and the territory, thus, becomes fixed and unchanging, eliminating any possibility of negotiation between the different parties. This cartography also does not take into account the symbolic territory, which is materialised by the places considered as “sacred”, and for which a system of private property would be contrary to all that this territory represents in relation to the collective identity, responsible for strengthening and structuring the social relations of a village or clan. The spatial disruption caused by the project

underlines how the territorial structure is punctuated by sacred places, which link the groups to their territory and to their past.

Territoriality changes, sacred landscapes and rituals

Furthermore, after the land loss for the Tasi Mane constructions, in Suai, the lands that are still available for forestry and agricultural exploitation for the local inhabitants are a long way from their present villages. As a result, older people fear that young people will abandon cultural practices that require, for example, continuous maize (maize harvest rituals) and harvesting of forest products (for the building of sacred houses). Moreover, traditional practices are often abandoned in such cases, in the expectation of new activities, or in the provision of vacant jobs to the populations. This model represents a danger to the ritual life: the time devoted to ceremonies is shortened, artisanal knowledge is lost with the arrival of objects and industrial materials, and agricultural and forestry activities are gradually forgotten in view of the new facilities offered by a 'modern life'.

But if the older members of the community care about the loss of traditions, the weakening of spiritual sanctions, and the transgression of prohibitions, young people often think differently: attracted by the prospect of new comforts and a better quality of life, young people aspire to modernity without being fully aware of the costs it might require. With these project developments, residents now have to pay for the 'conveniences' of electricity, fuel and education, which drastically reduces their autonomy and increases their need for financial resources. Hence, these villagers who formerly lived by subsistence farming are often confronted with the obligation to pursue professional activities outside of the village, which increasingly alienates them from their former way of life.

Finally, local populations fear that the influence of the State on land will cause a rupture with the current system of collective management of resources ("commons") and a more individualistic behaviour in which exploitation of resources accelerates, with individuals exploiting resources without thinking about the rest of the community or future generations. These fears make us think of the Garrett Hardin (1968) concept of "tragedy of the commons". In the notion of "tragedy of the commons" each individual demonstrates a personal interest in using the common resource in such a way as to maximise his or her individual use, while at the same time distributing operating costs among each user, which would not allow sustainable management of the resource acceptable to society (see also Feeny et al. 1990).

In the past, local communities made the choice of collective management to different degrees in order to manage, value and protect their resources in the long term. In this management regime by commons, characterised by the juxtaposition of different rights of collective appropriation and use, property is not attached to

a good, but to its products, which is very different from the modern concept of exclusive, private and indivisible ownership, where the rights of use of land and its resources are attached to land ownership.

Moreover, the lack of state recognition of traditional land management and sharing modes, and the exclusion of local communities from the long-term land management process may weaken customary prohibitions and rights (for example, “*tara bandu*”, i.e., to hang the ban, and other “*lisan*”, i.e., customs).

As already discussed by other authors (D’Andrea 2003; McWilliam 2001), the abandonment of customary resources management—which evokes the notion of collective use of the territory, or “common good”—can lead to the degradation of local forests and protected areas. When ritual practices (such as a prohibition on cutting trees in the sacred forests) are reduced to simple and meaningless symbolic gestures and when, consequently, spiritual or material sanctions are weakened, the penalties for those who transgress are smaller and may no longer be a deterrent.

But these changes on the territory and in the management of its resources are not the only source of conflict. Different visions of the project and reactions to it between the community also need to be considered. Accelerated due to this project of oil development, the modernisation of infrastructures as well as the important process of monetarisation without precedents in the zone inspires great hope of economic prosperity to the youth of Suai. This image of prosperity carries other prospects: that of a better standard of living although until now these ‘novelties’ cost more money than they bring (see Bovensiepen 2018).

The expectations of the population: the imagery of a ‘New Singapore’ versus the fear of misfortune

The inhabitants of the affected area have a double vision of the project: on one hand they expect modernisation and an increase in employment, hoping for a ‘better life’; but on the other, they are afraid of losing their lands, forests, livelihoods and, consequently, the traditions and knowledge that constitute the very basis of their identities and livelihoods.¹⁴

Accelerated by the oil development project, the modernisation of this zone inspires great hope in the Kamanasa youth: the prospect of economic prosperity, more convenient work than their parents, and the access to education are explicit in the imagery of a Timor-Leste that could be the ‘New Singapore’ of Asia. This view has its roots in the organisation by the Timorese government in September 2013 of a delegation of local power authorities sent to Singapore and other major cities in Indonesia and Malaysia to see for themselves “the benefits of economic development”. It is necessary to emphasise that this trip was not perceived by the communities as a “consultation”, but as a way of inciting the local inhabitants to

abandon their lands, according to the members of this delegation that I was able to interview.

This ambiguous and mitigated attraction for modernisation also gives rise to other hopes, such as the wealth that would allow the inhabitants of the zone to improve their living conditions, although until now, as already mentioned, the measures taken just lead the community to an increasingly important monetary dependence (the monetisation of trade and the increase of life's costs will be discussed below).

Economic changes derived from compensation policies: relationship with money and changes in diets

The economic changes derived from compensation policies brings the community to an increasing monetary dependence, as well as a change in their relationship with money and in the dynamics of non-monetary exchanges. Thus, this situation is a major disturbance to the way of life, transforming the local agriculture and diet.

The monetisation of exchanges, a major disturbance to the way of life

The monetary compensations made by the Timor Gap project led to an important and unprecedented monetisation in the zone, although the last three decades had already been a prelude of this change. During the period of Indonesian occupation, monetary exchanges became slightly more frequent and the arrival of the United Nations in 2000 was followed by an injection of money into the country (aid, wages). In the past, if exchanges linked to long-distance trade could imply a currency—as the old coins now used as ornaments bear witness to—an essential part of exchanges between local populations was on the basis of barter, such as products of the sea being exchanged against mountain products. Even the cockfights (*futu manu*) that today yield a few exchanges, were originally not monetised: the winner had the right to take the losing rooster to eat it. Consequently, locals were not accustomed to having large sums of money, such as the compensation provided by the project.

This large influx of money into societies where monetary exchanges were limited has only reinforced the illusion of wealth to the inhabitants who do not see money as a resource that must be capitalised and managed but as an excess to be spent quickly (see Chapters 1 and 2, this volume). Thus, several families used almost all of this money in the purchase of consumer goods like motorcycles, mini buses and televisions. Others contracted large debts that they thought would be able to be repaid quickly with the promise of ongoing income from the oil project. Some informants stated that “only a few of them used the money for the children's schooling”.

It is also important to remember that the purchase of consumer goods is mostly done by men. Yet, in Kamanasa land belongs to women, who are now losing their property against goods that benefit their husbands the most. This reality poses a problem in the matrilineal transmission system and amplifies the vulnerability of women.

Finally, the traditional houses that were once made from materials collected in the surrounding forests have begun to be rebuilt in bricks. Local clan elders, fearing the environmental degradation of the area, wanted to ensure the durability of their houses. They worried that in the future the wood and palm leaves used for traditional houses would no longer be available.

The transformation of local agriculture and diet

According to the *United Nations World Food Program Report* (2005), households in rural Timor-Leste would have a typical shortage (“the famine season”) of 3 to 4 months per year on average. Timor-Leste is located in a region heavily affected by natural disasters, and its vulnerability is aggravated by the threat of climate change, which reinforces food insecurity (WFP 2005). This insecurity is now heightened by the fact that the lands used by the local populations for their livelihoods (agriculture, fishing, harvest) have been abandoned for food production and the community is no longer self-sufficient in their diet, according to my informants. Likewise, based on my own fieldwork observations, most staple products now come from the local market, where most vendors are residents of the surrounding mountains. This context has so far produced two key changes in the region, according to my informants and my own observations.¹⁵

The first change refers to the products available for consumption (and consequently food). As most products originate in the mountains, this has caused a change in the composition and food diversity of the communities in Kamanasa: maize, sorghum, fruits, and green leaves are less present, giving rise to sweet potatoes and taro, as well as industrial rice and meat.

The second change concerns trade and the cost of living. As demand for commodities increased and supply declined, prices rose sharply. The exchange is also less and less recurrent, since the inhabitants no longer have any fields from which to extract production. The remaining money provided by Timor Gap is thus used to buy basic food products, which has also contributed to the cost of living in the area.

According to the Timor-Leste government, the Tasi Mane project would allow increased employment and education prospects in the area, creating new sectors of economic activity and promoting local products (agriculture, livestock, fishing), as well as creating tourism, catering, transport, business and hospitality sectors. The government have promised local workers will be a priority for the jobs created by the project. The promises of the government thus led many inhabitants to believe

that they would get all the jobs, without workers from other areas or even countries being mobilised. However, residents indicate that the rate of job creation so far has been very low and that this has not allowed the communities to secure new livelihoods, with past livelihoods compromised by the use of their land by the oil project. The reason for this is, according to the women of the village, that most local people are now forced to buy their food—which, moreover, is becoming more and more expensive and outside of their usual diet. A reliance on bought food is a result of local lands used by the local populations for their livelihoods (agriculture, fishing, harvest) being evacuated. As a result, the community is no longer self-reliant on food or in control of their diet.

Several NGOs, among them the more active La'o Hamutuk, contest the Tasi Mane's project which, according to them, has so far severely compromised the public budget without the Timorese government having stabilised the unemployment rate, which increases each year.¹⁶ In addition, such funding could have been invested in other sectors such as agriculture and small industries, which would be much more beneficial to local communities (La'o Hamutuk Bulletin 2003).

Moreover, these NGOs accuse the project of lacking economic and technical viability in the national scenario. Fearing a vain sacrifice, they urge the government to create policies that will ensure the long-term economic sustainability and food sovereignty of these impacted communities. But not all families are impacted in the same way. According to Cryan (2015a), family vulnerability is intrinsically linked to status, noble families being less vulnerable than modest households since they "are often already part of the local elite and have greater access to land, business opportunities and political connections" (*ibid.*, 9). Modest households on the other hand are likely to be more dependent on subsistence farming as a source of food.

One last important point is that, with the increase in the search for empty land, the inhabitants of other surrounding villages expect their unused land to be bought by the affected families at the same value as the compensations provided by the State, that is to say \$3 USD per m², thus leaving very little money available to these families to recommence production on these new lands (Cryan 2015a).

Conclusion

We can observe that this project, so far, is causing more problems than it is helping to improve local living conditions, in addition to causing internal conflicts. Although tangible security, or even comfort (electricity, basic necessities, goods from village grocery stores, opening of telephone networks, highways) is emerging, this new context creates new needs that local production systems and social organisation cannot fully satisfy. New uncertainties are emerging related to the loss of ancestral

lands and the conflicts caused by the project, which many elders attribute instead to the disruption of ancient ceremonies.

While elder people resist the adoption of this “modern” way of life and remain intrinsically linked to customary or traditional cultural practices, young people are rapidly integrating change by accepting new convenience goods and the comfort that they offer, even if there is so far no disregard for the culture of their ancestors, which remains an important part of their daily lives by the accomplishment and adaptation of customary rituals—like “blessing” newly acquired motorcycles.

The Timor Gap project has also created problems, even a land crisis, by destabilising the local community and defusing their social dynamics of conflict resolution, which normally follows a peaceful procedure (through a neutral mediation in the customary assemblies and during ceremonies—the stakes of money changing this situation). Other social structures were also committed, such as land use and ownership, and the matrilineal system—by the fact that land, inherited by women, is exchanged for consumer goods that are perceived as more “masculine”.

In conclusion, this project has been responsible for radical changes in the local way of life, even if it is important to emphasise that there is a gap between the local populations’ vision of these changes and its consequences, stressing their resilience, and ours, anthropologists, archaeologists and geographers, from a comparative and diachronic perspective. And, according to our reading grid, the consequences of this process may lead, in the near future, to the impoverishment, marginalisation and exclusion of this community in the national context, due to the lack of land and work in the area, as well as the possible loss of local practices.

Notes

- ¹ The fieldwork was conducted as part of a doctoral thesis on the impact of the Tasi Mane project on the livelihoods of local communities.
- ² For more details, please see Crespi, “Sacralité, rituels et développement chez les Bunaq et Tetun de la région de Suai, Timor oriental”, 250.
- ³ According to Ostrom’s (1990) “commons” theory, goods are not considered in themselves as particular goods, but rather in their relation to the social groups that participate in their production or maintenance by relying on them in a complex system of collective property rights and rules.
- ⁴ See also Fitzpatrick, D., A. McWilliam and S. Barnes, *Property and Social Resilience in Times of Conflict: Land, Custom and Law in East Timor*.
- ⁵ *Rai*= land; *nain*= master. This word that can have several meanings, see more in Crespi 2018.
- ⁶ In Timor-Leste each locality has its own territorial organisation. For other cases, please consult: McWilliam, A. and E. Traube (eds.), *Land and Life in Timor-Leste—Ethnographic Essays*.
- ⁷ *Liu* = beyond; *rai* = land. This title corresponds to the highest status in Kamanasa, placed at the top of the social hierarchy and politically responsible for the kingdom. Although the explanation most frequently invoked by researchers of the zone (Francillon 1967, 24; McWilliam and Traube

- 2011, 7; Bovensiepen 2015) translates *liu* as “above” or “superior to”, another meaning of this word, “beyond”, might be more relevant here, since, according to the accounts, those who originally occupied this function came mostly from outside the island, from “beyond the land.”
- ⁸ *Suku* is a socio-political unit. Each *suku* has an administrative structure, consisting of a village chief and a council. See also Chapter 2, this volume.
- ⁹ *Rai* = land; *teen* = excrement
- ¹⁰ Inspired by the Indonesian “*sosialisasi*”, socialisation in this context refers to “efforts made to popularize something that must be known, understood and assimilated by the public” (Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia, translation by Dominique Guillaud).
- ¹¹ As discussed earlier, the question of the land covers two dimensions in Timor: that related to real land, which includes the rights of appropriation and use, and that related to the symbolic territory, which refers to the spiritual and political power, knowing that these dimensions are closely nested. In Kamanasa, land includes property rights and usage rights (which also have several levels), while power is divided into spiritual (*rai nain*) and political (*liurai*) power.
- ¹² See also Scambary, “In Search of White Elephants: Political Economy of Resource Expenditure in East Timor”, 283-308.
- ¹³ During my fieldwork, I have tried several times to obtain these documents from the representative of Timor Gap in Kamanasa, who promised to send them to me by e-mail each time. However, to date, no e-mail has been received.
- ¹⁴ Based on industrial standards of life, their perception of better life is the availability of goods such as running water, electricity, electrical appliances in the house, transport and other goods and services.
- ¹⁵ Comparing the situation between 2014 and 2018.
- ¹⁶ Note that this only becomes a problem when people become dependent on the market. On the contrary, people always have occupations based on what makes up their livelihood activities.

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