Reframing culture.
Assembly of God's cultural policies in Ussubemassu, Atauro.

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This paper consists of a first analytical effort to make sense of the data produced over a 5 months fieldwork carried out in Ussubemassu, Ataúro (between August and December 2019)[1]. The research aimed at understanding economic transformations in this village before the governance praxis of turning Atauro into a touristic destination (as part of the state's strategies to diversify the East Timorese economy. Changes in the women's work routines as well as issues related to the commodification of culture have been some of the main subjects of the research.

The search for a holistic approach – necessary in any anthropological endeavour - led me to pay attention to various other collective phenomena (such as religion, politics, and local history), besides the economy. Also, the way I understand economy – as the set of production, exchange and consumption procedures by which populations and institutions guarantee their reproduction by replacing people and things – plays a role in this epistemological plot. For me, the economy is tightly connected to reproduction, a phenomenon in which the symbolic frame is just as important as its material base. It is also worth noting that people have made sense of their current economic condition by resorting to issues related to *kultura* and religion. So, during my fieldwork I could not help but pursue issues related to *kultura* and religion when researching about economy. All of these are reasons why an investigation primarily focused on economy allowed me to explore some hypotheses regarding changes in some other realms of collective action.

In this paper I argue that the Assembly of God's pastoral praxis has effected at least three main transformations in the Ussubemassu people's cosmology and maybe also among many other Atauro people who have adhered to this Church's protestant project: 1. the decline of asymmetry and inequality as cultural values framing the relationships among houses (*lisan*); 2. the dissociation between *lulik* and *kultura* and 3. the Christianization of *kultura* and its use as a means for negotiating material reproduction.

All of these hypotheses derive from dialogues with works devoted to identify the main institutions organizing social dynamics in the region where East Timor and Atauro are

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located. These works allowed authors such as Van Woden, Fox (1980) and others to propose the very notion of Eastern Indonesia as a specific cultural region, characterized by the coexistence of the following institutions:

- asymmetrical alliance between houses (or groups of origin) by means of marriage exchanges between fertility-givers and fertility takers, being the fertility-giver in a superior position before its fertility-taker;

- diarchy of powers;

- precedence;

- binary ideology of classification;

- membership to corporate groups as houses or groups of origin;

- semantic parallelism in ritual parlance;

- values of origin and ancestrality.

So, I am supposing Atauro people's social organization and cosmology have also been framed by these institutions across time and I am also supposing that part of them are being challenged by the Assembly of God's pastoral projects.

Another assumption one needs to bear in mind (to follow the discussion I present below) is the way I look at the category *Kultura*. I understand *Kultura* – and here I paraphrase what I published elsewhere (Silva 2018) – as an emic signifier used to refer to practices or values perceived as indigenous, such as those which characterized Easter Indonesia as a cultural region or even those that are simply different from others (deemed foreign). East Timorese people use the idea of *kultura* when they are interested in , whether positively or negatively. Among many Catholic and also non-Christian people, *kultura* also entails mystical, supernatural contents as it is connected to worship practices involving ancestors, as well as other spiritual beings, and even what western cosmologies see as objects. In these cases, *kultura* is a synonym for *lulik*, a local category to the notion of sacred, amongst other potential meanings. In fact, as said before, one of the main changes caused by protestant missionization in Atauro seems to be the extraction of the sacred content out of *kultura*. *Hamos lulik* (cleaning the *lulik*) is the local category people resort to to explain this extraction.

To support my hypothesis I organize this paper in three sections. The first presents fragments of the history of protestant missionary practices in Atauro and its expression in some phenomena occurring in the Island today. The connection between that past history and the present is explored by pointing out the search for equality as a foundation for collective interaction.

Hamos lulik (cleaning the sacred) is the subtitle of my second section, which discusses the dissociation of *kultura* from mystical practices and assumptions. To analyse such an issue I mobilize diverse phenomena: toponymy strategies of the Church, funerals, the

Day of the Dead and wedding routines. Based on them I argue that the Assembly of God's pastoral project yields the Christianization of *kultura* institutional framework.

Finally, the third section points out the roles *lisan* has played as a means to structuring collective negotiation of material reproduction.

Protestantism and equality

At least three different missionary endeavours seem to have taken part in the plot of the Atauro people's adherence to Protestantism across the 20th century. Interviews with some Assembly of God pastors revealed that an American missionary called Martin was active in the Island by 1930. There is no consensus about the denomination to which Martin was connected. Some suggest he was at the service of the Baptist Church, others that he was a Luteran missionary. They do not know anything else about him, apart from the fact that he was obliged to leave the Island after a short time there.

After WWII, Juliana and Franz Braz supposedly went to Atauro from Arlo. It is said that sea currents brought a small ship (*beiro*) with Atauro people to Arlo. By arriving there unexpectedly they were hosted by a Christian couple who asked them whether people already knew the Christian God in Atauro. Being informed that all Atauro people were still pagans, the couple Juliana and Franz Braz decided to go to Atauro and to work there with local people to convert them to Prostestant Christianity.

They first placed themselves in the hills close to where the village of Atekru is located today. According to the Assembly of God's classification, that place is called Efron. Durand (2004) reports that by the begining of the 1960's, Juliana and Fraz led a community of 1350 people – almost 40% of the Atauro population at the time. This community was called by outsiders *rabuta* (…) or *taka matan* (tétum), those who close their eyes, because they pray with their eyes closed. The fact that by that same period only 400 persons were converted to Catholicism in Atauro suggests how effective Juliana and Franz missionary actions were.

By sharing with me his knowledge about this community, one of the leading pastors of the Assembly of God in East Timor claimed the place where Juliana and Franz Braz lived and carried out their missionary work was called *Samarata*, an Indonesian language word which means "equals". After being obliged to move closer to Vila Maumeta by the Portuguese administration, they called the new place where they lived *Tetap Rata* which means "to make things flat". My interlocutor's recollection about Juliana and Franz actions highlight that the core of their work was to promote equality among people. They would have taught that there is no one better or higher than another, no one bigger than another. There should not be anyone superior or inferior before anyone else or before God. Everyone would be equal and deserving of the same respect and treatment.

I came across this search for equality (in marriage negotiations between houses) on several occasions throughout my research in Atauro. I considere such anxiety to be an

important challenge to the very institution of asymmetry and precedence (between houses) that is characteristic of Easter Indonesia. One of the most prominent examples of such anxiety presented itself to me in the "local law" for marriage negotiations of the Makadade suku, which was proposed in January 2014. The document set some rules regarding filiation, residency and material limits for negotiating rights in persons by means of marriage exchanges. Among the various articles that compose what is called "lei tradicional barlakeadu" – carved out as an answer to the law 3/2009, which was about local power and was aimed at regulating, protecting and reproducing local knowledge to promote social order and thereby allowing everyone to benefit from independence - one particular article stands out. After listing all the houses (*lisan*) existing in Makadade, the "lei tradicional barlakeadu" then proposes in article number 10:

> "About the classification and categorization of *lisan* in the Makakade suku:
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> The classification and category of the 17 *lisan* existing in Makadade suco is the same. There is no category or classification of *lisan* superior or inferior before any other." (free translation by the author from the original text in Tétum language).

Different questions may be posed about the meaning of the content of this article. On this, I would like to share some considerations. Firstly, we know that laws are technologies of government and control (domestication). Secondly, Makadade is a suku where approximately 50% of people are Protestant and 50% are Catholic. As I suggested elsewhere (Silva 2018), Catholic Christianity has been much more tolerant to local values (such as inequality, and asymmetry) than Protestantism. Thirdly, *kultura* is an institutional framework whose *modus operandi is* marked by strong contestation*,* among other things because of its oral character. Considering all of these, the codification of the search for equality into law might mean that such is not really observed yet but it is a moral ideal to search for. In fact, the anxiety to insert into the Kultura institutional frame the value of equality has also been pointed out by some Catholic spokesperson in my previous research on marriage exchange in Dili (Silva 2013).

Another data which might be considered an index of the way Protestant Christianity is changing the way people see inequality and asymmetry are some suggestions it presents about the making of gifts in marriage exchanges in Ussubemassu. According to Francisco, one of the elders from the village, the Assembleia de Deus (Assembly of God) pastoral praxis suggested that:

> According to God's word, one should not measure and compare [the gifts], one should not ask for many things. That is what the Church taught us because the *lisan* are mutually dependent. So, if we are intelligent, we will follow this. This is because if you ask so much of me [as gifts, causing me material difficulties or indebtedness] I will reciprocate in the same way. But if you asked me what it is fair and natural according to my conditions [material conditions] I will do the

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same to you. This is really wonderful because it allows yours and my people to live well and to build up a good relationship between us; with this we follow God's words and this is very good. (free translation by the author from the original in Tétum language)

In Francisco's words, marriage exchanges should not be managed so as to exploit people, making them poorer. He said to me: "*Kultura la bele hakiak ema*" (Kultura should not make people poorer). As it is known, one of the main expressions of asymmetry between wife-givers and wife-takers consists of the quality and quantity of money and goods exchanged in marriage exchanges and other life-cycle rituals. Wife/Fertility-givers are superior in these relationships and as such are entitled to receive much more goods and money than to give them. Of course, the wife-givers are providing the wife-taker with the most important gift: the potential for fertility.

Anyway, what is deemed as an excessive quantity (and quality) of goods and money employed in marriage exchanges in the main island of Timor-Leste is a phenomenon mobilized by Protestant Atauro residents to value their lifestyle and religion adherence. Broadly speaking, Prostestant people in Ussubemassu are very proud of their asceticism and think about themselves and their life as much better than those existing in Dili, for instance. In fact, many interlocutors recalled the fact that Atauro has been called the second heaven or Eden by visitors from Timor or other countries.

Hamos lulik – towards the Christianization of *kultura*

During my fieldwork period in Atauro I also attended the Summer School (SS) on Local Heritage promoted by IRD.[2] Among other things, the SS team aimed to produce information about places (considered important for the ways Akrema and Uaru Ana people have made sense of their history) by registering them employing GPS to produce maps which were later given to each community.[3]

As it is usual among Eastern Indonesian people, the knowledge about and the right to talk about places is not democratically shared. Only particular agents are entitled to talk about them under very specific circumstances. So, before the SS began, its leader, Dr Ariadna Burgos, carried out various negotiations for mobilizing local authorities to share some of their knowledge with us. By arriving in Akrema one of our first activities was a meeting with those entitled to talk about local history who later on came to act as our local guides. Tio Martinho and Tio João soon pointed out to us that in Akrema and

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[2]   The summer school took place between 17th and 29th August 2019 in Akrema, Uaru Ana and Dili under the wonderful leadership of Dr Ariadna Burgos.

[3]   This work was done in collaboration with UNTL students who by means of their participation in the SS in some of the basic concepts and methodologies framing anthropology, ethnography, and Geographic Information System (GIS) applications.

Uaru Ana *lulik hamos ona*, that is, in a literal translation, the *lulik were all cleaned*. According to them, all people in the villages had converted to Assembleia de Deus Christianity and because of that they no longer believed ir or had *lulik* anymore. Such a statement was reaffirmed to me in many other contexts by Protestant people.

Contemporary academic exegesis about the category *lulik* (Bovensiepen 2015, Mcwillian et al 2014, among others) have demonstrated that this is a floating signifier, acting as a verb, a noun or adjective depending on the context. Bovensiepen (2015) comprehensive analyses points out the fact that *lulik* is a narrative marker by means of which ideas of rupture and differentiation are cultivated before a previous order of consubstantiation between agents whose separation later evolved. For instance, *lulik* might evoke dynamics of unification and differentiation between land, ancestors, humans and environmental elements, as stones and water. Also, it means generative potency:

> "*Lulik* is usually identified as a distinctly indigenous source of potency; it is gendered female and is associated with immobility ('sitting') and silence (*cf.* Therik 2004). *Lulik* is connected to the ancestors, who are referred to as *luliwai*. Houses that were founded by ancestors are called *ada lulin*, and objects that have been handed down from the ancestors are also *lulik*. *Lulik* places must be avoided, and trees near *lulik* sites cannot be cut down, since the ancestors retain a presence therein. Sites out of which ancestors were born, or at which they settled or died, are also *lulik*, which supports my suggestion that *lulik* is a potency specifically connected with the ancestral realm." (127)

When diverse Atauro community leaders with whom I have engaged in dialogue during the fieldwork – pastors, local authorities – made sure to mention to me that *lulik hamos ona*, they were saying they do not worship trees, stones, places, and that they also do not sacrifice to ancestors or to other supernatural beings, in contrast with usual practices carried out among Catholic people or the residents of the *rai bo'ot* (East Timor main island). According to them all that exists in the world, including their disenchanted and disempowered ancestors, were Maromak's (understood by them as being the Christian God) creation, from whom all the power over the world emanates too[4].

Such an encapsulating process – by which local institutions are perceived as products of Christianity – also makes itself visible in the Assembly of God toponymy strategy for Atauro island. For some decades now the Church has replaced local place names

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[4]   I see these narratives as a project of cosmology which is only partially internalized by different actors. Various phenomena could be mobilized as examples of the existing presence of what is related to *lulik* in local dynamics or the agency of other supernatural actors framing life and death among the islanders -such as, for instance, the supposition/accusation of witchcraft (to make sense of misfortunes).

with names derived from biblical narratives. According to some interlocutors, such a replacement was a missionary strategy to make people more familiar with biblical places. Additionally, other ones suggested that such names derived from prophecies which anticipated the future of Atauro places, according to features of each biblical place name. For instance, the denomination of Ussubemassu as Jerusalém derived from a vision that saw that place hosting people from all over the world, a fact which characterizes the original Jerusalem. The promise of tourism and the visit of people from overseas to see its reefs is considered today a proof of the accuracy of the prophecy.

We have in the Island today a double-name system for various places. For the sake of brevity, I share here only the double-name system for the villages:

Local name	Christian name
Uaru Ana/Baru Ana	Jericó
Berau	Sileu
Bikeli	Belém
Makili	Damasko
Vila Maumeta	Canaã
Akrema	Sinai
Uçubemassu	Jerusalém

As I said elsewhere (Silva 2011, 158), Durkheim (2000) taught us that name places are parts of a cognitive system that guides people and allows them to recognize who they are in relation to others. Fox (1997), in his turn, pointed out that among Eastern Indonesian people there is a potential reversibility between genealogy and topogeny (1997: 12). So, to enunciate places in ritual contexts has the following functions: 1. to define origins and lines of precedence among related social groups; and 2. to provide a chronological succession of events so as to situate social actors in space and time. Additionally, we may remember the fact that some name places may be considered *lulik*, thus reminding people of a past consubstantiation between a place, a people, and other environment elements.

If all of this were somehow at stake in places' local names in Atauro, replacing the local topogeny by a new and Christian one contributes to silence various local knowledges as well as the memory of facts which could hardly be included in Christian narratives coherently, such as the various wars between Makadade, Makili and Beloi. To Christianize the name of the places also contribute to erase from them the supernatural powers to whom people endowed agency in the very process of place making. I see all these phenomena as playing a role in the purification plot enacted by the Assembly of God.

It is not by chance that the expression *cleaning the lulik* seems to express a process of sanitization, and purification (in Bruno Latour's sense), aimed at establishing the Christian God as the unique and exclusive supernatural source of agency. In other words, we are facing a claim about the monopolization of agency carved out in opposition to animistic and other ritual mystical practices which, on the other hand, attribute agency to words, objects, ancestors etc. All of this has been brilliantly discussed by Webb Keane (2009), based on research among Protestant people in Sumba.

Importantly, the notion of *lulik* has also been turned into a signifier to evoke the agency of the devil. Some people consider *lulik* a kind of disguised manifestation of the devil. For that reason, people shall keep it at a good distance.

Any kind of ritual manifestation towards dead people or supernatural agents is seem as an opportunity for the devil to manifest itself, even in a disguised way. The Assembly of God preaches that once a person is dead, she/he cannot act over the living. Moreover, the living and the dead cannot communicate with one another. So, there is no point about lighting candles or making gifts or sacrifices to dead people.

The material effects of these assumptions manifest themselves in the Day of the Dead. In strong contrast to what comes about in most of East Timor, the Day of the Dead in Ussubemassu is experienced as an ordinary day, without any kind of rituals. People claim that, on that particular day, they merely miss their deceased relatives or friends more than in other day. But there is no public function at the Church or any kind of public ritual in the cemetery to pay respect to the deceased. When I was in Ussubemassu I was expecting at least that people would clean the graves that day. But in fact, they did not do it. Most people in Ussubemassu just followed their ordinary working routines during that day. The very few lucky enough to have wage work took the holiday to renovate their houses or to just relax with friends and family listening to music or having lunch together.

One year ago and even when drafting this very paper as a proposal I almost suggested that we are facing here a sort of secularization of *kultura* In Ussubemassu. I do not argue this anymore. It seems to me that we actually are before an attempt of encapsulating a local institution into a Christian metanarrative. In this plot, the Christian God acts as the origin of everything, including the ancestors and the *lisan*.[5] The Christian God is the unique supernatural being endowed with agency to act over the living.   Probably, ancestors and *lisan* are now inscribing themselves into a christianized narrative of creation. For instance, the circulation of women by means of marriage is celebrated as a God's sacrament. As we know, Christian institutions turned

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[5]   Elsewhere (Silva 2013), I registered an opposed trend, based on research done with ritual mediatidors (lia nain) in marriage exchanges. In some marriage negotiations among Dili dwellers spoke persons attempt to encapsulate Christians values into local institutions.

the marriage itself into an institution provided by God to respond to individual and collective needs.

Honestly, such narratives and facts did not surprise me very much. In fact, I expected them, having read ethnographies about the impacts of Protestant missionization in the region. What surprised me was that such a denial of *lulik* does not imply a rupture with other institutions that are typical of the region. On the contrary, the denial of a previous communion with ancestors and other supernatural beings did *not* imply people's disengagement with the *lisan*, the house. In fact, what seems to occur is rather a dissociation between the native categories of *lulik* and *kultura* – *lisan* is part of kultura – as to allow Ussubemassu people to resort to *kultura* to organize their collective and material life while adhering to Protestant Christianity at the same time. The *lulik* contents of Kultura are removed/cleaned as if to make coherent the combination of local institutions of social organization and the assumptions of the Christianity and modernity (Keane 2007).

Lisan and material reproduction

In Ussebemassu, the *lisan* (houses) have maintained its role as a key institution framing the following phenomena, at least: negotiations of rights in persons, land accesses, and conflict resolution. Between 8 and 9 houses make up of Ussubemassu community. They are: Ai Luli, Major, Koronel, Uhu Rala, Loro Piu, Aku Ai, Maseu, Tilman nai, Maker. The centrality of the *lisan* (houses) in collective life in Ussubemassu firstly manifested itself to me during wedding rituals.

Everytime a house plans to take a woman in marriage, the house's men, both single and married, are summoned to present monetary contributions to this event. This is done months or even years before the wedding comes about so as to allow people to plan how they will organize their domestic finances so as to be able to contribute somehow. The money raised may be used to pay the costs involved in the wedding – be it those involved in the ceremony at the Church or the lunch offered to the marriage participants – or it may be used to produce the marriage gifts the groom's house will offer to the bride's house. All of these events are accurately designed by the Church and community leaders. Regarding this, it is important to know that the Assembly of God in Ussubemassu has a working group with the exclusive function of organizing parties, be them weddings, Christmas, pastoral activities, etc.

Weddings in Ussubemassu entail three diverse transactions regarding the bride, which are openly announced by the MCs and are enacted by the representatives of the following institutions: the *lisan*, the church and the state. So, during the religious ceremony, the bride is formally transferred to its new cult community. The leader pastor of the village from where the bride comes from presents her to the community and leader pastor of the village where the wedding occurs. Ideally and very often this village is the very one from where the groom is. It seems to me that patrilocal residency is very much observed among Ussubemassu and all Protestant Atauro people. This is because there is no expectation among the bride family and house to receive the

bridewealth when the wedding ceremony occurs. Usually the bridewealth is offered years after the wedding, only after the couple is in condition to bring together the resources to that.

It is after lunch is served that the special ritual moment for transferring the rights in the bride among the *lisan* (houses) occurs. For that, the groom and the bride's house spokespersons are invited to the stage. Then, they greet and thank all the guests and all those involved in the wedding and declare that from that moment on the bride is part of the groom's house (*lisan*). In order to seal the event, the fertility-taker (the groom's house) offers gifts to the fertility-givers (the bride's house). Such gifts are also reciprocated by the fertility-givers. As proposed by Graeber (2016), such gift exchanges seem to be only the recognition that fertility-takers and fertility-givers are in an alliance relationship and so in mutual indebtedness.

The last transaction in women occurring in the wedding is the transfer of the name of the bride from her village of origin to the husband's village. This is done by the suku´s chiefs of the bride and the groom's respective villages. So, the suku chief of the bride's village declares that by means of wedding the bride has become a resident of her husband's village. An official document is then given to the chief of the suku where the wedding happens.

As it is usual, during the funerals the houses manifest themselves again. During my fieldwork I lost one of my dearest interlocutors, Albertina Araújo. For her funeral, the meals provided to all the ones presented were prepared using animals and other resources provided by her husband's fertility-takers. But the role *lisan* played in this event was limited to that. There was no mention to any supernatural agent or fact related to her house of origin during the funeral services and all that was ritually said about her life and death inscribed her trajectory in Christian institutions.

Another realm in which the *lisan* keeps its governance power is land rights. In Ussubemassu, rights in land have been determined by the trajectory of the houses in the place, as it is usual all over the country. The house which owns the larger part of land in the Ussubemassu is Ai Luli whose only descendent affirms it to be a trunck from Manroni houses. For instance, the place where Compass facilities are placed today is part of Ai Luli land as well as all land which goes from there till the airstrip, in Kampum Baru. Migrant (*laorai*) houses as the *lisan* Coronel have also received lands in exchanges for supporting the original dwellers in wars. This is the case of the *lisan Coronel*, who has rights in land in various parts of North Ussubemassu.

To sum it up, I take these facts as indexes of the role *lisan* continues to play as an institution framing material reproduction among Ussubemassu people.

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