

The cosmopolitics of flow and healing in north-central Timor-Leste

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Abstract

In north central Timor-Leste, multi-sensory ecological engagement is deeply entangled with conceptualisations of and approaches to people's wellbeing. How people understand human health and wellbeing is closely related to how they understand nature or more particularly human/nature relations and distinctions across multiple timescales. Working through complex cosmopolitics and activated through cross-temporal more-than-human 'mutualities of being', kinship networks are attuned to *relational flows* between 'bodies' and things. Rather than concentrating on the disjunctions created by the *differences* in the natures of beings or their ritual separation, this paper examines how *relational flows* between such 'bodies' and things open up cosmopolitical spaces for the creation and negotiation of intergenerational wellbeing.

KEYWORDS

cosmopolitics, healing, mutuality of being, Southeast Asia, Timor-Leste

1 | INTRODUCTION

Coming to formal statehood in 2002, the independent nation of Timor-Leste has struggled to rebuild from the devastating consequences of a brutal Indonesian occupation and the incipient effects of 500 years of exploitative and neglectful Portuguese colonialism (Gunn, 1999). What has survived this human, infrastructural and ecological destruction is a culturally and economically resilient, largely rural, semi-subsistence population of just over one million people. Despite and because of their



nation's turbulent history, people's diverse linguistic and cultural traditions remain vibrant and embedded in shared concerns for a sociality which embraces a multiplicity of more-than-human beings and timescales (cf. McWilliam & Traube 2011; Bovensiepen, 2015; Palmer, 2015; Fejo & Viegas 2017).

Up to one third of the local population are estimated to have died as a direct or indirect result of the occupation (CAVR, 2006). Two decades later, the bodies of many of those who died are still being recovered by their families. People remain intensely focused on providing the bodies of their kin proper burials so that peaceful relations can be forged between the realms of the living and the dead. These complex processes of recovery and reburial involve much ritual work and aim to ensure that wandering spirits take their rightful place in origin houses as venerated ancestors. This post-conflict pre-occupation with the dead signifies part of the transition from conflict to social repair (Bovensiepen, 2015; Viegas, 2019; Field, 2004). While striving for the controlled separation of the dead from the living through proper burial processes (Bovensiepen, 2018), these processes also highlight the necessity of keeping open or reactivating more-than-human kin-based networks and socio-political processes which are understood to generate more-than-human intergenerational wellbeing. By more-than-human kin and intergenerational wellbeing I refer to the sociality and exchanges which are understood to enable the cross-temporal flow of generative relations between people, place, ancestors and the environment.

A 'kinship system' writes Sahlins (2011, p. 14) is 'a manifold of intersubjective participations, founded on mutualities of being'. Below I draw on what Sahlins (2013) terms the 'mutuality of being', or intersubjective participations in one another's existence where kinsfolk are intrinsic members of one another, to elucidate the flow of relations at the kinship level in a region of Timor-Leste (see also Viegas, 2019). I then examine the way in which the expression of 'intersubjective participations' and transpersonal 'mutualities of being' amongst kin are also tied to collectivities of more-than-human kin and to a broader cosmopolitics bringing humans into constant negotiation with the more-than-human world. In drawing out the ways in which people consider themselves co-constituted with a range of more-than-human kin, I draw on an extended sense of Sahlins' 'mutualities of being', examining how these relations flow through a broader more-than-human cosmopolitics (see also Sahlins, 2017). By cosmopolitics I refer to the ways in which human entanglements with non-human actors may be foregrounded, ceding political agency and voice to non-humans (or nature) in order to create and govern *common worlds* (Stengers, 1997; Latour, 2004). In the cosmologies of north-central Timor-Leste, I seek to better understand what forms of life and phenomena are ceded political agency and how relations are activated and interconnected.

Through ethnographic vignettes drawn from the region, I examine how place-based understandings of the cultivated relationships flowing between people, their ancestors and their environments entangle with particular conceptions of agency, more-than-human sociality and wellbeing. In doing so, I pay attention to the ways in which transgressional acts can create blockages in particular flows of relations and how they are understood to manifest, cause illness and foreclose the wellbeing of kin and others. I then investigate the ways these blockages and transgressions are addressed within and between collective but varied forms of more-than-human life. My aim is to dwell in the cosmopolitics of these indigenous modes of flow and healing and to understand their relational and generative potential for achieving more-than-human health and wellbeing.

This paper is grounded in my long-term ethnographic research with Tetum, Waima'a and Makasae language speakers in the Baucau-Viqueque region of north central Timor-Leste (Palmer, 2015) and more recent collaborative work focused on customary approaches to health and healing in the same region (Palmer et al., 2017). Drawing on three field encounters between 2017 and 2018, I show the ways in which relational cosmopolitical flows are activated to enable intergenerational wellbeing, address blockages, rework power and mediate potential ontological conflict.

2 | COSMOPOLITICS AND MUTUALITIES OF BEING

The ethnographic literature from the Timor region has long made clear the links between kinship, marriage exchange, social reproduction and the 'flow of life' (Fox, 1980; Traube, 1986; Hicks, 2004). Collectively this literature shows how families of particular lineages are organised around origin groups linked to particular origin houses (*uma lulik*) and the ways in which these houses embed families in intimate, intergenerational social, political, economic and spiritual relationships with their extended consanguinal kin and affines from other origin houses. Within this particular rendering of a kin-based 'mutuality of being' (Sahlins, 2013), links between houses are embedded in a lifeworld of exchange, obligation and reciprocity built around socio-cosmic dualisms such as male/female, fertility-giver/fertility-taker, younger sibling/older sibling, indigene/newcomer, political authority/ritual authority, as well as a suite of socio-botanical metaphors such as trunks and tips—the harmonious (or conflictual) relations between which ensure (or hamper) the 'flow of life' (Fox, 1980). Embedded in these 'metaphors for living' (Fox, 1980) is a concomitant Austronesian idea of a spiritual potency or life force flowing through all physical forms and phenomena, an idea that has been referred to by Fox (1987) as the 'immanence of life'.

While this regional literature has demonstrated ethnographically the embeddedness of human relations and exchanges with other material forms (such as inanimate objects, plants and animals; see, e.g., Traube, 1986), there has been a focus in the more recent independence period literature on the links between these kin-based relations and broader spirit ecologies, including the circulation of more-than-human 'bodies' and things across time and space (Trindade, 2011; Bovensiepen, 2015; Palmer, 2015; Palmer & McWilliam 2019). Similarly, building on the literature from the so-called ontological turn in anthropology, a wider regional literature has placed increasing ethnographic emphasis on the inseparability and interconnectedness of human and other life forms (see Tsintjilonis, 2004; Allerton, 2013; Arnhem, 2016; Sprenger, 2016).

Below I argue that in north-central Timor-Leste people's attunement to this wider ecology of things, and their perpetual questioning of it, is embedded in more-than-human kin-based 'mutualities of being'. Such mutualities are demonstrated most frequently at ritual 'house-based' events designed to communicate with the ancestors and the wider spirit ecologies of the house. These processes, which in most houses occur at bi-annual harvest rituals, life-cycle events or in times of illness, allow any 'blockage' or transgression in the flow of relational fields to be assessed and monitored through careful attention to sensory awareness (such as through people's dreams, or the movement, hue and patterning of ritual objects and/or the internal organs of sacrificial animals). These carefully curated ritual processes enable an assessment of the flows (or blockages) of relevant spirit ecologies and discussion to ensue around the ways forward which are necessary to restore the flow of life and wellbeing. They also allow any conflict between the living and/or the living and the deceased to be addressed and negotiated with the ancestral realm (cf. Field, 2004; Sakti, 2013; Bovensiepen, 2015; Viegas, 2019).

Such complex indigenous notions of knowledge, personhood and relationality pose a profound policy challenge to Western liberal and progressive appreciations of individual human needs, rights and desires and the interconnection between spiritual, ecological and human health. They invoke instead a kind of cosmopolitics, ceding political agency to a range of physical forms and phenomena and foregrounding more-than-human relations and negotiations.

In response to the ontological impasses such divergent realities create anthropologists and others have critiqued the notion of a common material world (one with which different 'cultures' interact in different ways) and have argued instead that material objects and entities do not pre-exist the relations which continuously bring them into being (Ingold, 2012; de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018). Viveiros de Castro (1998) has argued influentially that from an Amerindian perspective all



beings (human, animal, plant) share a single view on different worlds, creating ‘multinaturalist’ worlds divided up not by cultures but by the differences between the natures or bodies which have mastery in them. In contrast, in Southeast Asian cosmologies, others have argued that relational alterity is foregrounded less by focusing on the body (immanence and multinaturalism) and more by differences based on spirit and hierarchy (transcendence) (Arnhem, 2016, p. 299; Sprenger, 2016).

Some anthropologists have been critical of the approaches that have dominated the so-called ontological turn, arguing for the need to reinstate historical and political economic analyses which can better account for power relations and exclusionary practices (see, e.g., Bessire & Bond 2014). Others, such as de la Cadena (2010) and Blaser (2016), have engaged with Viveiros de Castro’s (1998) notion of perspectivism (multinaturalism) and combined it with the concept of cosmopolitics (as developed by Stengers, 1997 and Latour, 2004) to highlight the ways in which such multinaturalist ways of being create a necessary politics between heterogenous worlds. Refusing Latour’s presumption of a *common world*, de la Cadena and Blaser develop a notion of cosmopolitics that ‘operates on the presumption of divergent worldings constantly coming about through negotiations, enmeshment, crossings and interruption’ (de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018, p. 6).

Taking as my focal point the way in which cosmopolitical flows are activated to ensure health and healing, I demonstrate below the ways in which indigenous cosmologies in north-central Timor-Leste are simultaneously concerned with the immanent (with the body and biotic) and with transcendent otherworlds. I present a cosmopolitical context in which relational flows within and between more-than-human kin are the core concern. Acknowledging the need to bring an analysis of power to these cosmopolitical renderings (de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018), and keeping the body firmly in the cosmopolitical frame, I ask what happens to such negotiations, as in the case of north-central Timor-Leste, when worlds are comprised not by distinctions or differences between bodies and things but via the flow of relations moving within and between various forms of more-than-human collectivity. How, I want to explore, do these particular ‘inclusive cosmic polities’ (Sahlins, 2017, p. 91) work? In order to address this question, below I provide three vignettes which elucidate cosmopolitical flows and interconnections in the context of more-than-human kin-based ‘mutualities of being’ and place-based ecologies of healing.

3 | VIGNETTE 1

The ritual of *matara* (W: responding to ‘bad death’) is the specialty practice of Emmanuel,¹ a Waima’ a-speaking farmer and healer from a small upland village. His curative capacities were cultivated during the Indonesian occupation of his country. During the early years of this period, the people of his village fled to the mountains where many died, and all suffered from starvation, ill health and the sustained aerial bombing campaigns of the Indonesian occupiers. Despite surviving this horror, even after returning to the village, members of Emmanuel’s family continued to die, and others became ill. As a result, Emmanuel turned for guidance to the ancestral spirits of the sacred (W: *luli*) spring and grove which provides irrigation waters to his family’s rice fields. This was the place where his ancestors had migrated and where several generations of his family had now laboured. It was through establishing communication with the spirits of the spring grove that Emmanuel was able to reverse the tide of ill health afflicting his family. Through ritual prayers he activated the healing properties of the ‘body’ (bark and roots) of one of the most important trees in the grove: a type of ficcus tree called *nunu me* in Waima’a. His notoriety spread, and he is now a well-known local healer. In an interview in 2017 he explained to me:

I am not a *matan dook* [someone with the capacity to see through to other realms]. I am an ordinary person, but I assist in healing in cases of bad [accidental or unexplained] death and/or murder. When people die like this, I am the one who provides the medicine [to heal the family of the deceased]. When I harvest these medicines from the grove, I must promise to make a return offering to the ancestral spirits. This I do [bi-annually] at the new rice or maize consecration ceremonies. For each treatment I provide, I must repay the debt by offering a chicken.

Depending on the cause of the death, treatment involves harvesting either the root or bark of the *nunu me* tree. I must also bury a rock or some soil which I recover from the site of the death at the base of the tree. Next, I take this medicine to the ancestral origin house by the grove. I bring as well ginger, lime powder, areca nut and betel leaves [also from the spring grove]. I place them all in an offering basket and make a prayer to the ancestors of the house [the custodial house of the spring grove]. Then I chew together these ingredients and apply the chew to the person [a sick family member of the deceased]. If the cause of death was sorcery or murder, then I use the roots for healing. If the cause of death was due to the intervention of ancestral or nature spirits [i.e., a spiritual displeasure which needs to be addressed] then I use the bark. I can cure other illnesses using other plants, but I always use ginger as well. I always pray to as well to the ancestral spirits. It is only with prayer that the medicine obtains its power. Without prayer it has no force.

As we engaged in this conversation an uncanny event took place. We were talking under Emmanuel's day hut, a location sandwiched between the spring grove and a terraced valley of irrigated rice fields. Emmanuel's mother, wife and children were also milling about. We had been in discussion for an hour or two and I was trying to better understand the ecology of healing in this place. I asked Emmanuel about the relationship between the ancestors of the custodial house and the wider spirit realm of the spring and grove. How, I wanted to know, were the various potencies of the house and grove brought into exchange to enable healing. At the exact moment I asked this question, as if out of nowhere, an older man appeared at the front of the open-sided hut. This man, Me Losi, was the most senior custodian of the custodial house associated with the spring grove [in the past the house was located right by the spring]. Emmanuel was also related to this custodial house, but his ancestors were more recent arrivals. His ancestors (who were sometimes referred to by others in private as *atan* or servants) had married into the house's female line and had only to some extent been incorporated into the house (W: *umo luli*). They were considered 'in the house' (*uma laran*) but not 'of the house' (*uma na'in*), so they did not enjoy full custodianship over the grove. Emmanuel was not authorised to speak about house matters.

When the old man appeared our conversation about the potencies and the flow of relations linking the house and the spring grove was stopped in its tracks. This senior custodian, whom I knew well, had known that on this day I was going to the fields to interview Emmanuel about his healing practices. While the elder had indicated that he respected the younger man's healing capacities, it was now clear that there were also limits to the claims which the latter was authorised to make about his knowledge and connection to the potencies of this place.

Emmanuel's ancestors had come into the region from the mountain range across the valley. This movement formed a part of a customary agreement and exchange between an apical house of the mountainous region and the custodial house of the spring irrigated valley. In return for their labour in the fields, these people were acknowledged by the custodians as having rights to settle, 'eat and sleep' (*han toba*) in the valley. Yet eventually Emmanuel's grandfather had married a woman from



the custodial house. Through this alliance, he had created a new set of relations, ones which now had to be reconciled with this history and within the house's predominantly patrilocal customs (*W: lisan*).

When the old man arrived at the day hut, Emmanuel's enthusiasm for our conversation tapered off. It was obvious then that there was a deeper politics at play in this encounter (including of the politics of the interview itself). Emmanuel's healing practice had begun as a way of integrating his own family into the intergenerational wellbeing provided by the potencies of the spring grove. He had done this through forms of communication with the grove's spirit realm and by accessing the potencies of its variously manifest more-than-human collectivity (most notably its roots, bark, leaves and fruit). His cultivated practices had eventually generated benefits for the wider human community of the area who had come to acknowledge him as a healer. But there were clearly limits to his communicative practices and to his knowledge claims, ones which needed to be carefully, respectfully and slowly negotiated. As he had told me upfront, he was not a '*matan dook*', someone in direct communication with the ancestral realm.

Meanwhile, the communicative and bodily relationship between the old man, the custodial house and the associated spring grove was beyond question. He was understood to be both the senior human custodian of the house and the person most potently consubstantiated with its more-than-human collectivity, a collectivity which enabled life to flow from the spring grove to the living members of the custodial house and the wider water-using community. The old man's ancestors, everyone knew, also manifested as eels (*tuna*) in the spring and the community relied upon him to cultivate and honour this ancestral flow of relations. During the agricultural year, farmers, including Emmanuel, would defer to him in their activities. Everyone knew too that transgressions in the valley (such as improper interactions with spring water, particular animals or landscape forms) would manifest as sickness in the old man's body and the bodies of the more-than-human collectivity associated with the spring grove. Emmanuel was a part of this kin-based 'mutuality of being' but he was not central to it. The flows of relation moving within the more-than-human collectivity were circumscribed by genealogy, history and power. All of this needed to be continually negotiated.

In the above cosmological rendering of consubstantiated more-than-human kinship relations we can observe relations flowing between beings and things in bodily and biotic as well as spiritual and transcendent ways. The potencies or 'immanence of life' referred to by Fox (1987) as flowing through all things, cohere here through exchanges within particular collectivities of more-than-human kin. What is primarily at stake is not bodily or spiritual difference but relational flows.

Across the north-central Timor-Leste region, the specificities of these types of relations, practices and knowledge claims will differ according to the place, customs and people involved; however, the principle of respecting the flow of constitutive relations between varied forms of more-than-humans in a collectivity remains constant. This attention to the flow of relations concerns at least two domains: more-than-human relations which are constituted vertically and those that are constituted horizontally (cf. Hicks, 2004). Vertically the flow of relations binds together and provides protections *within* trans-generational collectivities comprised of various more-than-human forms. Horizontally the flow of relations binds together and provides protection for what can be more ephemeral alliances (e.g., through inter-house marriages), ones that create pathways of connection *between* collectivities of various more-than-human forms. In both cases, it is the constant attunement to ways of honouring and negotiating such flows and pathways in these 'mutualities of being' that matter most.

Resonating with literature on a type of 'kinship rooted in place' (Strathern, 2018, p. 33) and the acknowledgement of more-than-human kinship and associated knowledge inhering in particular landscapes (see Leach, 2003), the above account of Emmanuel's healing practices and his at times tenuous location in a more-than-human collectivity is also an example of the ways in which cosmopolitical

'mutualities of being' (Sahlins, 2011, 2017) may be circumscribed. Indeed, it points to the way in which more-than-human 'kinship accumulates or dissolves over time' (Carsten, 2013, p. 247). In ongoing processes of making-kin, Emmanuel's uncertain status and his cultivation of his speciality skill and exchanges with the spring grove in the *matara* ritual can be read as an attempt to thicken his relatedness (Carsten, 1997, 2013, p. 247). Yet Emmanuel's ability to communicate with these more-than-human agencies is both a source of his potential thickening of kinship relations and a potential threat to them. Emmanuel and his family are blood relatives (and incorporated 'in the house'), but at the broader cosmopolitical level this ancestral reckoning is not yet enough for them to claim full potency (or 'mutuality of being'). Rather any movement in that direction needs to be carefully calibrated with those closer to the house's apical ancestor. Clearly in this case, the ancestral flow of relations is central to the exercise of cosmopolitical power and power imbalances are primarily smoothed over through genealogical reckoning. How, we might ask, are such flows and potential conflicts reckoned with and smoothed over when the politics is not only kin related?

4 | VIGNETTE 2

In mid-2018 I headed into the mountains to interview a healer who I had been told knew a lot about the healing properties of plants. I was accompanied by my research counterpart and retired nurse Senhor Almeida. He first learnt his nursing practice in the jungle as a resistance fighter (relying largely on ethnobotanical medicines and treatments), later returning to civilian life and dedicating his working life to healing others. The interview was to be carried out at a house where Senhor Almeida had never been and it had been set up for us by the director of the local hospital. A few days before the director had spoken to me at length in an interview about his hope that further research into regional ethnobotanical properties and treatments might modernise Timorese medicine. He had also expressed his enthusiasm for my stated intention to make a film about customary healing.

The house we were searching for that day was nestled amidst a beautiful breadfruit grove under craggy limestone mountain peaks. When we arrived, we found the yard brimming with people. Tarpaulins were draped in a marquee arrangement out the front of the house and many people were gathered underneath. Some were eating, some were working on carpentry projects, and a monument of some sort was being built slightly uphill on the other side of the house. I could see many more people seated inside the house around a long table which was covered in a long woven cloth (*tais*). We were invited to sit down on the house's veranda. What an unfortunate time to arrive to carry out an interview, I ruminated, thinking that we had arrived during the early stages of a '*mate uma*' (death house) ceremony.

From my vantage point on the veranda, I soon realised that there was no coffin on the table. Rather it was covered in large numbers of colourfully bundled materials. We were told that these were 23 sarongs containing the remains of recently recovered family members—the war dead. Each was lain carefully along the length of the long table. Each contained bones (and/or rocks or betel leaves which represented bones) of men, women and children who had died while fleeing the advancing Indonesian troops in the early years of the war. They had fled to what they hoped was the safety of the Matebian mountain range across the valley. Their bodies had never been recovered. Until now.

After a *matan dook* (literally meaning someone whose 'eyes can see far') had consulted with the spiritual realm to locate the resting places of the deceased, family members had organised a recovery expedition. Over a concerted two-month period they had followed the pathways of the deceased down across the valley and up into the forests of the Matebian range. With the assistance of *matan dook*, they gathered as many remains as they could locate. These remains had then been stored in the health



clinic in Kelikai, a sub-district capital of the Matebian mountains. The day before we had arrived, the Ministry of Health had provided an ambulance to transport the remains from Kelikai back to this house.

The people gathered invited us in to the main room and carefully opened each sarong to reveal the contents which included the names of each person written on tiny scraps of cardboard. Reading the names, I saw that they were mostly indigenous Timorese names, rather than Portuguese-derived Christian names. In two days, they explained, a Catholic Priest would be attending the house to posthumously baptise each of these people. Their remains would then be placed in the tiny chipboard coffins that the men were busily making under the marque out the front of the house. Each would be 'dressed' with Western-style clothing folded and placed along with their remains in each coffin. Two days after that they would receive a Catholic mass by the same priest and would be buried in a large grave made up of 23 separate compartments in a public graveyard facing out across the Matebian mountain range.

Quickly abandoning my hope of carrying out a video interview with the healer, I hesitantly suggested that I would be happy to record anything they would like to say about the recovery and reburial process. They immediately agreed. It only dawned on me later that the planned interview with the healer was something of a ruse, that a recording of this event was indeed the reason the director of the hospital had organised the visit. I found out later that the director was a senior member of this house and a key organiser of the event (it was because of him no doubt that it had been possible to organise an ambulance to transport the found remains on the long journey back from Kelikai). He and his family were obviously keen to have their struggle and their determination to carry out this ritual process recorded.

The property was full of people, from the infirm to newborns. I found out too that the monument they were building to the side of the house was to honour two additional deceased family members—Falintil Resistance fighters who had been killed in battle. As this constituted a 'martyrs' burial, for this process they had been able to receive government support and recognition through a war veterans' reparations program. But the costs for the recovery and reburial of the human remains of ordinary family members, ordinary war dead, would fall to the surviving victims of war. One house, 200 plus people, 25 dead bodies. It was an emotional time for everyone.

Emotion was only a part of the story though. After I began recording their commentary, I began to appreciate another significant aspect of this event. While I was struggling to suppress my sadness (and anger at the role my own government had played in this conflict), I quickly came to understand that for those gathered the event was far from backward looking. Its intention was firmly fixed on ensuring the flow of pathways for life prosperity for the house's current and future generations. It was, I realised, an event almost entirely about intergenerational wellbeing.

The primary purpose of reconnecting with these bodies and providing a proper burial was so that pathways for wellbeing could open-up into the future. Specifically, the concern was for the living and their own marriage relations. Until the death exchanges involving the houses of their own intermarried parents and grandparents had been properly concluded, enabling and properly negotiating the marriage arrangements for the living was also not possible. As with elsewhere in Timor-Leste, important exchanges between houses occur during mortuary ceremonies. Through the exchange of livestock, woven cloth and other objects, outstanding marriage debts are settled, relationships that need to be concluded are closed, and new pathways and relations are created and opened up. While Bovensiepen (2018) has written that a major purpose of similar death rituals in the highlands of Funar is to mark the separation between the dead and the living, what is clear in this account is that the intent is as firmly focused on exchange, interconnection and mutual dependency between the living and the dead. The presence of the bodies of the deceased is essential to this process.

The days before the bodies were to be posthumously christened and then buried were especially important. They explained how this was the time for the members of the house and those from associated houses to gather, to sit together with the deceased, and to negotiate with each other the conclusion of the deceased's marriage exchange agreements, through settling, or agreeing to settle, any outstanding debts prior to their burial. These negotiations and their associated processes would also allow, they said, the deceased to transition out of the 'darkness' and into the 'light'. As well as referencing their imminent Christian baptism (a widespread societal expectation since the Indonesian occupation), this referred to the processes through which the inner 'light' of the ancestral origin house would now protect the deceased from the darker realm of 'wild' and wandering spirits. Now the war dead were reunited with the house, at subsequent post-harvest corn and rice consecration ceremonies, these deceased could have their names called out as ancestors, taking up their rightful places as revered protectors of the living.

In the making of kin and intrinsic relatedness, Sahlins (2011) has written that 'kinsmen (sic) are people who live each other's lives and die each other's deaths' (p. 14). Considering the character of these relationships and participations, he writes of the need to acknowledge the 'transpersonal distribution of the self among multiple others' (Sahlins, 2011, p. 13). This encompassing 'mutuality of being' can be glimpsed in the above *haloot ruin* (collecting up the bones) process where through a series of kin-based exchanges incomplete deaths were transitioned to a state of completeness. Through this process any blockages in the flow of relational fields for the living could also be released. While properly separating the dead from the living was important, the greater purpose was the ongoing making of community. Put another way, while this separation was an embodied process involving the 'payment to the dead' for life giving processes (Bovensiepen, 2018), just as important were the ways in which these 'payments' made possible future exchanges to ensure the continuity and flow of life.

How though do we account in this event for the politics and flow of non-kin relations? The ritual and reburials were also deeply embedded in relations (and negotiations) with the Catholic Church and the Timorese state. People were concerned about the imbalances in the way that the state recognised and financially supported the reburial of war martyrs but not the ordinary victims of war. Yet by transporting their loved ones' remains in a state vehicle, ensuring that the event was recorded, posthumously baptising them and burying them in a public graveyard, the families were intent on somehow bringing this process to the attention of, and folding it into, the institutionalised structures of the nation-state (see Bovensiepen & Delgado Rosa 2016 for an historical discussion of relational aspects of Timorese cosmologies and Catholicism). Carefully negotiating their transitions from 'darkness' into 'light' in order to honour and expand the potentialities of their kin-based 'mutualities of being', this process was also about extending the flow of these relations through other realms (Catholicism, the State), thereby creating a pan-ontological common world comprising various pathways. In common with other peoples in Timor-Leste, none of these processes were considered as being at odds with the other (cf. Fejo & Viegas 2017; Bovensiepen, 2015; Hicks, 2019). Rather they were entwined with and working through particular notions of power-laden and cosmopolitically charged intergenerational wellbeing. Divergent and potentially conflicting power relations were actively drawn into enabling the wellbeing of these kinship worlds, where they were smoothed over and incorporated into wider cosmopolitical flows.

5 | VIGNETTE 3

To further demonstrate the ways in which these more-than-human cosmopolitics are understood and negotiated by healers in cases of ill-health, in what follows I document the practices of one healing



specialist named Rogerio. While I have known and carried out research together with Rogerio over many years, these events and the discussion about his work as a healer took place during the month of January 2017.

Rogerio is an elderly Waima'a- (mother's side) and Makasae- (father's side) speaking man and long-term resident of the town of Baucau. While his ancestral origin house lies below the town closer to the sea, his everyday residence is perched among the rocky outcrops and lush spring groves of the old Portuguese-built town. He is also well-known in the town as a ritual specialist and is often called on by his extended kin networks to carry out rituals at the hearths of their origin houses, as well as at other potent sites in the land and waterscape. As well as being a rice and maize farmer, a *kabu bee* (or controller of the spring fed irrigation waters—see Palmer, 2015), his other livelihood is that of a healer. He is knowledgeable about a wide range of ethnobotanical medicines and wherever he goes, he carries with him a small bundle of wood (*W: lutu-kai-ue*) tied in red cotton and placed inside his wallet along with a small metal Christian cross and charm. The three different types of wood in the bundle are replenished periodically by Rogerio from three different locales: one at the coast, one in the savanna plateau region above the town and one from the mountains from where his paternal ancestors originated. Combined (and placed in his wallet with the Christian cross and charm) these materials repel any malevolent spirits, thus enabling Rogerio to ward off attacks due to sorcery, ancestral or nature spirit displeasure. On the day that he explained the function of this small wood and metal bundle, he told me he was planning that evening to chew small pieces of the wood together with his betel nut. He explained that he would then apply this chew to his swollen wrist (swollen body parts are a common manifestation of sorcery or spiritual attack signifying a spiritual invasion of the body). This swelling, he said, was the result of a recent treatment he had given to a person from further east on the island. This patient had yet to repay the debt (via Rogerio) to the spirit realm for this healing intervention and it was Rogerio who was now paying the price. With this account he was demonstrating that healers are also, if not more, at risk than patients in these types of healing interventions.

Rogerio is well known in the town as a healer and while like many other healers he does not charge for his services, patients are expected to repay the debt incurred to the spirits that heal them. This 'payment' is made to Rogerio who then carries out the appropriate rituals to satiate and honour the spirits. These payments will often involve one chicken (market price US\$5–7) or, in cases of more serious illnesses (e.g., broken bones or a psychosis), a number of small or even larger animals (this is due to the need for longer term treatments). While he usually makes 'house calls', Rogerio is also frequently called on by the families of patients who have been admitted into the Baucau Hospital. In these instances, he goes to the hospital wards to carry out treatments, although he said he does so covertly lest the hospital staff feel compelled to chase him away. He added that one of the senior surgeons at the hospital, an East African who is a long-term resident of the town, understands well the efficacy and need for these customary practices (although the surgeon does not say so outright).² While Rogerio thought most other foreign doctors in the hospital had less idea about the efficacy of these practices, he said it was common knowledge among Timorese doctors and nursing staff.

Rogerio told me in 2010 that his mother had passed on her ethnobotanical knowledge and healing practices to him. However, more recently, he explained in more detail how his power to heal also emanates from his connection with the ancestral nature spirits and beings (*rai na'in*) that inhabit his mother's ancestral lands. He explicitly linked these *rai na'in*, and the healing capacities they enable, to the spirit of Joao Lere (Palmer, 2015). Joao Lere was a Waima'a ritual specialist and local ruler from an area to the west of Baucau town. His story is regionally famous as several centuries earlier he had railed against the Catholic Church and the Portuguese colonial administration in their failed attempt to split the island in two. His supernatural powers and sedition were deemed excessive, leading even some in his own family to seek his downfall. Yet the various narratives of the period recount that, no

matter how hard the Portuguese tried, Joao Lere's death was only possible when he surrendered his own body and gave the authorities instructions on how to kill him. In death, Joao Lere took the form of a snake, metamorphising into the powerful being known by the name *talibere* (the great rope) which is intimately connected to the underground flow of water through the region. As with the other ancestral agents (snakes, eels and crocodiles, to name a few), the *talibere* is known to have 'mastery' over particular house-based more-than-human collectivities and to be the enabler of the flow in the regional hydrosocial cycle (Palmer, 2015). Making offerings to the spirits and beings which constitute the *rai na'in* associated with Joao Lere connects Rogerio to both the power of his mother's natal house and to the fertility and potency associated with movements of water and the *talibere* through time and space. For this reason, Rogerio always joins with his mother's natal house when they make biannual offerings at sites in the landscape associated with Joao Lere.

What this account also makes clear is that the healing practices of Rogerio (and the dozen or so other healers I have interviewed over the years) engages much more than a taxonomic knowledge of the medicinal properties of plants. Engaging in the broader cosmopolitical context of 'wild' healing (Lai & Farquhar 2014), all healers I have interviewed maintain that the curative powers of the plants they use is only activated by the communicative relationship forged between them and the more-than-human collectivities associated with such medicines. As we see above, Rogerio also carries with him a Christian cross. For him and many others, place-based ancestral prayers may be supplemented or supplanted by more universalist (and differently powerful) Christian prayers invoking various patron saints. In all cases, to activate the healing powers of plants, healers must attend carefully to relational flows through cross-temporal more-than-human (and often kin-based) ecologies. In this process, healers like Rogerio also frequently incorporate, as well as negotiate, the differently manifest power of Christian practices and state-based health systems.

In order to better locate such healing practices in the broader political-economic context of post-independence Timor-Leste, below I summarise an encounter involving myself, Rogerio and the family of a six-year-old boy who had become ill and disabled due to unknown causes several years earlier. At the time the boy's illness manifested he had been hospitalised only to be later discharged to the sole care of his impoverished family. He was now unable to walk at all or eat properly. The boy's mother, Rosa, was a neighbour of Rogerio and had long asked him if he could come to her house and ascertain the cause of the boy's illness. In early 2017, Rogerio decided to accede to her requests and took me along with him to observe the consultation.

Rosa was originally from Oecusse (an exclave of Timor-Leste inside Indonesian West Timor). Oecusse is one of Timor-Leste's poorest regions. Increasingly people from there are seizing opportunities to marry people from other relatively better-off regions like Baucau. As a part of his divination process, Rogerio asked Rosa to explain why she had come to live in the area. Rosa said that she was driven out of Oecusse by her older brother's wife who had claimed that Rosa no longer had a right to live in her natal home. At that stage, her son was already ill and disabled. Desperate to avoid ongoing conflict in the family, her older brother had drawn on kinship connections with other families who had married into the Baucau region. Rosa accepted the arrangement negotiated by her brother and married an older man from the outskirts of Baucau town. Sometime after her arrival in Baucau, her husband had a stroke and was now also disabled. In a short space of time, Rosa had found herself in a new town, with a disabled son and a disabled husband. Her husband's family had not accepted the marriage and, instead of going to school, Rosa's other young son was now obliged to assist his mother in the fields and with domestic care duties.

Literate in Portuguese and Tetum, Rogerio wrote down notes from his interview with Rosa. Then he began the divination process. Rogerio's diagnostic 'x-ray' powers involved the sacrifice of a chicken and the augury of its body and internal organs. Before he carried this out, he positioned himself in an area open to the sky and held aloft the living chicken, while directing his prayers to the *rai na'in*



(in this case the ancestral nature spirits) and to the divine (verbally invoked as a Christian god). For his prayers to the divine, his body faced to the east, the place of the rising sun and rebirth. Then with his body facing to the west (the place of death and the setting sun), he addressed the ancestral nature spirits (referred to by the Waima'a term *ria buu*). To enable the communicative process (to 'sik') with the spiritual realm, he next placed his spittle on a number of small rocks which he picked up from the ground and then carefully laid in a row in front of the now strangled chicken and the notebook (he explained to me that the number of rocks which it is necessary to *sik* in any one divination depends on the nature of the affliction; a very complicated situation may require up to 14 rocks). Through these processes, Rogerio was determining whether the illness in question was the result of ancestral or nature spirit intervention, a sorcery attack or simply a case of everyday illness. If it was a case of spiritual intervention or sorcery, a series of rituals and offerings would be needed to overcome the attack and/or placate the spirits.

None of the various kin-based exclusions to which Rosa and her family had been subjected were, in the end, found to be the cause of the boy's predicament. Through the divination process, Rogerio determined that the affliction was an 'everyday' illness (i.e., it did not have spiritual cause emanating from either kin or non-kin sources). There was little he could do, he told the mother.

Rogerio told me afterwards that he thought he would be able to cure the boy. However, given the length of time the boy had been ill, he said the process would be onerous and expensive. It would involve a process that he knew Rosa could not afford. He explained the curative process thus:

I would need to visit the boy every few days, to massage him and apply the medicinal treatment. The remedy would come from a tree called *nunu wala* [a type of ficcus] in Waima'a. The medicines from this tree must be harvested at night around 3am and I must be naked at the time, lest people see me and also to stop snakes from slithering past. This tree belongs to the snake. The tree is also known by the name *Mate*. I would first call out to *Mate* and ask it for permission to take some of its roots and tips. I would do this by chewing betel and spitting 14 times at the base of the tree before making an offering with a red chicken. After this, I would harvest the medicines and while doing so I would make prayers to three saints: Ave Maria, Santu Antonio and Gloria.

Later I would take the root and pound it together with the root of a special type of bamboo (W: *betudai*) and the bark of a type of castor oil plant (W: *badu me*). I would chew them all together with special type of betel leaf (W: *malus kai horin*) and ginger (W: *lah da*). I would use this chew to apply a poultice to the injured area. It must be changed frequently with a new poultice reapplied every three to four days. I would take as well the tips of the vine of *Mate* and ask Rosa to cook and feed it daily to the boy in a rice broth. During the treatment period the boy would not be able to eat garlic [garlic is disliked by snakes].

During this time, I would need to regularly visit the tree to harvest more roots and tips and make the associated offerings. Once the boy recovered, a final offering to *Mate* would be required. This would involve a prayer and the offering of another chicken or even a goat (*bibi Timor*). The animal would then be roasted on a bamboo fire by the nearby spring and irrigation water channel. After the bamboo had made a loud cracking sound in the fire, the meat would be taken off the fire and offered to *Mate*. Then the botanical residues of the various treatments [which would be set aside with each dressing change] would be disposed of into the water channel. This is so that they would be carried away by the water to the sea [a place synonymous with life and death].

Despite this lengthy explanation of the healing process which could cure the boy, because of Rosa's dire financial and familial circumstances, Rogerio did not explicitly discuss this treatment as a possibility with her. Yet Rogerio was also her neighbour (if not distant kin of her husband's family) and presumably felt obliged to do something to help her. He suggested she could seek financial and livelihood support from the sub-village head. But Rosa countered that her exclusion from her husband's family and her status as an outsider meant she had little chance of making a claim on scarce sub-village resources.

While I never asked him directly why he took me with him that day to Rosa's house, my own explanation is that I too was being enrolled in the wider world of kin-related care (or non-care) to which Rosa was beholden. Following the encounter, I arranged to have some food (and money) delivered to her house and through the help of a foreign friend managed to make contact with the disabled people's association in the capital. They promised to visit her to assess whether they could assist the family. A year or so later when I next returned to Baucau, I passed by Rosa's house and found out that her son had passed away. She said the people from Dili had come once and given her some rice and some money. They had also promised to try to facilitate the intervention and assistance of the state-based social services sector in Baucau. But, she said, as she had expected the social services people never came. "You need to have family working there to get help," she said. A further six months later, I heard from Rogerio that her husband had also passed away. Rosa meanwhile remained in Baucau working a small plot of land with her remaining son. Rogerio told me that he continued to take them some rice or other food whenever he could. I said I would continue to do the same.

The above account raises many issues about the flow of relations at the kin and broader cosmopolitical level. While Rosa was materially excluded by her own kin and affines, Rogerio benefited from a deep cosmopolitical relationship with his. His healing practice was enabled by the careful cultivation of his relationships with his mother's natal house and its wider spirit ecologies. Within this more-than-human kin-based collectivity, the bodies and various agencies of co-constituted people, animals and plants mattered as much as the transcendent spirit world. Through Rogerio's activation of various flows in this cosmopolitical configuration, these bodies and their various potencies could be interconnected. As with Emmanuel, Rogerio's healing practices relied on carefully attuned communicative processes with other bodies and things, processes through which various 'mutualities of being' may be invoked, thickened or thinned.

Nonetheless, political-economic factors were such that a cure or even beneficial treatment was not possible for Rosa's son. These uneven material flows contributed to the impossibility of activating any healing potential. Rogerio's decision to involve me in the consultation process was perhaps another attempt by him to smooth over the uneven power relations blocking these more material flows.

As I have shown above, whether concerning patients, family members (both living and dead), neighbours, healers, health workers (or even ethnographers), people's approaches to health and healing in this region involve the embrace of a multiplicity of socio-political processes (cf. Pigg, 1996). In these settings, a wide network of actors and more-than-human relations may be co-enrolled and implicated in the processes of healing. These approaches to enacting treatment and wellbeing are not so much discrete alternatives, as performances which collaborate and possibly even depend on the other (cf. Mol, 1999, 2003; Langwick, 2007; McWilliam, 2008; Lai & Farquhar, 2014).

In these cosmopolitical processes, relationships are made and unmade with different bodies and registers of explanation being invoked and working together. Rather than these constituting contentious spaces of struggle, these movements are 'read through one another' (Langwick, 2007, p. 437) across space and time. Rather than holding apart the *differences* between these bodies or registers or making only partial connections between them (Lai & Farquhar, 2014, p. 428 drawing on Strathern, 2004 and de la Cadena, 2013), this approach actively strives to incorporate all of them through the metaphor of flow which also attempts to smooth out uneven power relations. What this creates is a



common world in which other beings and things are constantly being enrolled to thicken or thin various 'mutualities of being' and to enable the cosmopolitical flow of life.

6 | OPENING UP SPACES FOR HEALING

In this paper I have suggested that the cosmologies of north-central Timor-Leste are continuously brought into being through the generative convergence of various more-than-human 'mutualities of being'. The vitalist 'immanence of life' (Fox, 1987) flowing through all things has been shown to come together most potently in 'bodily' exchanges between more-than-human kin. In 'assembling their relations with non-human types' (Sprengr, 2016, p. 44), the key activator of wellbeing in these cosmologies is not the preservation of difference but ensuring relational flows between variously configured more-than-human collectivities.

While I have focused on how healers and other ritual specialists understand their power to see into other realms and/or activate the bodily powers of more-than-human collectivities, these practices are widely understood in this region as essential to the transmission of life's force and the broader reproduction of cosmopolitical life (cf. Sahlins, 2017). By focusing on how these 'mutualities of being' bring together and mediate power flows through a common cosmopolitical world, I have articulated the negotiation of cosmopolitical flow, not separation or disjunction. I have shown how the negotiation of uneven power relationships is also enabled via the cultivation of relationships which ensure the flow of life among a common world of heterogenous more-than-human collectivities.

In the achievement of this common world, power and difference are not elided but embraced and reconstituted through metaphors of flow. Characterised by spiralling patterns of horizontal and vertical relations, more-than-human kin and non-kin collectivities continuously come into being and are cultivated to foster intergenerational wellbeing through careful attunement to multiple space-time contingencies, contexts and possibilities. In the controlled separations, continuities and exchanges between the living and the dead, the human and non-human, kin and non-kin a deeply relational whole is understood to enable life to somehow hold together, flourish and pattern out.

In the context of diverse Timorese approaches to health and wellbeing, this cosmopolitics also operates *within* a world constituted as common wherein people focus on the need to ensure the 'flow' of multiple forms of life. This is a world in which people also attune themselves to revelations around blockages, transgressions and the sources of illness and seek to cultivate a range of responses to address uneven flows and power relations. It is within this cosmopolitical context of honouring and negotiating more-than-human collectivities and connections, as well as through incorporating others, that intergenerational wellbeing is understood to be continuously brought into being.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 All names in this paper are pseudonyms. The language terms provided are in Tetum unless otherwise noted. (W.) indicates a specifically Waima'a language term.

2 It is common to hear people referring to this surgeon's curative power as stemming, at least in part, from his presumed supernatural gifts. The surgeon himself told me that one elderly male nurse in the hospital refuses to work night shift unless the surgeon has done his rounds of the wards that evening (and by implication cleared the space of wandering spirits).

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