

# Filmic encounters: Multispecies care and sacrifice on island Timor

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## Abstract

This is a story about the ‘arts of noticing’ more-than-human noticing. In it I reflect on the ways in which my own practice of ethnographic filmmaking is itself an agent of multisensory participation. As artifice and artificial eye, there is something both liberating and sensuous about filmmaking practice. It heightens the performativity of participants and their embodied rituals and allows me to enter intimate spaces I would otherwise not encounter. In these encounters a deep multispecies noticing takes place, although in the first instance this is usually only by the camera. The intimacy enabled in these artificial but sensorial encounters can be both revealing and confronting, especially in cases of animal sacrifice. Re-encountering footage filmed across years of research-led endeavour, in this paper I explore the power of film to convey these multisensory and multispecies stories, as well as to evoke understanding and engage the multisensory memory of the filmmaker.

## KEYWORDS

animal sacrifice, filmmaking, multisensory ethnography, multispecies ethnography, Timor-Leste

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Reflexive ethnography of the sensory kind engages with what Anna Tsing (2015, p. 37) calls the ‘arts of noticing’, in this case the open-ended and entangled worlds connecting people with the more-than-human. For Tsing (2015, p. viii) paying attention to the sensibilities of these diverse more-than-human

entangled ways of life, social relations and logics also gestures 'to the so-much-more out there'. For the human subject, including the ethnographic filmmaker, awareness and attunement to these sensibilities can be explanatory, triggering imagination and curiosity. In practices of animal sacrifice, for example, a camera is able to capture, much better than averted or repelled eyes, the finely calibrated sensory details involved in practices of more-than-human care and violence. While the camera, to some extent, avoids the judgement of the human eye and the foreclosure of other ways of being, sensorial engagement with the more-than-human also occludes knowing and demands epistemological humility.

In this article, I consider the ways in which filmic encounters can trigger both a kind of sensory openness to the more-than-human and an occlusion of the known world. What, I want to explore, can multisensory encounters through filming and then with my own video footage (its sounds, colours, surroundings, voices, bodies, gestures, rhythms, sensations, smells, tastes) reveal about the participation of people, animals, plants, water and celestial bodies in more-than-human lives and livelihoods on the island of Timor? The sensory attunement augmented for me via my own filmic encounters involves an increased openness and awareness of Timorese spirit ecologies, including people's diverse ways of being with the other-than-human spirits, plants, animals, land, sky and waterscapes (Palmer, 2015, 2020; Palmer and McWilliam, 2019). My argument is that one important element in these filmic encounters is the camera's ability to capture sensorial aspects that might elude or repel the eye of the ethnographer. Filming outside in the tropics is hard work, and my immediate recollections of the process are primarily sensorial: heat, thirst and physical exhaustion, as well as a heightened olfactory and aural intensity. Yet this heightened sensorial awareness comes at the cost of vision, visual acuity being sacrificed to concerted camera operation. This temporary impairment of vision is, however, more than recompensed by what is gained—a post-facto visual account with which to augment and bring to life both sensorial memory and a deeper metaphysics.

The three vignettes I have chosen for this article all invoke the 'arts of noticing' more-than-human observation through multisensorial engagement. All three depict Timorese customary practices and associated traditions of honour and sacrifice through or with animals—the first concerns pigs, the second, pigs and bees, and the third, a goat and chickens. While video recording has become an oft-used technique in my fieldwork,<sup>1</sup> there are many times when I choose not to engage in the medium. The first vignette is an example of one of those times. Yet, as I demonstrate through the second and third vignettes, my fieldwork experience of frequent video recording, and latterly filmmaking, has informed my sensorial awareness of multispecies relationships and encounters.

While some might consider the video camera an invasive and contrived medium, its use is always welcomed and encouraged by my interlocutors in the field. As well as being a medium for noticing, filming itself performs new interests (Carta, 2015; Feld and Ricci, 2015). Contrary to the time-worn tropes of the 'primitive gaze' or 'salvage ethnography', this is not because my interlocutors want their practices recorded for the sake of exoticised curiosity or posterity, but because of a desire to share these traditions outside of their social world.<sup>2</sup> Indeed I have come to realise that, more often than not, my filmic participants are also subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) directors of my camera work, keen to ensure that critical details are captured on camera. On occasions, it has also become apparent that participants have surprised themselves and others with their heightened candour and/or the depth of insight.

Stoller (1997, p. xv) enjoined ethnographers to reject the 'bloodless language' of 20th-century scholarship on embodiment. Instead, he urged practitioners to actively engage 'smell, touch, taste and hearing' (1997, p. xvi) in order to better reflect and understand the ways in which the multisensorial is 'central to the metaphoric organisation of experience' (1997, p. xvi) in many settings. All three vignettes presented here are, if you like, blooded. All include aspects of animal sacrifice, multispecies



care and violence, and all emphasise (to different extents) the ability of the eye of the camera to capture key moments in more-than-human encounters. In the final section of the article, I expand upon what this means for the practice of filmmaking in the sensory ethnographies of more-than-human worlds. Employing blooded language and practices to tease out these sensorial aspects, I reflect too on the 'cultural memories' (Stoller, 1997, p. xvi) that filmmaking triggers for the ethnographer and the role of collaborative filmmaking in multimodal anthropology (Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón, 2019; Pink, 2011).

Firstly, I discuss some tentative links between selected literature on sacrifice, animal economies, human–animal intimacy and multispecies ethnography. My concern here is to think through, in a regionally specific way, how an emerging multispecies anthropology can help integrate 'the more-than-human in understanding social, ecological, and political processes' (Fijn and Kavesh, 2020, this issue).

## 2 | ANIMAL SACRIFICE, KINSHIP AND CARE

Sacrifice and its links to gift-giving and cosmological communication has long been a subject of anthropological discussion (Evans-Pritchard, 1957; Hubert and Mauss, 1964; Tylor, 1889). Signe Howell's (1996) edited collection *For the Sake of our Future* focuses on the topic of animal sacrifice in the Eastern Indonesian and Timor region. Noting that blood sacrifice was once a topic of 'morbid fascination for the Western imagination', Howell reflects on its decline in contemporary anthropology and seeks to reopen critical conversation on the matter from a regional anthropological perspective (McWilliam, 1997, p. 343). Various contributors argue that across the archipelago shedding blood is considered life vitalising, both as gift and 'efficacious substance' (McWilliam, 1997, p. 344). Reflecting on the history of anthropological theorising on the topic, Hoskins (1993, pp. 159, 175) draws on an Eastern Indonesian context to argue for a deeper explication of the embodied acts of sacrificial violence, as well as close consideration of the divinatory significance of the body tied up in the practices of giving and taking life. She argues that animal rearing is not in these contexts a 'means of production' but rather a 'means of reproduction' (1993, p. 163).

More than two decades later in her multispecies ethnography from the Indian Himalayas, Govindrajan argues for a shift away from the highly symbolic nature of analysis around sacrificial relationships toward a focus on the more 'affective corporeal dimensions of their engagement' (2015, p. 515). Govindrajan examines people's 'kinship' with domestic animals (2015, p. 586), beings which are understood to have their own 'point of view' (2015, p. 588) and an 'intentionality' which is respected (2015, p. 588) as embedded in a place-based and relational web of 'sacred geography' (2015, p. 510). These animals and humans, she writes, 'speak without words' through relational practices of touch and care (2015, p. 516).

While I am sympathetic to Govindrajan's multispecies kinship approach, my own approach, informed by the specificity of regional ethnography, makes a clearer distinction between wild and domesticated animals. Hoskins (1993, p. 185) notes that on the island of Sumba (as on the island of Timor), there is a distinct difference between the ways in which wild and domesticated animals are understood and related to. While domesticated animals such as pigs and buffalo (and to a lesser extent horses and dogs) are considered to have given up their agency to humans, this is not the case with wild animals. Hence domestic animals are understood to lack the autonomy, voice and agency of wild animals (Hoskins, 1993, p. 185).

While, as we will see below in vignette 1, Timorese often express feelings of connection with animals they have raised, this relationship is not rendered linguistically as kinship. Kinship affinities

are reserved for the consubstantial relationships between wild animals (in particular bees, rats, snakes, eels, fish, insects, birds, civet cat, cuscus, crocodiles) and groups of people in association with their origin houses (Palmer, 2015). These beings must be periodically honoured and fed, as we will see in vignettes 2 and 3 with bees and snakes.

While in the Indian Himalaya animal care is women's work (Govindrajana, 2015, p. 515), in Timor-Leste animal care (including the extensive care provided by men to their beloved fighting roosters) is equally men's work. There is, however, often a gendered division of labour in the types of animals that men and women care for: men primarily caring for cattle/buffalo, goats and horses and women caring primarily for pigs. All of these animals are also central to affinal gift exchange across the island of Timor, with cattle/buffalo, goats and horses symbolically 'male' animals, and pigs symbolically 'female' animals.

However, my insights on the matter of domestic animal care are gleaned primarily from my experience of the relationships between women and their pigs. Before summarising these insights, I draw briefly from a wider regional literature on pig rearing, highlighting the ways in which the topic has been approached from an ecological, economic and symbolic perspective. Rappaport's (1968) seminal work on the Tsembaga Maring in New Guinea exposed the ecological link between pig rearing, long-term ritual cycles and people's adaptive capacity. Also writing from the New Guinean context, Minnegal and Dwyer's (1997) account of pigs and the Kubo people highlights the contemporary drivers that influence the number of pigs raised per person over time. The relationship between the growing importance of money in this setting, changing practices of raising and exchanging pigs, and changing male–female social relations leads them to discern a deeper structural transformation in Kubo life. Minnegal and Dwyer note that while domestic pigs are not eaten by their owners, in the past pigs were frequently exchanged with others outside the kin group for the purposes of eating. In these 'like for like' material exchanges, it was not the pig as a 'category' which was exchanged but rather the particular identity of a pig, 'not a pig per se' but a pig with 'attributes and a history' (1997, p. 11). Similarly, in healing rituals involving sacrificial offerings to the spirits, animal owners offered their own hand-raised pigs as 'like for like' symbolic exchanges. In these instances, pigs stood in for the essence of the owner (1997, p. 11). Increasingly, the authors argue, due to people's aspirations to enter and control a monetised economy, pigs were becoming more simply pigs.

In Timor-Leste, specifically in the north-central region with which I am most familiar, pig rearing is predominantly women's work and central to the exchange economy. In vignette 1, a pig is purchased to meet the funerary obligations required by the customary exchange relationships between origin houses. These intergenerational life-cycle exchanges include offerings of pigs, rice and woven cloth from fertility-giving houses and offerings of buffalo, goats, horses and swords from fertility-taking houses (Palmer, 2015). Yet in the case described below, securing a suitable pig took several days and included intense negotiations inside the kin group. This was not because it was necessarily hard to source a pig at a reasonable price, but because purchasing a pig from strangers was a less attractive option than sourcing a suitable pig for exchange from within the kin group. The prestige of the gifting family was tied up in the particularity of the pig and in this case it needed to be a large, healthy castrated pig. While the men of the kin group had discussed the ritual circumstances of the exchange obligation in detail, the senior female who owned the pig ultimately refused to allow her pig to be exchanged below her stated asking price. In the end a large cross-bred pig of Timorese-European extraction (Tetum: *fahi Macau*) was purchased from outside the kin group. The pig under negotiation within the kin group had been a slightly smaller Timorese breed of pig, the kind people preferred in rural areas given their hardiness to disease.

While the pig featured in vignette 1 was exchanged for money, these monetary exchanges to secure animals are a central part of a reinvigorated customary economy (McWilliam, 2011; Palmer, 2015).



Since independence in 2002, an unevenly spread increase in the amount of money circulating in the Timorese economy has meant that cash often facilitates these exchanges. Nonetheless, these monetary exchanges are still tied to the particularity of the animal and/or its place in a register of customary equivalence (cf. Hoskins, 1993; Silva, 2018).

Over the last decade or so, pigs have also increased in value, achieving an equal, and at times higher, monetary value to buffalo (an animal that is customarily the most valued symbolic marker of marriage-based exchange negotiations). Even so, the fertility-taker's gifts of buffalo, horses and goats always requires a (delayed) return of pigs from the fertility-givers. Smaller pigs are also often sacrificed for a house's harvest, thanksgiving or healing rituals. Pigs are a labour-intensive animal to raise, especially given an urbanising economy and the increasing need for pigs to be penned or tethered to protect urban streetscapes and rural crops. Yet given the necessity of pigs for customary rituals and the increasingly high price they can fetch they remain favoured animals to raise in both rural and urban areas.

While people in north-central Timor-Leste can eat their own animals, given the embodied effort it takes to raise them many state that they prefer not to, as they *hanoin* (Tetum: feel a connection to) these animals. In inter-house exchange rituals these animals are consumed outside of the origin house, but in house-based harvest, thanksgiving or healing rituals, people will both offer and consume their own animals considering this to be an appropriate exchange of a like-for-like essence (cf. Minnegal and Dwyer, 1997). People state that they do not *hanoin* other people's animals.

Below I sketch three vignettes of multispecies sacrifice and care and reflect on my own, and others, multisensory responses in these settings. In each of the vignettes, the bodies of humans, animals and plants are in cosmological communication through exchanges of the transformational fluidity of blood, spittle (or chew) and water. Through the enhanced multisensory encounters and cultural memories enabled by the experience of filmmaking (its vision, sounds, colours, surroundings, voices, bodies, gestures, rhythms, sensations, smells, tastes), they show how I as an ethnographer have become slowly attuned to the participation of people, animals, plants, water and celestial bodies across the more-than-human lives and livelihoods of island Timor.

## 2.1 | Vignette 1

It was New Year's Day 2020 and I was travelling in convoy with my husband's extended family through the far eastern districts of Timor-Leste. Our convoy comprised two four-wheel-drive vehicles and a truck. In the back of the truck was a large black and white pig and sitting in the back with the pig were various nieces and nephews and other junior members of the household. The journey ahead was long, and the youth had brought along a large sofa which they placed in the back of the truck's high-sided tray. They alternated between them time sitting on the sofa and time perched on the truck cab's roof. The pig lay tethered at the front of the tray on piles of sand and palm leaves—an attempt by the family to protect it from the dirt road's devastating corrugations and potholes.

We were heading to the funeral of a member of the family's extended kin network. Following the expected life-cycle exchanges between fertility-giving and fertility-taking origin houses, our family as nominal fertility-givers were offering a pig to the deceased's origin house. The pig had been purchased after days of deliberation between my husband's siblings and the other close family members living in the town of Baucau. None of them owned a suitable pig (large, male, castrated) and none of the various rural relatives who raised pigs could be cajoled into providing one at a suitable price. Given the urgency of the circumstances, it was decided that we would buy a pig for sale in the town.

The townspeople selling their pig were doing so, we heard, due to their concerns about the recent spread of African swine fever virus around the capital and other areas of coastal Timor (Bann, 2019). The large, black and white, male castrated pig (Tetum: *fahi Macau*) was a critical household asset and despite misgivings the owners were keen to sell it in case it later succumbed to the virus. Having pooled our money, the family purchased the pig for what was the relatively cheap asking price of US\$800. The men of the house drove to pick it up in the truck, an event my husband recorded on his smart phone. From these photos and video footage, I could see that this pig was prized and well cared for by its owners; it had been raised in a large and very clean concrete-floored pen and was periodically allowed to roam in the property's lush tropical surrounds. The video shows it trotting along behind its owners in a dog-like fashion (<https://youtu.be/2B01vxvXCZk>). This same disposition was evident when the newly purchased pig arrived at our family property and dismounted the truck.

The contented disposition of this fossicking pig contrasted starkly with the one that had been sacrificed 2 days earlier for our household's *shambaying* (Chinese-Timorese New Year) ritual. Then, one of the pigs raised by my husband's brother's family had been slaughtered for the ritual offerings. While the wellbeing of the family collective depended on the correct carriage of this complicated set of offerings, during the early morning slaughter of the pig there had been a delay in the proceedings. As the men performing the slaughter searched for a knife sharp enough to slit the pig's throat, the squeals of the now firmly bound pig sounded out across the town. The other Chinese-Timorese families living nearby heard the pig's screeching and sent messages requesting to purchase certain cuts of pork for their own New Year's Eve offerings.

Although we were on the other side of the large sprawling property, there was no escape from the pig's anguished squeals. As I helped my sister-in-law prepare the steamed buns for the *shambaying* ritual, I could see that she was visibly distressed by the pig's ordeal. She and junior members of her household had spent a year preparing food and feeding it to the pig to fatten it for this moment. It would greet them each day as they arrived to feed it and by then they felt a certain attachment to the animal. They also expressed a deep satisfaction and pride that the spilling of its blood would now secure the family's health and wellbeing.

By New Year's Day the four sets of *shambaying* offerings (one each for divinity, household ancestors, land spirits and the new year) were complete. We turned our attention to the funerary proceedings in the far east and the wellbeing of these more distant kin networks. We loaded the purchased pig into the truck and set off. After a 6-h journey we arrived. The property was brimming with people seated around the grounds in small family groupings. They were spatially separated according to their status as fertility-givers (who arrived with offerings of pigs, rice and woven cloth or equivalent) and fertility-takers (who arrived with offerings of buffalo, goats, horses and swords or equivalent). The extended family members (Tetum: *uma laran*, or people of the house) of the deceased's origin house were concentrated at the rear of the property, preparing meals and hospitality for the mourners. There was a lot of carefully managed work underway to ensure that fertility-givers would be served only buffalo or goat meat, fertility-takers only pork.

After we arrived, we parked the truck at the front entrance of the property. Our family gathered by the truck and an anticipatory hush settled over assembled mourners. Those who were able to do so discreetly turned their heads to witness the unloading of our offering. During this dismount from the truck, the pig was far less cooperative. Blood was dribbling from its mouth. Someone in our group noted with dissatisfaction that its tooth had likely been knocked out during the bumpy journey in the tray. Scowls were directed at the youth whose job it had been to care for the animal. Yet, once it dismounted the pig seemed to recover its friendly disposition and trotted into the property on a lead (see Figure 1). Its huge belly swayed admirably with each step and members of the deceased's origin house, who were by then gathered just inside the entrance, broke into a loud ritual greeting to welcome us and



**FIGURE 1** Arriving at the house of the deceased [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

our offering. With palpable collective satisfaction and pride, all the families concerned watched on as the pig was led to the rear of the property. As it crossed the threshold into this private funerary space it stopped in its tracks and abruptly lay down.

Later, after some time inside spent standing by the coffin, praying for and paying our respects to the deceased and her surviving children, we were led out of the house and served betel nut, refreshments and finally a meal. It was already late in the day and given the long return journey ahead of us, it was time to take our leave. The pig still lay there just over the threshold into the private space. My

10-year-old son went over for a closer look. At the same time a woman from the rear of the property walked past and noticing my son looking at the pig, she too went closer. She let out a gasp. 'The pig's dead!' she exclaimed in the local language of Fataluku and hurried to the front of the property to alert the deceased's next of kin.

Family pride and mutuality shifted quickly to embarrassment. My immediate thought was that we had indeed bought a pig that had already succumbed to African swine fever. But this thought had not occurred to the others. For them news of the pig's untimely death was a sure sign of spiritual displeasure. The urgent matter to be resolved was to whom this displeasure was directed. Members of our group and the adult children of the deceased gathered in deep discussion by the waiting vehicles. They spoke quietly but with urgency—I could sense from the tension in their bodies that this was a precarious situation. The cause of the spiritual displeasure (and the pig's sudden death) was quickly identified. The prayers and familial exchanges by the coffin had failed to invoke the name of the deceased's older brother. This man, long deceased, was the critical connector between our families. The failure to invoke his name meant that he had intervened to express his displeasure by rejecting the offering. But as the pig's death had occurred inside the private funerary space, this was a problem that emanated from the deceased's origin house not ours. The pig had 'died in their hands' (Tetum: *mate ho sira nia liman*) and everyone knew that there had been ongoing conflict in the family as they negotiated the deceased's final place of burial. Even as they tried to hide it, deep concern was etched in the faces of the deceased's family. They assured us that all was okay, that while the pig could no longer be used as an offering to be distributed amongst the fertility-taking houses, the deceased's family would make use of the meat for their own household consumption.

Halfway back to Baucau several hours later, a phone call came through in the truck. The pig was alive, likely distressed after its long, tortuous journey, its breathing very shallow. With huge relief in their voices, the deceased's family told us they would slaughter it straight away. Now it could be received as an offering and its body shared amongst the fertility-taking houses as a part of the funerary proceedings.

As someone who had been standing near the pig when it was prematurely pronounced dead, I felt a little silly. I had not gone closer to take a better look. Instead I had recoiled and withdrawn; the horror of the pig's suffering and the shame of its death had been too much. Later, when I relayed this outcome to my son, he replied, 'That's what I saw, the pig was still breathing.'

## 2.2 | Vignette 2

In 2018, I had a video camera in hand as I bore witness to the death of another pig. I have documented this event in an essay (Palmer, 2019a) and a film titled *Wild Honey: Caring for Bees in a Divided Land* (Palmer, 2019b). My family and I had joined our friend Balthasar Kehi in the tiny village of Lookeu on the international land border between Timor-Leste and Indonesia. This was Balthasar's home village and we were there at the invitation of his community to film a nocturnal communal honey-harvest ceremony. The island of Timor is divided by this border which, in turn, divides the lands and waters of the former kingdom of Lookeu. Oblivious to this boundary, Timor's migratory wild honey bees (*Apis dorsata*) move back and forth across the region and the people of Lookeu carry out community honey-harvest rituals to court the leading queen bees. The harvest is carried out by men who take on the guise of *laku* (Tetum: Asian palm civet cats) to climb high into the tree canopy at night where they sing love songs to the bees. These songs express gratitude to these beloved beings, enticing and begging them to give up their sweetness and maintain their bi-annual visits. While similarly intimate relationships between humans and bees have been documented elsewhere in Southeast Asia and Oceania (see, e.g.,



Fijn, 2014; McWilliam, 1991; Meitzner-Yoder, 2011; Phillips, 2020; Sager, 2016; Tsing, 2003), *Wild Honey* was the first documented account of a nocturnal honey harvest on island Timor.

I had arrived in the area with a video camera, but as I had no prior filmmaking experience it was my intention to simply record the harvest and return on a subsequent occasion with a film crew to properly document this nocturnal event. On top of this, I had not really considered the difficulty of filming at night and as the event drew closer, I was considering abandoning the task. As it turned out, everyone involved was keen to collaborate and ensure that filming could occur. A production plan was thrown together: torches were purchased for lighting and assistance of all kinds was offered. On the night, the *laku* and senior elders spoke directly to the camera, narrating the event and surprising themselves and each other with the insights they offered to the camera's gaze. Balthasar told me later that the consensus was that the ancestors had intervened to make themselves present through the words of the man who ultimately became the film's main in situ narrator. During the impromptu interview, as the torchlight flickered around the faces of those seated on the forest floor, this elder connected the bodies of the bees to the seven lights in the sky and provided a concise, erudite and richly spiritual account of the evening's honey harvest. The account of this man, known locally more for his materialist than spiritual leanings, both astounded and impressed those seated around him.

We had been told that due to the climate, a previously inauspicious harvest and a resulting decrease in bee numbers that year, the event would be a small harvest conducted during a few hours of the evening, not the usual grand style where one tree might hold up to 100 or more 'houses' and the harvest takes up most of the night. We were also told quietly that 'bees are actually people' and that they have names: 'Buik Lorok and Dahu Lorok'. While Buik and Dahu are common female names in the community, Lorok refers to the sun and to *Nai Maromak* (the Enlightened One) or deity. Buik Lorok and Dahu Lorok are the queen bees and it is they, and their relationships with the Lookeu people, that would be invoked and celebrated at the honey harvest. Love songs would be sung to touch the hearts of these female bees and entreat them to return to their homes in this same tree year after year.

After 2 days of ritual preparation, on the final night dozens of villagers gathered in the forest close to the wild almond tree that was to be harvested. A small black pig was tethered by the altar some distance from the tree where the honey would later be strained. A bark tray and a palm-fibre filter had been positioned on the altar so that the harvested honeycomb could be squeezed by hand, allowing the honey to flow along it and down through a bamboo half-pipe into the plastic bucket below. Sweet (not bitter) and smooth-flowing honey would indicate the night's successful harvest and signal the life blessings to flow forth from the bees and through the community.

Those assembled by the altar also began to prepare the 11 offering baskets and assorted ritual adornments that would be presented to the bees prior to the harvest. Among the offerings was the *fatuk metan* (black stone) basket specifically for the queen bees, Buik Lorok and Dahu Lorok. One of the senior men wrapped this basket carefully in a black cloth and adorned it with five corn-sheath cigarettes. The pungent smell of these hand-rolled cigarettes would entice the bees down from the tree during the evening's harvest. The animated banter of participants involved in the preparations signalled much excitement around the imminent harvest.

Once the black-stone basket had been prepared, we carried it in procession with the pig to the base of the tree where a man carefully unpacked from his bag a number of ritual objects: *morten* (red-coral bead necklaces) and *belak* (golden breast plates). These were used to adorn the black-stone basket, and another two of these ritual objects were hung by Domi, the tree's custodian, on a notch on the trunk of the tree. Next, one of the *laku* assumed his role as lead singer of the offering party. As he stood at the base of the tree, he began a resounding love song to the bees. Soon he was joined in chorus by many others who held hands around the base of the tree. The linking of hands reflected their bonds to each other and with the bees. The singers circled the tree three times, singing:



Ooooh ... ooooh ... ooooh ... *fatuk metan* (black stone) ... eeeeh ... the wild almond tree where you hang yourselves, where you come to dwell. You came together here as a group to make your home ... We bid you a farewell ... do come next year. Tonight, we are here with you, our generous and respectful lovers, Dahu Lorok and Buik Lorok. You are giving us your sweetness and the strength of your bodies. We are here to thank you and to bid goodbye to you while hoping and pleading for you to return next year. To return here to your home so we shall be together again for another night. So that we can taste your sweetness and the strength of your beings ... Do kindly share your experience in this home to others and bring them along next year, too.

As the singing and movement concluded, one of the *laku* (who was also the lead singer) held aloft the black-stone basket and rotated it in front of him through the air.

The deep emotion of the serenade resonated through the forest and our bodies. Next, the small black pig which lay tethered on the ground nearby was unbound from its stake and brought across to the base of the tree. It was dark and the ground was steep. Multiple activities were occurring at once and it was hard to know where to film. As one of the senior men raised a kitchen knife close to the pig's throat, a ripple of commentary and nervous laughter spread through the gathered crowd. I tried to position myself to film the sacrifice. I knew that it would be confronting. My son, who had been sitting by the tethered pig for several hours during the day (see Figure 2), held back tears and outrage as he watched the knife held at its throat.

I had to look away. I heard the pig squeal in pain as its throat was slit above the black-stone offering. After the sound abated, I looked back. People continued their banter but were also observing the death closely. The pig's eyes had glassed over as life slowly drained away, yet a strong stream of blood continued to flow from its neck into a bucket below. I had to look away again. The camera kept rolling.

Given the intense visual, aural and olfactory liveliness, it was only much later when I reviewed the footage that I noticed the other activities unobtrusively occurring around the pig at that time. Just prior to the sacrifice, when the pig had first been held aloft by the base of the tree, Domi had rubbed the animal with betel leaf. Throughout the sacrifice, he had moved quietly in the shadows between



**FIGURE 2** Awaiting the sacrifice [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



the pig and the tree base, collecting blood from its streaming flow with his hands, then caressing the trunk of the tree with his blooded hands, sending sprinkles of it over the various ritual offerings. The methodical care and intimacy with which he carried out these activities belied the horror of the moment. By caressing the pig's body earlier with betel leaf, he had given the animal the blessing of life before its death. Through his subsequent acts, Domi had communicated this offering to beings both visible and invisible. The squeals of the pig, the anticipation of the crowd, the smell of the offerings, the flow of the blood, the touch of the leaves, the caress of bloody hands communicating the offering are all present in the footage (<https://youtu.be/evF2po72-iI>). Yet while these multisensory aspects of the sacrifice are clearly evident in the footage, it is also the case that a deeper multispecies reading of the event is intimately linked to multisensory experience over longer time periods.

Indeed, events recorded in the forest were remarkably similar to those I had recorded the evening before inside the Lookeu main origin house. Then, another small black pig had been carried by young men into the house where it was caressed with betel leaf before it was slaughtered by a more senior man over the house's main altar. Once dead its various body parts became part of an elaborate ritual and feast. Later, the presiding ritual leader mixed droplets of the pig's blood into a paste with his betel chew. Beginning with Balthasar and his siblings and ending with us (the visitors), we were all called to enter the male part of the house where he blew his breath onto our foreheads and pressed onto our sternum and forehead small portions of the potent paste. Later, after we had eaten together, betel leaf and areca nut from the ritual baskets were shared out amongst all participants. The same sharing of food, betel leaf and areca nut was carried out the next night after the honey harvest. These acts ensured all of us would exit these spaces with *matak malarin* (a greening coolness and flourishing life energy) (Kehi and Palmer, 2012).

Distracted in the moment of the honey harvest sacrifice, without the camera I would not have noticed Domi's actions in the shadows of the tree. I would not have been able to connect this assemblage of activity with the activities of the previous evening inside the origin house. These communications between bodies and trunks were all tied up in unfolding spatio-temporal processes. While the actual bodies of humans, pigs, trees and sacra separated us physically, the blood and betel connected us all—bringing us into conversation with the divine.

Much later, back in Australia as we edited the footage for the film, it became apparent that I had failed to pick up another critical detail. Following the main prayer by the tree, when the black stone was circled in the air, and barely audible in the footage, the *laku* could be faintly heard invoking the names of the migratory bees' multiple origin places: from across the west, east and central mountains of the island. In these few words and circular action, he had honoured the longstanding movements of people and bees back and forth along both sides of this artificial border (<https://youtu.be/ynAKQRkP9E8>).

### 2.3 | Vignette 3

Later in 2018, and back in Baucau, we were invited by our friend Atinu to witness the culmination of a customary healing process for his sister's son, Simiao. This ceremony involved a network of kin from various origin houses coming together to give thanks to the ancestral and nature spirits of Atinu's origin house who had healed Simiao by repelling a life-threatening spiritual attack. The ceremony to which we were invited took place by a cave that led down to waters flowing deep underground. This place and its waters were intimately connected to Atinu's origin house and the custodians of this site were consubstantiated through the embodied relationship between the house's senior elders, apical ancestor spirits (now rendered as nature spirits, or *dai* in the local Makasae language) and the pythons

that lived deep inside the cave (Palmer, 2015, 2020). The following day a similar ritual would take place at the origin house located inside the village.

Once again, I was filming the ceremony. Afterwards I planned to edit it and give a copy to Atinu and his family. Years earlier I had video-recorded a similar ceremony by this water source and the footage of the old people then present, many now deceased, is highly treasured by the family. I have realised over the years that I simply cannot experience and understand everything I need to during these complex events. Video-recording allows me to experience the moment in non-visual ways whilst creating an important visual record through which to capture the sensory experience and later piece together and understand critical details.

The day's events began at Atinu's house where around 20 men had gathered. Signalling it was time for us all to depart, the first man jumped on his three-wheel motorbike and sped off toward the ceremony site. In the back of his bike tray were a 'foreign' goat (Tetum: *bibi malae*) and several lengths of bamboo. Others followed, heading off on their two-wheel motorbikes, with chickens bound to the handlebars and various numbers of pillion passengers on the back. The rest of us piled into our four-wheel-drive vehicle. We all headed several kilometres inland down a dusty open-savannah track to the cave known as Wai Lia Bere.

By the time our car arrived at the scrubby clearing near the entry to Wai Lia Bere cave, the ceremonial preparations were in full swing. Seven chickens had been assembled by the tree and rock altar, and a goat was tethered nearby. The bamboo was being fashioned for cooking and as water receptacles. Strings of areca nut were hung up on a notch in the tree. One old man lay out baskets of betel leaf and lime powder on the stone altar. Lastly, he added a packet of cigarettes.

The camera recorded one of the senior men discreetly snip off a small piece of the goat's ear, before walking off in another direction with two of the chickens. He was headed to make offerings at Wai Mata Ana, another deep cave and water source nearby which is sometimes referred to as the 'wife' of the Wai Lia Bere cave.

After this, another ritual involved separate offerings of the goat and a black chicken to the custodians of Wai Lia Bere. While the chicken was taken directly to the entrance of the cave, the body of the much larger goat was absent. It was made present through prayer. During this prayer the two ritual leaders squatted on the ground in front of the simple rock altar by a tree, with a younger man standing behind them. One of the old men began to speak to the custodians of the cave:

We are making this offering to you of a goat and a male and female chicken. This is our final offering in this process. We are small people, you are big. Please look after us. Don't be angry or jealous. We have offered this to you. Protect us, too, from getting sick when others who might be angry or jealous of us seek to do us harm. We are looking to you for protection. Please look after us. Look after those of us who are not here. Look after those who are studying away. Help them write well.<sup>3</sup>

The camera filmed the men picking up a small twig as they left the prayer site (<https://youtu.be/Rok4S X7OJqc>). Later back by the altar, I was called over to film as the senior man brushed this twig briefly over the head of the goat (<https://youtu.be/ZybFaMxLew0>). The goats and chickens were then sacrificed before being singed over the roaring fire close to the savannah altar. Following these sacrifices, each animal's liver or entrails were read for signs by the assembled senior ritual experts. After this, the various body parts were cooked and laid out as offerings by the altar for the final ceremony.

The senior ritual leaders returned for a second time to the cave entrance. This time they offered a single black chicken. The old man holding the chicken began again to speak to the custodians present in the cave and its waters:

Now, in the era of democracy, many of your people are studying far away from here. Some travel over the sea. They work with pens. Please look after them. Keep them safe. Help them to do their jobs well. This is their offering to you.

The next stage of the ceremony involved directly addressing the cause of Simiao's illness. Back at the savannah altar, one of the senior ritual leaders plucked a single tail feather from a red chicken and placed it on the altar. Simiao and his father were called to sit in front of the altar. Holding the red chicken, the ritual leader spoke to the custodians of the site:

Your grandson has brought a chicken to thank you for healing his sickness. He has brought a chicken, so we can call out and honour your name. Something attacked him, but you helped him. Please don't make him sick again. We as elders are speaking, we are praying for him. Not all our in-law houses could come, but your grandson's father speaks for them. His words will reach you.

After this he briefly expelled some of the spittle from his words over the chicken (<https://youtu.be/A6ytGLQ0MA>). Squatting down in front of the altar, the father spoke humbly, his eyes to the ground. He repeated a similar message and gave thanks to the ancestral custodians of the land and waters for healing his son. The chicken was then killed, and its liver was examined for markings and interpreted closely as a proxy for the spoken reply of the cave and water custodians (cf. Hoskins, 1993, p. 173). Much consternation and discussion accompanied the reading. Later, I was told that it revealed that others from outside the house were still jealous and that they were still making 'bad medicine'. 'What will you do?' I asked the father later. Looking at me a little incredulously he replied, 'The ancestors will look after us now. We have given the issue to them.' The healing and thanksgiving ritual later concluded with the bodies of Simiao and his father being washed by the waters of the cave and betel leaf ([https://youtu.be/ctE\\_08Lkmyc](https://youtu.be/ctE_08Lkmyc)).

### 3 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Across these three vignettes a similar kind of more-than-human noticing occurs. While the camera is largely absent from the first vignette, the sensorial attunement of people observing more-than-human encounters is obvious. Despite the faint breath of the pig being overlooked at the time, another kind of "extra sensory" (Pink, 2011, p. 266) noticing took place. As Hoskins writes, in the Sumba context, animal bodies are a 'bearer of messages and surrogate spokesman' (1993, p. 175). While this kind of deep and entangled more-than-human noticing is an everyday occurrence for others, for me these skills are far less apparent. In recent years, however, they have become more routine, enabled in part through the embodied noticing of filmmaking. In this noticing, I too am being drawn into these practices of care and sacrifice and slowly attuning to the diverse multispecies ways in which people interpret, and contest, an always unfolding world.

In the first vignette, pigs are an enabler of communication between people and the ancestral realm. In the second, they also have a similar purpose entangled with the more-than-human sociality, agency and presence of wild honey bees. These more-than-human assemblages of people, animals and spirits are brought into conversation through the skyward and botanical environments in which the bees make their homes. In the coming together of voice, agency, bodies, smells, tastes, flows, gestures and touch these conversations are directed at divinity and the unknown. In the third vignette, a goat and chickens are brought into conversation with human bodies, waters and botanical matter to ensure the wellbeing of the individual and collective bodies present.

In all three vignettes the camera's presence enables visual representation which later informs the subjective and sensorial basis of the ethnographer's memories and interpretations of these encounters. These 'cultural memories' (Stoller, 1997) are somewhat ironically given their flesh by the artificial eye of the camera, creating post-facto viewing experiences that add visual form to deeper sensory memories. The sensuous nature of filmmaking also encourages heightened 'performances' by participants and varied multisensory responses by audiences. The embodied jokes conveyed by the *laku* in their to-camera interviews being a highlight for Timorese audiences of *Wild Honey*.

To conclude this article and to further bring multispecies ethnography into conversation with this kind of multisensory ethnographic practice, I reflect on the work of Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón (2019) who argue for the necessity of multisensory and multimodal anthropology. Invoking an expanded idea of anthropological invention, they encourage 'a creative, immanent mode of engagement with the subjects and objects with whom we work [and] through which unforeseeable knowledges, events, and encounters may be produced (2019, p. 22; cf. Langton, 2019). Similarly, Pink (2011, p. 269) argues that

working with these ideas requires researcher engagements that go beyond observation and data collection to attend to the ways in which we might reflexively draw on our own existing biographical experiences (as researchers and film viewers) in order to imagine and recognize our sensory embodied responses to other people, objects, textures and more in film and video.

In my own linking of the power of embodied performance and the "'extra" sensory' noticing (Pink, 2011, p. 266; cf. Ingold, 2000; Siragusa et al., 2020) to the possibilities of ethnographic filmmaking, I have suggested that *Wild Honey: Caring for Bees in a Divided Land* is but a conversation opener. For example, in a forthcoming chapter on environment, media and popular culture in Southeast Asia, my co-authors and I write:

In a time of rapid change, *Wild Honey* contributes to documenting the customary practice around these more-than-human relations. It was made as a collaborative endeavor, a unique opportunity for those involved to facilitate and honor encounters across difference ... screenings contribute to opening-up conversations, reflection and raising awareness of the interspecies connections between people and bees and between diverse peoples and each other, in connection with land, water, moon, sun, stars, plants, other animals and the sacred realm. (Kehi et al., forthcoming)

Yet, in more recent times, whenever I have spoken about the film on the phone with the community participants, they are always keen to shift the conversation forward to their 2020 harvest rituals which they continually assure me were much larger and much better than the 2018 harvest. The film and the harvest event that it recorded were but a moment in time. Yet, in other more subtle ways, both the filming and the event itself were also for these participants a part of some kind of other (for me, opaque), larger unfolding. I mention this to also highlight the perhaps more limited (and more humbling) ways in which I as an ethnographic filmmaker can influence how this film is interpreted by both its participants and audiences. Collaborative filmmaking is certainly performative, but it is also about the diverse ways in which people and non-humans call others to notice both in the moment and beyond that moment to make change in the world. As a multimodal practice it challenges us to recognise the multisensory ways in which our worlds are brought into being and continually unfold.



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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, *The Cultural Ecology of Timor-Leste Digital Archive* (<https://www.arkivukulturaekologia.com>).
- <sup>2</sup> The one exception to this is the desire to keep certain powerful ancestral names private, the knowledge of and ability to invoke these ancestral names (in correct order of precedence) being the central requirement of place-based ritual power and jurisdiction (cf. McWilliam, 2009).
- <sup>3</sup> Simiao was a university student in the capital Dili.

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