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Making Sense of Changes: Preliminary Reflections on the Assemblies of God Mission in Ataúro, Timor-Leste, through a Marxian and Marxist Lens

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Abstract

This essay examines the correlations between transformations in the dynamics of social reproduction and adherence to the Assemblies of God Pentecostalism among the population of Usubemassu, in Ataúro, Timor-Leste, employing a Marxian analytical framework. The study addresses the impacts of technologies introduced during the missionary encounter, the dialectic of *Kultura*, and the political economy that has granted the Assemblies of God its current governance power. Such phenomena constitute essential elements of the *ethos* of rupture that shapes the way this population gives meaning to its contemporary life.

Keywords: Social Change; Protestantism; Timor-Leste, Economy.

Dando Sentido a Mudanças: reflexões preliminares sobre a missionação da Assembleia de Deus em Ataúro, Timor-Leste, à luz de lentes marxianas e marxistas

Resumo

Este ensaio analisa as correlações entre as transformações nas dinâmicas de reprodução social e a adesão ao pentecostalismo da Assembleia de Deus pela população de Usubemassu, em Ataúro (Timor-Leste), utilizando ferramentas analíticas de base marxiana. O estudo aborda os impactos das tecnologias introduzidas no encontro missionário, a dialética da *Kultura* e a economia política que conferiu à Igreja Evangélica Assembleia de Deus o poder de governança que exerce atualmente. Tais fenômenos constituem elementos essenciais do *ethos* de ruptura que orienta a forma como essa população dá sentido à sua vida contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: Mudança Social; Protestantismo; Timor-Leste; Economia.

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1 Introduction

This essay seeks to understand how part of the population of Usubemassu, in Ataúro,Timor-Leste, makes sense of social transformation and reproduction processes by applying a Marxian analytical lens[1]. This population consists of approximately 700 people, most of whom are members of the Evangelical Assemblies of God Church (Igreja Evangélica Assembleia de Deus [IEAD]). Adherence to this religious denomination and the Christianity it embodies is the primary driver of change in people's lives, according to their own perceptions.

Much of the paradigm developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels centers on the dynamics of industrialized or industrializing societies-such as class conflict and commodities. However, several of their foundational concepts, including historical materialism, dialectics, critical political economy, and the relationship between base and superstructure, provide valuable explanatory tools for understanding phenomena in societies situated at the margins of market economies. Scholars, such as Meillassoux (1972, 1973), Godelier (2012), Taussig (1980), Wolf (1982), Mintz (1985), and Comaroff and Comaroff (1991, 1997) among others, have demonstrated the usefulness of these concepts.

Fernandes (2020) explored the potential of Marxian-inspired analytics to understand the controversies and processes that mark the entanglement of East Timorese populations with a market economy. The author (idem) argues that kinship institutions in the municipality of Oe-cússi serve as the infrastructure to construct the national economy because they provide the basis for social reproduction and moral justifications for the appropriation of state resources, etc. At the same time, the interaction between these institutions and new agents and forms of social organization transforms them, as well as the subjects who are part of them, generating unpredictable historical processes[2].

While writing this essay, I recognized that fundamental concepts from Marxian analytics have long been integral to anthropological knowledge production. The concept of dialectics is a clear example. Principles, such as the constant transformation of social forms and the centrality of contradictions in collective dynamics, have consistently informed ethnographic research and theory-building in anthropology. Nevertheless, few studies acknowledge the pioneering contributions of Marx and Engels in shaping this perspective. Accordingly, this

[1] In this essay, the term Marxian refers to the direct legacies of the work of Marx and Engels. Marxist, in turn, refers to works by other authors inspired by Marx and Engels.

[2] Although not explicitly framed within a Marxian perspective, McWilliam's (2020) analysis lends itself readily to interpretations informed by that tradition. In my view, the work illuminates how kinship obligations were once again elevated to the status of social infrastructure. This followed the withdrawal of market institutions established by the Indonesian state among populations in the municipality of Lautém. I also discern a strong dialectical sensibility in his treatment of the transformations associated with migration.

analysis seeks to address this oversight by explicitly attributing Marxian inspiration to certain explanatory anxieties that have become commonplace in contemporary anthropological practice. In doing so, this study follows the example of Almeida (2021), who highlights the significant overlap between Marx and Morgan, and the relevance of the Marxian legacy to understanding the transformation of social reproduction in postcolonial Africa.

This essay's analytical framework is rooted in my foundational training in social sciences at the State University of Campinas (Unicamp), where I received a rigorous Marxist education in sociology and political science. However, during my subsequent specialization in anthropology at the University of Brasília (1998-2004), this influence diminished. Its resurgence in my research agenda is attributable to the works of Fernandes (2020) and Ribeiro (2008)[3].

The hypotheses I maintain throughout this text are the product of fieldwork conducted in Usubemassu/Ataúro between 2019 and 2024, totaling ten months of participant observation. During this period, I lived with my interlocutors, attended IEAD services and events, and conducted interviews with leaders and ordinary villagers, among other activities, to observe daily life. However, my research never intentionally focused on religious practices. Instead, my interest lies in economic transformations and to understand them it was essential to address the impacts of joining IEAD.

It is also important to clarify the analytical scale on which I base this essay. Although founded on ethnographic research experience, its ambition is not exclusively comprehensive. This text, inspired by the Marxian paradigm, has explanatory ambitions (Laplantine, 2004) and deals with medium-term phenomena. By this, I mean that my hypotheses reason from the perspective of disenchanted anthropology. However, for most of my interlocutors, God is the great agent of the events narrated here.

A further methodological consideration involves acknowledging the ambiguities and contradictions in how the population experiences certain categories or processes. The semantic and moral dimensions associated with the category of *Kultura* exemplify this complexity[4]. As will be discussed, in its Christianized form – separated from the concept of *lulik* – *Kultura* underpins institutions central to local social organization. Conversely, in its pre-Christian ontology, it is regarded as a source of danger with powers linked to malevolent forces analogous to the Christian concept of the devil.

This essay is structured in four sections. In the first, I present background information on the formation of Usubemassu Village and its inhabitants' adherence to the Protestantism of the Assemblies of God. This is necessary because an important part of the phenomena discussed concerns the process of *conversion*, taken here as an empirical category[5]. In the second part, I explore the impact of technologies introduced by missionaries on the *conversion* process. I seek to articulate this in relation to the problem of the material bases of historical

[3] On the one hand, the Marxian paradigm had a major influence on East Timorese intelligentsia in the 1970s and 1980s, and partly inspired their demand for decolonization. On the other hand, such a framework was almost absent from anthropological knowledge published during the same period.

[4] In the following sections, I will discuss the notion of *Kultura*.

[5] Considering the analytical legacies of anthropological literature on missions, I choose to employ the category of "adherence" rather than "conversion". As Jean and John Comaroff (1991), as well as Joel Robbins (2004), among other authors, remind us, the notion of conversion constitutes an ideology anchored in the moral project of breaking with religious practices of different origins. Such a break, however, rarely materializes. For a discussion of this issue involving Catholic Church authorities in Timor-Leste, see Silva (2018a).

consciousness. Next, the study reflects on the tensions to which missionary practices and other events have subjected the notion of *Kultura*. The discussion identifies the contradictions in the moral economy surrounding the idea of *Kultura* and its semantic field. The last part of the article considers the political economy of IEAD pastoral practices. In it, I address the processes by which IEAD governance power concentrates and the resulting disempowerment of local institutions in life-cycle rituals and labor-force mobilization.

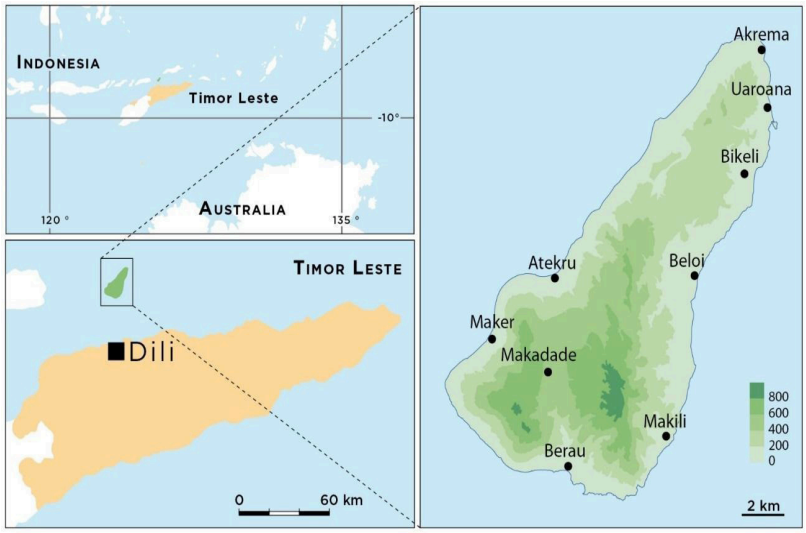
Marxian analytical frameworks and themes are present in this essay both structurally and incidentally. Rather than elaborating on theoretical concepts, the essay prioritizes ethnographic explorations shaped by the interaction of specific categories and historical experiences.

From an ideational point of view, all IEAD adherents argue that there has been a significant rupture in their lives since encountering this religious denomination, unlike Robbins' (2004) portrayal of the Urapmin in Papua New Guinea. Thus, the essay's general argument discusses critical events that illustrate how the inhabitants of Usubemassu elaborate on rupture and social change in their encounter with Pentecostal Christianity.

2 Usubemassu and Ataúro, Past and Present[6]

Usubemassu is in the Beloi *suku*[7]. In addition to having Ataúro Island's only operating port, it is also the location of a beautiful coral atoll, recognized by several specialized institutions as one of the most stunning and biodiverse in the world.

Figure 1 – Maps: Timor-Leste in the region; Ataúro's location; island villages



Source: ©L. Billault

According to data available at the *suku's* administrative headquarters, in 2022, the village had 612 inhabitants distributed across 158 households. Of this total, 307 were women and 305 were men. Their livelihoods are based on the following activities: fishing, agriculture, small trade (kiosks), teaching in public schools, working in state administration, serving and welcoming tourists, among others. Animal husbandry is another important source of income. Most families in the village are evangelical – followers of the Assemblies of God.

[6] Part of this section was first published in the article Silva and Pedrosa, 2024.

[7] Suku is an administrative unit of the East Timorese State made up of a number of villages.

Currently, the economic reproduction of Usubemassu households occurs through complex economic ecologies, marked by great diversity (Silva; Palmer; Cunha, 2023). The coexistence of multiple regimes of production, exchange, distribution, and consumption is recurrent, with no economic specialization (Mills *et al.*, 2017). For example, some of the resources needed to maintain households are obtained through agriculture, while another part is acquired through local commerce or in Dili. Other resources reach households through direct exchanges between neighbors or gifts (in the Maussian sense) from relatives living in mountainous areas.

The village, as we know it today, was established relatively recently. It is the result of the Indonesian state's forced resettlement – between 1975 and 1980 – In the early years of the occupation. Local social organization is structured around membership of groups of origin (Houses, or *lisan* in Tetum), as is usual in the region. Such belonging also determines access to land for agricultural practices, the construction of dwellings, rights in people, and other dimensions of social reproduction.

The growth of Usubemassu and most villages in northern Ataúro stems from Timor-Leste's overall population growth. However, it also relates to the development and establishment of Protestantism in the same region, driven by the missionary work of José Seabra Gomes and Fátima Gomes[8].

Figure 2 – Seated are Pastors Fátima Gomes and José Seabra Gomes. Photograph taken between 1985 and 1986 at their residence during Bible study to train new church leaders



Source: courtesy of Pastor Antônio Carlos de Oliveira

This couple and their family joined the Assemblies of God through contact with foreigners passing through Dili in the late 1960s. After reading a Bible donated by someone from Singapore, José Gomes intensified his interest in Christianity. At that time, Bill Pullman and his wife, both American missionaries, were working in Portuguese Timor. They introduced

[8] This fact is evident in various novels by Luis Cardoso, an East Timorese writer based in Lisbon.

José Seabra Gomes to the Evangelical Assemblies of God Church, which he joined, followed later by his wife Fátima and the entire family (Angeles, 2014, p. 110).

During this period, a small community of adherents to different Protestant religious denominations emerged. Many members of this community were exiles. According to Rui Gomes, son of José Seabra Gomes, his parents joined this small community and began practicing Protestant rituals. Soon after, they met Miguel Coias and Carmina Coias, a Portuguese couple living in the colony and followers of the Assemblies of God. It was Miguel Coias who suggested to José Gomes that he begin his missionary work in Ataúro. He accepted the challenge and went to live with Fátima in Bikeli between 1968 and 1975 (Angeles, 2014, p. 111).

To properly understand the impact of this family's missionary work in Ataúro, one must consider the place that this island and its people occupied in the imagination of the broader population before the restoration of independence. During Portuguese colonization and Indonesian occupation, Ataúro was a prison island, a place to which both regimes deported political dissidents. Its transformation into a prison island resulted from its well-known environmental adversities. There is a severe water shortage, which makes food cultivation on the island possible almost exclusively during the rainy season. Thus, Ataúro has long been known as a place where people were sent to die (Loney, 2022; Gonçalves, 2022).

Ataúro was also a sanitary colony where authorities sent people with leprosy and tuberculosis. Even today, in remote parts of the island, we find the bones of people who died in isolation. Not surprisingly, when discussing the past, my interlocutors recall how easy it was to die on the island. It was common for women to have many children, but few would survive due to the scarcity of food and water.

During Portuguese colonization, the Catholic Church was present, sporadically, only in the village of Vila Maumeta, as was the Portuguese state. No priests lived permanently on the island. Documents from the Portuguese administration in the 20th century, as well as missionary ethnographies by Father Jorge Dias Duarte, portray the population of Ataúro as among the most *primitive* in the colony (Duarte, 1984).

Despite the Catholic Church and the Portuguese state's lack of interest in Ataúro, the inhabitants' adherence to Protestantism was not accepted peacefully by these governing institutions. The first *converts* were imprisoned in inhumane conditions: they were kept in open pits below ground level, chained, and without water or food for three days. In addition, the first IEAD headquarters in Dili was burned down, as were several of its other buildings in the country (Angeles, 2014).

When addressing the greatest challenges his family faced in the early years of missionary work on the island, Rui Gomes cites confrontations with what he called *demonic forces* and material hardship. From his point of view, demonic forces were expressed in the notion of *lulik* and in witchcraft practices. According to him, there was a lot of witchcraft on the island, and an important part of his family's work consisted of demonstrating that the Christian God was more powerful than the evil forces established there. Regarding the materiality of life, he highlighted the high mortality and hunger rates among the population.

Thus, in contrast to a past in which Ataúro was considered hell on earth, the contemporary descriptions of the territory and its populations are as heaven, or paradise. The narratives of

the evangelical populations residing there celebrate the absence of large-scale conflicts among the islanders and the Timorese state presents Ataúro as surrounded by pristine coral reefs.

3 Historical Materialism and Adherence to the Protestantism of the Assemblies of God

It is impossible to be in Usubemassu and not be impressed by the good humor and goodwill of its inhabitants. People smile and laugh a lot. Such dispositions are partly fostered during services at the Evangelical Assemblies of God Church, which, through music, sermons, and prayers, cultivates an *ethos* of joy and gratitude among its followers.

In addition, the inhabitants of this village unanimously agree that they are living the best time of their lives. It is a time of abundance, health, prosperity, and optimism about the future: all these phenomena are attributed to the action of the Christian God, whom they came to know and worship *properly* after joining the Evangelical Assemblies of God Church[9].

As with other East Timorese, the memory of violence, famine, and other forms of suffering experienced in the past is present among my interlocutors. They report, however, that since joining IEAD, things have changed. Since then, life has improved.

There are a number of indicators used to show how *conversion* to the Assemblies of God Pentecostalism changed people's lives. They include: (1) daily consumption of rice – considered a noble food – as opposed to the consumption of roots and corn, which was more common in the past; (2) the possibility of having three meals a day, in contrast to a past marked by hunger; (3) the opportunity to provide their children with a school education, enabling them to read and write; (4) access to cotton or other fabric clothing, as opposed to a past in which people dressed in small pieces of plant-based fabric or went naked; (5) the possibility of having brick houses; (6) access to medicine; (7) access to motorboats, televisions, and telephones, and even refrigerators and freezers in some cases; (8) the possibility of earning money more easily.

The collective lunches that accompany wedding ceremonies, as well as Christmas and New Year's parties in the village, are the greatest expression of the abundance that people associate with the present. In 2019, at the end of a lunch to celebrate and formalize a wedding in the neighboring village of Arlo, I witnessed the pride of one of the party organizers as he rejoiced in having fed nearly 500 people. He pointed out to his colleague how prosperous the Ataúro population had become, which made it possible to hold a party of that size.

Although some of these phenomena may be attributed to state policies or to gains derived from the commodification of labor power, people interpret them primarily as the direct legacies of blessings granted by the Christian God. The adherence to IEAD is experienced as a rupture with the past, similar to the trend Coleman and Hackett (2015) identify[10].

This perception is the product of medium-term historical processes related to how missionary activities have been conducted among the population over the last 55 years. As in

[9] Some members of the Usubemassu population declared themselves Catholic before joining the Assemblies of God. However, they consider that, as Catholics, they did not practice Christianity properly. They voice the same criticism when they discuss the actions of other missionaries who worked in Ataúro in the past, such as Fraz and Juliana Braz (Silva, 2024).

[10] Celebrating rupture is a moral practice diametrically opposed to the intention attributed to the non-Christianized local ritual practices of the Austronesian world, as interpreted by Keane (1997). According to him, such ritual performances are organized to reproduce, as faithfully as possible, what is experienced as ancestral legacies.

other places, the spread of Pentecostal Christianity by the Assemblies of God in Ataúro also occurred through pedagogical practices that transformed the material dynamics of social reproduction (Comaroff; Comaroff, 1997). The internalization of new practices for managing the body, land, food, certain domestic utensils, and other technologies is attributed to their great effectiveness in improving the quality of life. We can assume that the combined effectiveness of practices disseminated by the missionaries to address the population's problems and the animistic perceptions that guided people's world view led to them attributing great power to the Christian God, thus catalyzing adherence to IEAD.

Figure 3 – The Gomes family and IEAD adherents in Ataúro. Middle, standing: Pastor Fátima Gomes and to her right is Pastor José Seabra Gomes



Source: courtesy of Pastor Antônio Carlos de Oliveira.

In fact, the association between adherence to Protestantism and improvements in the material conditions of social reproduction is evident in the *conversion* narratives. This is true for the first adherents of the Assemblies of God and for the descendants of the Church's first missionaries on the island.

When recounting his family's early years working among the inhabitants of Ataúro, Rui Gomes highlighted their various educational activities. Outside of worship services, the Gomes couple spent much of their time care giving and teaching in an attempt to reduce the high rates of death and illness.

One teaching practice, cited by various interlocutors, concerned the sharing of plates and cups. The Gomes couple worked intensively to encourage people not to share these items to prevent the spread of diseases such as tuberculosis and leprosy.

Teaching personal hygiene was also highlighted as fundamental to improving the population's quality of life. It is reported that part of the population did not wash their genitals because they were considered *lulik*[11]. Therefore, they were not cleaned. There was also no habit of frequent hand washing and, obviously, hygiene products were unavailable. To understand the context, let us remember that the population has long suffered from a lack of water. The Gomes family considered these facts as important causes of the high mortality rates on the island.

The lack of water also led to food and water shortages. It was not usual to have vegetable gardens near houses and vegetable consumption was almost non-existent among those who lived by the sea, where missionary work began. The Gomes family established a vegetable garden around their house, using water from a nearby well, and thus began sensitizing the population to the consumption of vegetables for good health.

Another skill the missionaries introduced was reading and writing, according to Pastor Antônio Carlos (now a missionary for IEAD in Metinaro), Pastor José (the leader pastor in Usubemassu), and others. This took place over a long period by missionaries not exclusively from the Assemblies of God, but who collaborated with its work. Initially, older pastors remember Christian inculcation – learning occurred primarily through the repetition and memorization of biblical passages. Later, Pastor Gomes recorded cassette tapes for training delivery and distributed them to those who would become pastors (Angeles, 2014, p. 115). Over time, new missionaries arrived and taught some of these pastors to read and write. Recent generations of church leaders are literate, having attended school[12].

One of the most powerful technological elements in the local population's adherence to the Assemblies of God's Christianity was the effectiveness of the consultations, medicines, and care provided by Pastor Fátima Gomes, as attested to by contemporary IEAD leaders. Faced with dire health conditions, the pastor requested help from the Portuguese Army. The pastor received a diagnostic manual, along with a number of basic medicines, and began holding health clinics with the population and distributing medicines.

The synergy of all these facts led to a significant drop in the number of sick and dead. It also cemented the population's perception of the power of the missionaries' God: this was the explanatory chain they used to make sense of the results of their practices.

An earthquake in Ataúro in 1977 is also frequently cited as an agent that led people to *convert* to the Assemblies of God. Its missionaries and early followers interpreted the earthquake as a manifestation of the Christian God's power, perhaps suggesting that the end of times was near or expressing his anger towards the population. Currently, some followers indicate that the fear of punishment from the Christian God also led people to join IEAD.

Although the Gomes couple and the first IEAD followers were not trained as professional missionaries, their conduct was in line with the common *modus operandi* of missionary action: using the material world as a vehicle for communication and mobilizing consciousness to

[11] I will address the notion of *lulik* in the next section.

[12] It was only in the 2010s that a few young people from the village had access to higher education.

encourage adherence to Christianity. The influential work of Comaroff and Comaroff (1997) demonstrates how this occurred across different fronts among the Tswana in South Africa: for instance, in healing practices, the economy, cultivation and invention of specific notions of domesticity, and agriculture. According to these authors, missionary practices are based on correlations and overlaps between ethics and aesthetics, between morality and materiality (Comaroff; Comaroff, 1997, p. 275).

There seems to be two fundamental aspects that encouraged the majority of Usubemassu's population to adhere to Evangelical Christianity. One was linking certain technologies of life management – a manifested in practices of hygiene, healing, food production, and organization of domestic space – to the Christian God and, at the same time, the technical effectiveness of these forms in alleviating the suffering and difficulties of the population. As elsewhere, the process of becoming Christian seems to derive from interaction with material practices that challenge the reproduction of past ways to make sense of the world. At the same time, this takes place in a context of explicit proselytism, which calls on people to alter chains of association and attribution of agency (Keane, 2007).

As would be expected, the symbolic shifts that led to becoming Christian in the face of changes in the material world are never immediate. In fact, they only happen because they are super mediated. They are informed by explanatory chains already in place within a given population (Sahlins, 1990). In this process, conflicts and contradictions act as catalysts for potential change and can be captured as associated with the agency of the Christian God.

In addressing the historical processes involved in the construction of Christian consciousness among the Tswanas, Comaroff and Comaroff (1991, p. 190-202) analyze how the goods and technologies brought by missionaries led to various epistemological shifts. At first, however, these shifts did not derive from the functional or utilitarian value attributed to an artifact. People attributed the effectiveness of goods or technologies to the missionaries' ability to unlock the potential of these artifacts – perceived as the white man's power of action.

The white man, in turn, attributed this effectiveness to the Christian God. As the analysis explicitly states, it is impossible to isolate the material dimension from the immaterial in the process of transforming historical consciousness, in this case, becoming Christian. One produces on the basis of what has been materially and immaterially bequeathed (Godelier, 2012) by previous generations, as Marx himself noted in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. However, distancing ourselves from immediate determinism should not prevent us from observing to what extent, in Marx's words (2024 [1859]), "The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and spiritual life process".

As we know, Marx and Engels did not advocate a relationship of direct and absolute determination of the economic or technological base over forms of thought or consciousness. This is evident in "The German Ideology" (Marx, 2007 [1932]), which suggests the dominant ideology is typically that of the ruling class.

On the other hand, they also defended the assumption that forms of consciousness do not exist in a vacuum. They are subject to the material conditions of existence and by political economy. In the case of Usubemassu, it is reported that the consolidation of Christian consciousness is rooted in the technologies brought by missionaries. Noting these facts seems fundamental to me for understanding how the population has adhered to IEAD, and the role of the artifacts and knowledge introduced through its missionary practice.

4 The Dialectic and Moral Economy of *Kultura*[13]

As in other parts of Timor-Leste, the population of Usubemassu and IEAD leaders refer to the local institutions that organize their social reproduction as *Kultura*. The East Timorese use the concept of *Kultura* to demarcate local differences and particularities in the ways of managing life, in contrast to a Western mode they imagine. Depending on the context, *Kultura* also encompasses ritual practices for communicating with ancestors and other agents to whom they attribute the power to act in the world of the living. In most contexts – although notably not among Protestant leaders in Ataúro – *Kultura* also indexes the category of *lulik*.

From a genealogical perspective, *Kultura* can be understood as a vernacular derivation of the term culture. In addition to its consolidation as a fundamental anthropological concept of the 20th century, culture also functioned as a category of colonial governance, translated into administrative expressions such as "custom" and "*usos e costumes*", a recurring expression in the lexicon of the Portuguese Empire (Silva; Simião, 2012). In colonial practice, such classificatory regimes underpinned policies of social differentiation, assigning different citizenship statuses to colonial subjects.

As in other scenarios and categories, the semantic field of *Kultura* has been transformed over time by the various encounters and tensions that mark its social biography. In this section, I explore the transformations and contradictions that characterize *Kultura*'s dialectic in the missionary encounter in Usubemassu. Other agents, such as the state, development non-governmental organization (NGOs), and the market, also participate in the events that mark this encounter.

The Usubemassu population's adherence to the Assemblies of God has led to changes in certain social reproduction practices. The Christian precept of equality[14] among human beings strained the strong hierarchy that was characteristic of relations between groups of origin, manifested above all in marriage exchanges and rights of access to land. This has led to a significant change in the relationships between wife-givers and wife-takers, making them less unequal (Silva, 2021, 2024).

The relative disempowerment of spiritual agents to whom the population attributed powers over the world of the living has also been a source of pastoral anxiety for IEAD leaders on the island.[15] In Usubemassu, as in all villages in the northern part of the island, church leaders propose that some practices surrounding the notion of *lulik* should no longer be enacted. It is said that IEAD has cleansed the communities by freeing them from *lulik* beliefs.

In a nutshell, *lulik* is the Tetum word for forces related to the powers of the earth or ancestors. Depending on the context, *lulik* can be simultaneously perceived as life-giving, life-taking, sacred, dangerous, forbidden, fertile, ritual, or even "of the same origin"(Bovensiepen, 2015, 2016; Fidalgo-Castro; Alonso-Población, 2023; Silva, 2024).

[13] Some of the arguments presented in this section were previously published in Silva (2021, 2024).

[14] The promotion of more egalitarian relations among the population was a pastoral concern of missionaries who preceded IEAD in Ataúro, as I demonstrated in Silva (2021, 2024).

[15] Pastoral power and practices refer to the action of guiding individuals in their ordinary lives through care. Its primary objective is to bring them closer to God through the adoption of so-called "Christian" practices of life. To this end, the clergy acts as a mediating authority; it is a mobile power, which legitimizes itself by proclaiming itself a benefactor. Such dynamics ultimately produce processes of individualization (Foucault, 2008, p. 155-174).

As has occurred elsewhere (Keane, 2007; Aragon, 2000; Comaroff; Comaroff, 1997), IEAD missionary practices have proposed that the Christian God is the only source of supernatural agency in the world. This leads to the proposition that no other spiritual agents – such as ancestors, spirits associated with the earth and water, among others, which mark Austronesian social organization and cosmology – act in the world of the living[16]. According to IEAD pastors, this is manifested in the fact that people no longer worship stones, trees, water sources, or perform mourning and bereavement rituals for their dead, because they know that they have no power over them (Silva, 2024).Therefore, the villagers of northern Ataúro no longer maintain *uma lulik* (sacred houses).

At the same time, however, the notion of *lulik* has become a signifier mobilized to evoke actions attributed to the devil. Some leaders of the Assemblies of God consider *lulik* to be a kind of disguised diabolical manifestation, which, for this reason, must be kept at a distance. Any ritual manifestation related to the dead or invisible agents is interpreted as an opportunity for the devil to manifest itself, even in a covert form. These facts indicate that agency is attributed to what is called *lulik,* although this agency has come to be associated exclusively with morally reprehensible agents, known as sources of evil.

Such events also reveal the existence of a moral economy surrounding *Kultura* and Christianity. The notion of moral economy refers to the production, distribution, circulation, and use of evaluative and prescriptive narratives – expressed as feelings, emotions, values, and norms – through which the community articulates notions of good and evil, ideas of justice and injustice, conceptions of what is tolerable or intolerable, reasonable or unacceptable, as well as ideas of what constitutes a good life (Scott, 1976; Fassin, 2018).

In this context, it is worth noting that IEAD leaders in Ataúro are making efforts to "purify" *Kultura* to align it with Christian precepts. While seeking to dissociate the notion of *Kultura* from that of *lulik*, they also advance the proposition that the Christian God created the groups of origin and associated them with the tribes of Israel in the Old Testament. It is proposed that the groups of origin are creations of the Christian God to facilitate the social organization of populations lacking a modern state.

The relative absence of the state and the market in village life until recently has thus allowed groups of origin or *lisan* to continue playing their role as the main organizers and mediators of the reproduction of domestic units. In Usubemassu, the *lisan sira* (Houses) have maintained their role as central institutions in regulating the following areas: negotiations about rights in people, access to land, and conflict resolution. The population of this village is linked to nine Houses, namely: *Ai Luli, Major, Koronel, Uhu Rala, Loro Piu, Aku Ai, Maseu, Tilman Nai,* and *Maker.*

As in many other contexts in Timor-Leste, the reproduction of the Usubemassu population is marked by various misfortunes. The precariousness of the health services, the lack of adequate transportation infrastructure, and other phenomena, all contribute to the continuing occurrence of sudden deaths, shipwrecks, accidents, and chronic diseases, which bring

[16] The main characteristics of social organization in the Austronesian world are: membership to Houses (corporate groups of origin); asymmetrical relations between Houses; asymmetrical alliances through marriage exchanges (gifts) between Houses; diarchy of powers; binary ideology of classification; semantic parallelism in ritual speech; values relating to origin, ancestry, and precedence; and animistic practices.

immense suffering to the population. However, these are disenchanted explanations that make more sense to those who view these facts from outside the IEAD religious community.

From a local perspective, many of the deaths, illnesses, and accidents that victimize the population are interpreted as actions of *Kultura*. Institutions considered part of *Kultura*, such as *malisan* (curses) and *aimoruk aat* (witchcraft), are often mobilized to explain the various misfortunes mentioned above.

In contrast, adherence to the Christianity of the Assemblies of God is approached as a source of good and everything that is healthy, fair, pleasant, and a source of well-being for people. As I indicated earlier, the perceived material abundance that characterizes the contemporary life of the Usubemassu population is attributed to converting to Christianity.

In this context, it is impossible not to recall the explanatory potential of Marx's (1982 [1867]) notion of fetishism, which, broadly speaking, refers to the dissociation of a commodity from the modes of production that made it possible. My interlocutors' association of material abundance with adherence to Christianity is based on a relative unfamiliarity with the social processes and relationships involved in the manufacture of the missionaries' artifacts and technologies. It also stems from the projection of direct links between this material and technological universe, and the agency of a Christian God.

The material and technological repertoire brought to the village by the missionaries is seen as the unmediated production of a Christian God. This repertoire is thus literally mystified, presenting itself as autonomous with respect to the historical processes that brought it into existence. The historical articulations (scientific and technological developments) and social relations of production that allowed this repertoire to come into existence are ignored.

It should be noted, however, that IEAD adherents do not reify this material repertoire. The objects brought by missionary practices are not treated as effective objects in themselves, but are associated with the people who brought them to Ataúro and, ultimately, with the Christian God. It leads to what Taussig (1980, p. 36) calls pre-capitalist fetishism:

> In contrast to this subordination of persons to things, persons in precapitalist societies and the products they create and exchange are seen as intermeshed. Yet in these societies, too, such products may acquire lifelike qualities. Thus, products may become fetishes, but they do so for reasons completely different from those outlined above. [...] In the precapitalist mode of production [...] products appear to be animated or life-endowed precisely because they seem to embody the social milieu from which they come.

Usubemassu is experiencing an explosion of brick houses. Households are organizing themselves to make consistent investments in the education of their children and young people, in line with local standards, with high expectations for social mobility. As with other populations in the region, conversion to Christianity is associated with development and the moral affirmation of new ways of life (Aragon, 2000, p. 310-311, 321).

Learning how to build brick houses is also attributed to IEAD. It is true that the Portuguese colonial administration constructed buildings of this kind in Ataúro before the Protestant mission. However, according to IEAD pastors, the population gained knowledge of the techniques and materials used in construction when they participated in building the denomination's first houses on the island.

Despite representations circulating in Timor-Leste about the population of Ataúro as very poor and primitive – depictions rooted in the colonial past – Usubemassu people consider themselves much more *evolved and prosperous* than the Catholic population. They say this is because they do not "waste money and resources" on ritual practices of ancestor worship, as Catholics do.

Thus, there seems to be an ambivalence towards *Kultura*: on the one hand, it has provided resources and immemorial collective ways of life (land, women, gifts), which have allowed the reproduction of life. But on the other hand, it also appears as a threatening agent that operates as an exterminator of life. In this latter context, Christianity seems to encompass *Kultura,* seen as a sign of evil agency.

Aragon (2000) explores how, in Sulawesi, the promotion and adherence to the Salvation Army's Protestantism were associated with the idea of economic development. Protestantism and development became almost synonymous, so that modernization came to be identified with adherence to a monotheistic religion.

The Christian narrative has gained traction in Usubemassu by exploring the project of egalitarian relations between local people and institutions, and by enabling improvements in the material conditions of reproduction. At the same time, missionary practices are the spearhead that, in the long run, make people more dependent on a market society, deepening inequalities between them. Potentially, therefore, adherence to Christianity articulates both the promise of equality and the disenchantment with exclusion, attributing life's misfortunes to *Kultura*.

5 The political economy of, and in, IEAD pastoral practices in Usubemassu

The IEAD community's strength is not founded solely on life-management technologies brought by missionaries. The denomination has also accumulated power in the ritual domains of social reproduction. In this section, I analyze phenomena related to the distribution and concentration of IEAD power to mediate between the secular and the supernatural world, inspired by Marx's precepts of critical political economy (Marx, 2011, 2024).

To be faithful to the facts, it is important to consider that the current concentration of IEAD power may not be by design. It seems to be much more the product of other governance actors' absence – especially the state – and of the pastoral leaders' commitment to the well-being of their community. IEAD is the only institution to have buildings and governance agents in all the villages on the island. Its capillarity is far superior to that of the state and any other religious denomination or NGO.

Another element to consider is that during the Indonesian occupation, it was mandatory for citizens of the then 27th province of Timor-Timur to adhere to a monotheistic religion. This was one of the pillars of Indonesia's nation-building during the New Order regime, led by former general President Suharto, and expressed as one of the five principles of Pancasila (official state ideology). Under the Indonesian administration, each person's religion was recorded on their identity card.

In "Grundrisse", Marx (2011, p. 45) points out that analyzing power, resource, and status distribution processes is central to the critique of political economy. Subsequently, Meillassoux (1972) indicates that it is necessary to note who benefits most from distribution practices, who controls them, and so on.

Analysis in Silva (2024) demonstrates how IEAD has positioned itself as the protagonist of various life cycle rituals in the village – birth, marriage, burial/death – supplanting the role previously played by the customary mediators and ritual authorities of the origin groups – the *lia na'in* (custodians of the words) – to which people belong.

> If it is true that the groups of origin still mobilize the financial resources to undertake weddings and burial rituals, the most significant moments of these events are officiated by Church authorities, and the labor involved to carry them out (the preparation of food, tents, props, etc.) is coordinated by working groups also organized by the Church. Apparently, the Assemblies of God in Atauro has thus parasitized local rituals to monopolize religious authority, as did the Salvation Army in Sulawesi (Aragon, 2000), and as does the East Timorese state about local institutions of governance (Silva, 2024, p. 192-193).

As I pointed out earlier (Silva, 2024), during festivities that mark wedding ceremonies, the Church shares its authority as sealer and witness of the union with ritual authorities from the bride and groom's Houses and with state authorities. However, this is no longer the case at funerals. Burial rituals are exclusively Christian, and the identity of the deceased is narrated solely from the perspective of their Christian trajectory. There is no mention of their group of origin before marriage or of women's House of belonging after marriage.

Another clear indicator of IEAD authority is its power to mobilize the village workforce. For Church-promoted events, the population of Usubemassu is divided into four groups (*Bethânia, Macedônia, Emanuel,* and *Pentecostes)* that are called upon for collective events. In addition, the Church also organizes youth and women's groups for community service. These women and young people are the workforce for the huge wedding lunches.

Most of the village's festive and recreational events are organized by IEAD[17]. Some examples are: parties for Christmas, New Year, Children's Day, and Mother's Day, as well as weddings, pastoral itinerant services, and Bible knowledge competitions.

The Church also maintains a full schedule of services and educational activities. In addition to the weekly Sunday service, there is Sunday school, youth services, women's services, worship sessions, choir rehearsals, rehearsals for Children's Day and Mother's Day celebrations, prayer and fasting at the beginning of each month, and church cleaning sessions. The Church also occasionally offers courses on home economics and other topics of interest[18].

In 2024, I asked the village chief if I could meet the village women to share my research results and present photographs of each of them, as they requested. The women suggested meeting in the church courtyard after they had finished cleaning it. This demonstrates the overlap between secular and religious life for a large part of the population.

[17] The Catholic population of the village currently numbers 162 people, distributed between 32 households. Most of these individuals are migrants from other parts of Ataúro or nationals who provide services – as teachers, merchants, and other roles – in the village and its surrounds.

[18] During my last fieldwork, I stayed for two weeks in a house opposite IEAD. During this period, I noticed that there were daily activities in the church, which involved part of the population.

The church space is also used to disseminate civil information such as planned state activities in the village. This occurs at the end of each Sunday service, when most of the village gathers.

When morally justifying a wide variety of practices, such as social organization based on groups of origin (Houses) or the incessant daily work of women in particular, people repeatedly draw on IEAD teachings or passages from the Bible. They seek to anchor the choices and actions that mark the various fronts of social reproduction in a religious rationale. It is no exaggeration to suggest that IEAD in Usubemassu has the potential to become a total institution, because religion has come to present itself to people as a total social fact (Mauss 1974).[19]This power of governance, exercised as pastoral power, is also legitimized in the moral economy as discussed earlier.

6 Final Considerations

Throughout this article, I have explored the social transformations that have reconfigured practices of social reproduction and social change in Usubemassu, a village on the island of Ataúro, Timor-Leste, over the past 55 years. In doing so, I have engaged with a set of concepts drawn from Marxian and Marxist thought, including historical materialism, dialectics, fetishism, and political economy.

After providing a brief historical and cultural context for Usubemassu and its inhabitants, I discussed aspects of the missionary process. I then highlighted the importance of the material and technological repertoire brought by the missionaries in shifting people's historical consciousness. I argued that there is a pre-capitalist fetishism among my interlocutors, which associates this material and technological repertoire with the missionaries who brought it, and with the God to whom they attribute power.

Marx's propositions on the dialectical character of historical dynamics inform my analysis about the transformations the notion of *Kultura* has undergone. Various political and epistemological efforts seem to be underway to make *Kultura* coherent with the Pentecostal Protestantism of IEAD, in a situation of relative absence of the market and the state as entities of governance and social organization.

On the one hand, this absence has allowed, or rather made it necessary for, the Houses (*lisan*) to continue performing their role as institutions of governance, administering rights in people, land, exchange of women, and conflict resolution. On the other hand, there is a Christianization of *Kultura* in the local way, which associates the Houses with the tribes of Israel – mentioned in the Old Testament. It also dissociates them from ritual practices related to communication with ancestors and attempts to domesticate the volition of agents who were previously attributed power over the world of the living.

The notion of political economy also allows us to recognize that the relative absence of the state and other institutions of governance in the village left room for IEAD to become the main organizer and guarantor of the population's life cycle rituals. In addition, it is a mobilizer of labor, generating an overlap between religious and civil/collective space in the

[19] Total social facts are those that involve diverse domains of human experience; that is, politics, religion, law, technology, among others.

village. Alongside Sunday services, IEAD provides festive events, education, and entertainment for people of different genders and age groups in the village.

Finally, I argued that the Christianity proposed by IEAD serves as a source of moral justification for the most diverse actions. The articulation of this fact with the governing power of this religious denomination in the village supports my hypothesis that it has the potential to become a total institution.

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